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How to Build Trust in a Team

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Without trust, teams cannot and will not function effectively. Trust is the foundation for all positive group dynamics, including open communication, consensus decision making, effective problem solving and constructive, productive conflict.

In a team, trust has three components: integrity, ability and caring. Integrity has to do with character, ability correlates with competence and caring is how team members treat one another.

In his best-selling book, *"The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,"* Patrick Lencioni describes trust as the ability to be real, open and vulnerable with one another. If team members are guarded in their conversations, they hold back. When they hold back, the team fails to tap into the unique perspectives and expertise of everyone in the group. Weigh-in = buy-in. When team members do not engage in open, robust dialogue, they often fail to commit to the decisions made because they feel their voice was not heard.

Building trust in a team is more of a process than an event, a journey, not a destination. It begins with clarifying expectations and establishing core values that are non-negotiable. Two questions I ask to help facilitate this discussion are, *"What are the behaviors we can't live without? What are the behaviors we can't live with?"* Keep the number of core values small; fewer than 10 is preferred. Also, be sure that each core value has behaviors that clearly describe how the value is demonstrated in the team. Trust builds when each team member is more trustworthy. As team members demonstrate the core values, their confidence and commitment in one another increases. When a misstep occurs, it is important to apologize, forgive and move on. If a member consistently fails to demonstrate the core values of the team, she will need to be removed from the team.

Your character is defined by actions, not words. Keeping your commitments, being honest and totally transparent helps team members believe in you. "Tell me first" describes how team members are loyal to one another, not escalating issues or concerns without first addressing them with the person(s) involved. Believing the best about and expecting the best from team members creates a positive frame for conflict resolution and team problem solving.

Caring is demonstrated by getting to know one another as people. Do not underestimate the bonds of trust that form when team members take the time to really understand each other as human beings. Two of my favorite *"getting to know you"* exercises include Trust Lines and Bag of Questions. **Trust Lines** ask each team member to create a graph that visually shows, over time,

the important successes and failures in his life. As each team member shares these high and low points, he also shares lessons learned. You learn a lot about how a person communicates, makes decisions and approaches situations based on his significant life experiences. **Bag of Questions** is exactly that, a gift bag full of strips of paper that include questions team members verbally respond to in front of the group. I usually have enough questions that team members may choose three or four questions and respond to whatever two questions they choose. Examples of questions include, *"What is your definition of success?" "Why is your best friend your best friend?" "What is the biggest mistake you made and what did you learn from it?" "Tell us about the most frightening moment in your life."* A great reference book for this activity is *"Brave Questions"* by Alan Zimmerman.

Of course, social events, such as attending ball games, golf outings and picnics help team members get to know one another on a personal level outside of work. More structured events like high/low ropes courses are great ways to build trust. I highly recommend the Four Mounds Rope Course in Dubuque. Contact Dan Block of Team Building Blocks for more information.

To help build trust in a person's competence, it is important for the team leader to introduce all team members and specifically state why each person was chosen for the team, the strengths they bring and the role they will perform. This is especially critical in virtual teams where members are not co-located together.

Asking team members to participate in personality and strengths assessments also help to build trust in one another's abilities and talents. I like to use Human Synergistics' LSI Conflict Styles and Gallup's Strengthsfinder. Each of these tools helps team members see and understand how they positively contribute to overall team performance. They may also be used to show team members how they can negatively derail the team with passive and aggressive behaviors. Myers-Briggs, DISC and other personality assessments help team members learn how to flex their styles when communicating and collaborating with others who are not like them.

Lastly, trust builds when team members demonstrate vulnerability with their peers. *"I'm sorry." "I made a mistake." "That was my bad." "I don't know." "I need help." "I'm unsure. What is your opinion?" "I think you have a better idea."* These are all examples of being open and authentic with others. When you take ownership for mistakes rather than throwing colleagues under the bus, they will have your back in return.

Integrity, competence and caring are essential in building trust among team members. Trust does not happen by accident. It takes discipline and thoughtful actions from everyone on the team. Team members who trust one another are able to make effective decisions that tap into the perspectives and talents of all.

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