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Secrets and lies: How do you build workplace trust?

It's important to establish a strong culture of trust between employees and employer alike

Nicole Alvino learned about the importance of trust between managers and staff the hard way: by starting her career at Enron. After she departed the scandal-hit company amid its bankruptcy, Alvino knew that she wanted to build her own business, SocialChorus, and ensure trust was placed at its core.

"Why I founded it is really related to trust," she says.

"My first job out of university was working for Enron and my bosses went to jail. I saw first-hand what happens when a company culture is not built on trust." Alvino recalls executives telling employees that their retirement funds were safe, but just a few weeks later the firm was bankrupt.

Not all corporate breaches of trust

are so extreme, but building that trusted bridge between managers and workers is important to staff retention, productivity, and people feeling secure and confident enough in their roles to do their best work.

"Trust is a really positive thing in a working environment and key to driving empowerment, accountability and ultimately, productivity," says Debbie Clifford, head of talent, people, and performance at Olive.

Making trust happen

But how do you build that trust in the first place? "I think at the leadership level, it's about communication and transparency," Alvino says. "At the manager level, there's also an element of responsibility and accountability."

Dr John Blakey is a global CEO

coach and author of *The Trusted Executive*. He argues that trust is built around three pillars: ability, integrity, and benevolence.

The ability element includes delivering quality work on time and to budget, as well as coaching others to do the same. In terms of integrity, he calls on leaders to "be honest, be open and be humble."

And, when it comes to benevolence, he means being kind, compassionate, and being morally brave. This latter part means things like taking on work during the pandemic that benefits the wider team. "When people do that, it inspires trust," Blakey says.

Andrew Mason, founder and MD of the Advanced Workplace Institute (AWI), notes that there are different types of trust.

There's belief in the purpose and success of the wider organisation, but also trust in individual people you work with, whether it's a manager, colleague, or member of your team,

according to Mason.

If an organisation along with its leadership achieves its aims and communicates that well, it will build trust. This is true for individuals too, according to Mason. "Someone who is highly trusted tends to do what they say they'll do, deliver on their promises, and act with integrity in the interests of the team and organisation (as opposed to themselves)," he says.

Delivering on promises is key, but mistakes happen - the odd failure or misstep shouldn't be enough to undermine a working relationship. "It's important to remember and also demonstrate that we are all learning all of the time - and that we don't have all the answers," Clifford says.

"Showing a level of vulnerability, humility, and honesty to your team will go a long way towards connecting with them in a deeper and meaningful way, and more than 'being the boss' and getting tasks done."

But once trust is lost, Clifford warns that it's very hard to rebuild. "In my career, I have seen that trust isn't easily broken, but once it is, it's a real challenge to regain and build back up," she adds.

Life in lockdown

Trust is even more important now that so many of us are working from home amid the lockdown.

"Trust has been tested over the last few months," Clifford says.

"Employees not previously used to home working have found themselves without the face-to-face guidance they are used to, thus the reciprocal trust between team member and manager becomes even more important to hone, alongside measuring productivity and output of work."

It's also vital to avoid pointing the finger of blame when something goes wrong, according to Caroline Whaley, co-founder of Shine for Women.

"There's a bit of a tendency to start getting into the blame game when things get tough and in times like this what we need is to back each other," she says.

"We won't forget the people who came to our aid when we needed it most and that works both ways."

Indeed, AWI's research suggests



that virtual teams have to work harder to build and maintain trust than their traditional, office-based counterparts. "Virtual leaders should make a conscious effort to ensure that their staff develop the cohesion and predictability that make it possible," Mason says.

But it isn't easy to build trust at a distance. "In a virtual work world, people are spending less time in the same physical space as each other and have fewer cues to rely on in helping understand what is going on with colleagues, the organisation, another unit or the business as a whole," Mason says.

That said, video conferencing tools such as Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and others can help us better understand each other. That may sound counterintuitive, but Alvino argues that empathy is key to a trusting relationship - and that's helped by getting a sneak peek into people's lives, be it their spare bedrooms, the bookshelves in the background, or children and pets scampering through the room. "It just makes you feel like this is a real person," she says.

Surveillance warning

Managers should be mindful that not all tools are created equal when it comes to trust. Monitoring software, for example, can have the opposite effect on building and maintaining trust. "While this might be effective for some situations, it's not an option which is suitable for the culture of every business out there and can

imply a serious lack of faith in employees who have never had their productivity or commitment brought into question before," says Nicole Sahin, founder and CEO of Globalisation Partners. Instead, she advises setting up clear metrics and tracking them via weekly summary reports to let the employee highlight their own accomplishments.

Alvino argues that some monitoring tools or data analytics can be useful to spot people with potential or see those who are disengaged.

"We look for data that can become workforce insights," she says. "It's not surveillance, it's insight that comes from analytics."

Employee engagement surveys are normally run annually, but that's not frequent enough to get good data. After all, if your last survey was at the end of 2019, the pandemic and lockdown has since intervened.

Measuring trust is possible, says Blakey, adding: "What gets measured is treasured."

He's created a tool to quantify trust based on years of benchmarking, which lets people track progress over a year to see if the tactics you're trying to use to build trust are actually working.

But those are company-wide efforts, and while important, trust begins as a two-way interaction between managers and their reports, says Clifford. "Your behaviour as a trusting leader will enable you to drive performance and loyalty from your team that will exceed all expectations," she concludes.