

## It's About Trust

Like many of you, I have several books about communication on my shelves, and each one offers bits of good advice. Every time I browse back through one, something jumps out that I wish I'd remembered at some critical moment. Then I must remind myself (as I do my coaching clients) – the secret is Practice, Practice, Practice. Just reading this stuff isn't what changes your behavior; it's being intentional and then consistently investing the effort to change.

### **A common theme among my client organizations is this: How can we use better communication to cultivate trust?**

- In one case it's about managing change around a redirection of the mission.
- Another is trying to strengthen the level of professionalism and accountability among staff members without demotivating them.
- A third knows it can improve productivity by strengthening communication and cooperation between satellite sites and the home office, but that would be a change.
- One is struggling to develop a model of open, shared, transparent decision-making following the departure of a leader who allowed a dysfunctional style of behind-the-scenes maneuvering to become the norm.
- One involves a volunteer Board of Directors that wants to micromanage the company's paid professionals.

**In all these situations the critical element – the magic elixir for health – is to develop trust.** Two principles are guiding my work in all the above situations, both related to trust. The bad news is that they are both difficult and the boss has to go first. The good news is they are almost magically effective at strengthening working relationships. The first principle comes out of the Harvard Negotiation Project. Two of its participants, Roger Fisher and Scott Brown wrote, a couple of books based on that work. One is [Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement Without Giving In](#); the other is [Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate](#). In this latter book they put forth the idea that the most successful strategy for building a successful working relationship is to be “unconditionally constructive.” In spite of our grounding since grade school in the Golden Rule, this is counterintuitive for most of us. We usually take the “Do unto others” thing to mean “the first time.” After that, reciprocate. In other words, once you have started in the positive, your best course of action thereafter is to do to them whatever they just did to you. Most call this the tit-for-tat approach. It's a flawed strategy.

Instead, the authors say this. “In any relationship, I want to be able to take steps that will both improve our ability to work together and advance my substantive interests, whether or not you respond as I would like. In short, I am looking for guidelines I can follow that will be both good for the relationship and good for me, whether or not you follow the same guidelines.” In that sense, this strategy is “unconditionally constructive.”

The authors go on to outline what they mean in very practical terms and clarify that their guidelines are not meant to be advice on how to be “good,” but only on how to be effective. They reflect an extremely pragmatic approach to what it takes for the relationship to work better, thus allowing me (as well as you) to get my needs met.

Here is the second principle that has been pivotal for my clients' growth: It is enormously costly to avoid difficult conversations. We all “sort of know that,” but that knowledge doesn't change the fact that conflict-avoidance is an extremely common self-crippling behavior. A good articulation of this point comes from the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler. The authors originally started researching why, among equally trained and experienced colleagues, some are so much more effective at influencing outcomes and getting things done. They discovered that the critical differentiator was their ability to have difficult but crucial conversations – honestly, directly, but in a way that strengthened rather than damaged relationships. In the words of the authors, “Strong relationships, careers, organizations, and communities all draw from the same source of power – the ability to talk openly about high-stakes, emotional, controversial topics.” The book describes how to master the principles that will let you do just that.

As we track the changes in our culture – the coarsening, the seemingly reflexive cynicism – it's easy to feel that honesty and integrity have lost their power. But that's a cop-out, because it's simply not true. People are more desperate than ever to find relationships that are worthy of their trust. It is not only possible to foster that trust, it is imperative that we do so.

Besides that, it's still good business.

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