



LEADERSHIP TRUST

PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q4: RELATIONAL TRUST

Q4



Leadership Trust

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Dave Gilmore examines the necessary conditions.

[THIS ESSAY WAS COMPILED FROM PODCASTS ORIGINALLY PRESENTED ON "THIS IS DESIGNINTELLIGENCE" IN 2023.]

Conditions

Leadership trust results from a myriad of conditions. Key among these are developing leadership depth, understanding connotations, a keen ability to sense context and read the room, and being ever vigilant to guard against hubris by avoiding prideful falls, fostering loyalty, and earning respect. Like the engendered trust that can result from them, each of these pre-conditions is mutual, reciprocal and relational. In other words, a two-way street. To better understand, let's examine each of these aspects a bit more.

Depth

Inch-deep leadership is pervasive. It may be a mile wide in every direction, but that's not what makes for sustainable, effective leadership. In leading, it's the depth that counts, but what is depth? What about leadership depth distinguishes it from other marks of effective leadership?

In this regard, depth is manifest through multiple expressions. Expertise, wisdom, judgment, resonance and more: All are different yet interdependent attributes of expressed leadership depth. It's not difficult to express counterfeit alternatives to depth because most peers and followers don't recognize the genuine from the bogus. Most are influenced by first impressions, but first impressions are just that — first takes awaiting secondary understanding to be confirmed or contradicted.

This is where the shallow leader falls into the trap. They're too quickly satisfied and resolved from what they sense and feel in themselves as a leader that they deceive themselves into believing their wit or expression indicates depth. They may believe that a newly acquired bit of knowledge or know-how has transformed them into an expert others should follow.

Followers should be wary of the inch-deep leader who is self-convinced they are indeed a leader. As leaders go, so often go followers. Following a shallow sort will most likely result in you too becoming shallow. Only a brief satisfaction accompanies shallowness, and it leaves the shallow unfulfilled and looking for the next filling. Once on this treadmill, it's difficult to get off simply because other alternatives seem too much. After all, depth takes time to develop and that's not an attractive dynamic to impatient, shallow sorts.

Leadership depth is multifaceted and multidirectional. It's not confined to our ideas of relative space, as in a vertical measure from surface down, a one-dimensional perspective. Leadership depth is multidirectional through awareness and response and occurs across a broadened landscape of perspective and expres-



sion. Achieving such a quality requires understanding in context and interpretation of multiple meaning and connotations. When these conditions are met, and consensus is reached by both the leader and those being led, the essence of trust is within our grasp.

Connotations

After leadership depth, the next valuable skill is interpreting connotations. Connotations are odd but commonplace. They attach themselves to any number of things and have the power to alter objective realities, shift truth toward falsehood and blur clarity toward opacity.

Someone once defined connotations to me as emotional baggage one associates with memories, objects, people, words and more. One person's connotation about a thing may be the opposite of another's regarding the identical thing. By nature, connotations are wholly subjective and generally unknown to everyone but the individual who has them. But these always personal associated meanings, in context, hold great power in enabling communication and common understanding.

The pervasive nature of connotations is beyond calculation. They are everywhere, with everyone, all the time. There is no separating connotations from the nature of being human. They are a matter of the mind, fed by the senses and contextualized within the experiences of each of us. The word "connote" draws meaning from context, by definition. Never isolated, they constitute a chain of prior senses and experiences. Memory reflects connotations and, with all its filters, channels connotative power.

As a leader, being front-of-mind conscious of how connotations affect communication is central to effectiveness. So often, I find

myself speaking to an audience only to discover many different interpretations of my words and intentions being reflected back to me. Connotations filter transmitted meaning and alter received and perceived meanings. This is also the case with biases. Biases are another powerful filter to communication's effectiveness.

Leaders can't possibly know the connotations operating in others' minds, but they can speak directly to them by reinforcing the meaning of words, statements and sentiments. Far too often we simply speak and expect others to receive what we say without distortion. When I do that, I'm being irresponsible with my messaging and obtuse toward those I'm communicating with. Effective leaders know anything worth saying is also worth giving the extra effort to close misinterpretation gaps. In dialogue, this takes on the form of asking for reflection back from the hearer to validate if what was said and meant was received as intended.

Effective communication is a central responsibility of leaders who care about their organizations, teams and employees and wish to build trust and understanding among their teams, but it's not always convenient. In fact, it rarely is, but it's essential.

Contexts

Leadership ways and means range across a broad range of expressions. Effective leadership leverages awareness and discernment to read the room, assess and express the most effective manner for each situation. Said another way, there's no "one way" of leadership. Given that the theme of leadership is primarily applied to the context of humans leading humans, the seemingly endless permutations of human dynamics make for a varied and oft-confusing field of application for the would-be leader seeking optimal effectiveness.

I came across a team of people this past year who illustrate the dynamics I'm talking about. In this group of seven people, the following behaviors presented themselves during the three days I was with them:

- Executive A from the East Coast of the US. showed undisguised disdain for Executive B, who was from a southern state. It seemed everything the southerner, Executive B, said was met with rolled eyes, sighs and under-the-breath mumbling from Executive A.
- Executive C seemed consistently out of touch with the themes, topics and dialogue occurring in the days we all met together.
- Executive D was the positive person in the room. They always showed up with a smile, a warm handshake or pat on the back and complimented just about everyone in the room each day for their contributions. Funny thing about it, though: Executive D rarely added anything to the body of knowledge being shared in the room and volunteered to be the overall note taker for the sessions.
- Executive E and F seemed Velcro'd together for the entire multiday set of meetings. They sat together, ate together and walked together whenever the team would go outside the meeting space to a restaurant or other venue. Each had iPads and took their own notes. To anyone paying attention, it was clear they were texting back and forth throughout the days of the gathering.
- Executive G was the CEO and stayed with the agenda for the entire week, without deviation. Even when the dialogue begged changing direction or staying with a topic longer than the allotted time, this executive took pride in their punctuality and discipline.



Each of these leaders seemed unaware of the reality that leadership expressions are varied and require better of each. The CEO seemed resigned that the team's apparent dysfunctions were to be accepted, and they were to play the cards they were dealt. Trust was clearly absent.

Effective leaders stride into every situation with their awareness antennae attuned to reading the room, observing the manner of each attendee and adjusting to best communicate with and positively impact each for the common good. Effective leaders are fixed on the core principles of trust, purpose, clarity and relationship and, from these principles, apply awareness and discernment to initiate and respond.

I've heard too many would-be leaders state in one way or another, "This is just the way I am," as an excuse for not adapting to dynamics to communicate better and make the impact all are hoping for. If that's you, reconsider if leadership is for you. If, instead, you're willing to release such a stance and take on the role of an authentic leader who leads for others, not yourself, you're on the way to becoming the effective leader we so often talk about. You're becoming who can build and earn trust.

Respect

Hubris is a term seldom used in modern language. From the Greek, it means, "the pride that comes before a fall." It's that flavor of pride that always ends with a bitter taste in the mouths of both the prideful leader and those they failed to lead. But what does it mean when the definition refers to "a fall"? What does it mean to fall in or from leadership?

The first sign of hubris is the fall from respect. Leaders who operate from blind pride repel and repulse others. When this happens repeatedly, respect is lost and the fall occurs. People don't respect self-positioning, self-promoting pride that seems blind

to everything else but one's own agenda. Pride-driven leaders can rarely walk back what their pride has compelled them to state or judge. It's just not in them to humble themselves, admit they were wrong, offer sincere sorrow for the offense or ask the wounded party for forgiveness. Any leader who can't do this doesn't deserve the respect they're so determined to achieve. They're simply missing the point of leadership. So often, that means trust.

Loyalty

Another fall from pride's determination is the fall from loyalty. Plenty of people follow leaders they don't respect. I suppose this is because they need the job and see no other alternatives. These folks regularly criticize the leader behind their back but show up each day to stay employed and hope for a bonus; loyalty is the last thing they will give to a leader who has fallen from pride's manner. Loyalty is won over time by consistency of manner: caring for others, listening well and responding well, inspiring the better and best in others and covering for the employee here and there on off days. Loyalty, like respect, is hard won but readily lost.

Still another fall from pride's drive, the hubris that precedes the fall, is the fall from trust. When one operates from self-centeredness, people are quick to observe it and know what motivates such a leader. Trust is a precious gift given and earned from a life lived in honesty and truth. Not all lost trust is the result of pride's doing. Sometimes it's the result of a prideful other who blunders a decision, looks for a scapegoat to assign blame and publishes falsehoods resulting in your being the victim of fallen trust. I've been there. It hurts like crazy to be lied about and for others to lose their trust in you when it was all false, yet you weren't given the opportunity to correct the record. All you can do is go on being the leader you've always been: Operate out

of confidence, humility, care for others and do the right thing. Respect will return from those who understand the values you live, and that's enough.

I'd rather have respect, loyalty and sincere trust from those I serve as a leader than the accolades of other leaders and the compensation that comes from over-performance of the profit and loss statement. When it's all said and done, people forget the plaques on the wall, the bonuses paid and the track record of a leader's promotions. They remember the kind of person you were, the care you gave to those on your team and the impact you made on the organization and clients you served.

In the end, each of these qualities combine to form a synergistic whole. Together they create the kind of mutually beneficial trust between leaders and followers that is a requisite to any healthy working relationship. Having examined these traits, one question remains:

What kind of leader are you?



Effective communication is a central responsibility of leaders who care about their organizations, teams and employees.



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