

TRUST – THE NEW WORKPLACE CURRENCY?

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TRUST IN SOUTH AFRICAN GOLD MINES

Measurement of trust in management in South Africa's gold mines in the late 1980's produced unexpected results. Contrary to expectations, trust in management was not consistently low. Rather the degree to which managers were seen to be trustworthy or not varied immensely; not only from mine to mine but even from one shaft to another on the same mine.

Initial attempts to establish reasons for the differences proved unsuccessful. The researchers were unable to establish a relationship between trust and a number of factors including physical conditions (in the hostel and underground), labour mix, rates of pay, trade union activity and lack of an HR function.

An explanation for the findings was at last found but only in response to another question: "have relations with management changed (improved/deteriorated) over the last two years and, if so, why?" If management-employee relations had improved/got worse it was only because management had either attended /not attended to employee concerns or problems.

Due regard for employee grievances was, at the end of the day, the single criterion which was consistently applied by mine employees to assess the state of their relationship with management. In other words managers, individually and hence collectively, were accepted or rejected on the strength of their perceived interest in the well being of their employees.

Trust, the researchers concluded, was either granted or withheld, the leadership of a mine was seen to be legitimate and worthy or not of support, on this basis only. Whether management was trusted was ultimately a function of the intent of the immediate supervisor, at any level in the hierarchy, with respect to the people who report to him/her directly.

TRUST AND INTENT

For the last twenty years our experience as an organisational development consultancy, working with diverse organisations across the world, has endorsed the findings from the initial research in South Africa's gold mines. In any organisation that we have in we have witnessed variations in trust levels. In a retail bank, for example, we have found trust levels in one branch to be dramatically different from a branch around the corner. Similarly, in a hospital we have seen variations in trust literally from ward to ward; purely as a function of the ward sister's relationship with nursing staff.

We have concluded that in any group there will always be two populations; one which is anti and another which is pro-management. The two populations will always exist but the size of the positive group, and hence the degree to which there is overall trust

in management, will be directly determined by the perceived intent of the leader(s) of the group.

Intent is about whose interests in the relationship are believed to being served. When managers are perceived to be pursuing their own interests, to only be in the relationship to get something out of their people, trust in them will be low. Only when managers are there to give to or serve their people, will their staff be willing to give to them; because they trust that management has their best interests at heart.

What those in authority have to give to their people, what earns them trust, is however not money. Across the world, from an illiterate miner shovelling rock for a living several kilometres underground to the CEO of one of the biggest cell phone companies in Pakistan, what management needs to give, distils down to only two drops of essence.

In the first instance managers have to have a genuine concern for those in their charge. They have to care for their people as human beings; not as human resources which help their bottom line to grow. Secondly, they have to enable their people to realise the very best in themselves.

The price to be paid before employees will be truly willing to deliver on command is not money; it is care and growth. This is what makes the power which is exercised by those in authority legitimate. When the price of power is not paid people become resistant, no matter how much they are paid

CULTIVATING TRUST IN MANAGEMENT

Managers can only really earn trust in one of two ways. They can do so firstly, by passing the intent test. This is not a once off test but rather one that individual managers sit every day of their lives. Trust is gained or lost by them each time they sit the intent test; the effect of how they do on the intent test is, in other words, cumulative over time.

Secondly managers earn trust through a process of trust and entrustment of their subordinates. With each incremental step of entrustment there is greater trust in and increased trustworthiness in the relationship between manager and subordinate.

Managers take the intent test whenever they are faced with a choice between their needs or their values. Values are things that managers are prepared to put their self interest or needs second for. It is the value which is operative in any command situation, therefore, which determines whether managers are giving or taking in that situation.

When managers compromise on what is the right thing to do, in order to confirm their own interests, this becomes immediately apparent to their subordinates. Their subordinates instantly conclude that management is self serving and as such cannot be trusted. Conversely, when management contradicts their self interest in order to do the right thing, their subordinates experience them to be sincere. They see management as values, rather than needs driven, and therefore trust them.

Managers pass the intent test therefore whenever they are able to differentiate between what is expedient and what is correct in any situation and then act on the basis of what is correct rather than what is expedient.

Increased trust in management also occurs whenever managers give up control. By that is meant that managers go beyond asking their people for their opinion, listening to them and only then deciding. It means that they let their people decide and then live with their decision; even when the decision they have made is contrary to the decision which management would have made.

Each incremental suspension of control suggests a greater degree of trust and entrustment on the part of management. Moreover, it implies a preparedness by management to assume that their people are trustworthy; that when faced with the distinction between what is right and what is in their self interest that they will do what is right. Then, and only then, are their people in a position to demonstrate their trustworthiness.

To say that trust is the new workplace currency therefore is not correct. Trust always has been the workplace currency, it still is, and it always will be.

(Shortened version of a presentation by Wendy Lambourne at a Management Conference: Challenges Facing Today's Managers – (October 2009) in Johannesburg, South Africa.)