

## Trust: An Emerging Crisis

### *How is YOUR Workplace Faring?*

*“Human beings depend on trusting relationships and suffer deeply when trust is broken. When trust breaks down, so does our connection to each other.”*

Let’s face it, we live in an era of extreme dishonesty. Between big tech, big media, and polarizing politics, trust is at an all-time low. According to a 2019 report measuring public trust since the 1950s, only 17 percent of Americans say they can trust elected officials to do what is right “*just about always*” (three percent) or “*most of the time*” (14 percent).

Compare that to when the study began asking about trust in 1958, where roughly three-quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing “*almost always*” or “*most of the time*.”

As if those factors aren’t bad enough, there’s even more to it than politics and big business. Trust in *everything* and *everyone* has fallen – from retailers and doctors to mechanics, salesmen, our own bosses and other business leaders, and scores of others.

#### **Lack of Trust Takes a Toll on Mental Health**

Lack of trust comes at a high cost, psychiatrists say.

“There is such an intimacy and dependency that is built into human beings,” states author and psychiatrist Dr. Peter Breggin. “A human being grows up with a huge need of feeling worthy of love. We have a huge need to trust somebody.”

Because people hold trust in such high regard, deception can be devastating. In fact, trust is so essential to our mental health that Breggin believes betrayal may be at the heart of mental illness. Ask anyone who has been

lied to or harmed by someone they trusted deeply: the experience can make the person depressed and anxious.

The mental health toll that lack of trust exacts on our lives cannot be underestimated. According to the World Health Organization, *mental illness results in more disabilities in developed countries than any other group of illnesses, including **cancer and heart disease**.*

“If you don’t think mental illness will impact your life, you’re sadly mistaken,” explains John Grohol, mental health expert and founder of Psych Central. <https://psychcentral.com/> “If it doesn’t hit you, it’s going to hit someone you love or are close to.”

It should be pointed out that the most common mental illnesses in adults are **anxiety** and mood disorders. And so, in a world that’s already been hit hard by a pandemic, and scores of economic and political uncertainties comes yet another factor – *lack of trust* – that can ramp up our already anxiety-riddled lives!

#### **Lack of Trust is Hard to Fix**

Breggin says that we grant authority to others in the same way that we granted it to our parents and caregivers when we were young. It’s an innate process that starts from our early dependence on others. And yet, not all authority should be treated equally. Far from it.

“We have to be consciously aware that they (bosses) are not our parents,” Breggin stressed.

When trust in authority figures breaks, it’s significant and hard to fix. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that the pandemic and economic crisis, and political instability have led to “an epidemic of misinformation and widespread mistrust of societal institutions and leaders around the world.”

## Trust in the Business World

According to Jim Bohn, PhD, the following are some examples of how trust can break down in a business setting:

- A manager, supervisor, or other business leader promises to get an employee a pay increase but doesn't take all the necessary steps and drops the ball - *trust is eroded*.
- A manager, supervisor or other leader does not defend an employee's ideas during a stressful meeting with executives - *trust is eroded*.
- A manager makes a promise he/she cannot possibly keep (e.g., "You'll be promoted") - *trust is eroded*.
- When traveling, a business leader does not take the time to introduce an employee to key individuals, leaving the employee feeling like a fifth wheel - *trust is eroded*.
- A manager or other leader takes credit for an employee's efforts - *trust is eroded*.

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**EXERCISE:** Consider if any of the above examples have occurred in your workplace. How did you feel when trust was eroded? What did your co-workers think? Was trust eroded in some other fashion other than these instances? If so, discuss that situation and what happened. How was the boss regarded afterward?

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**EXERCISE:** In the issue of fairness, did the manager or other boss offer a reasonable explanation(s) as to why the promise or other declaration did not occur? Did the reasoning seem to make sense, and was it generally accepted in the workplace? Have other promises been breached or was this an exception?

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You get the idea: Trust was breached, and even if there was a good reason it's difficult

to get back. It's bad enough that we live in a (macro) world in which it is extremely difficult to trust the people and institutions that wield considerable power over our lives.

When trust is lacking on even a micro level, many employees will quickly "jump ship" for another position when they are given a chance. If they can't trust (boss) John or Jane Doe to do what they say they are going to – why should they hang around? If John or Jane failed to deliver on X, why should employees believe they'll deliver on Y?

## Lack of Trust Impacts Performance

Trust is the foundation of any successful relationship. When employees feel they can't trust leadership they feel unsafe, like no one has their back, and they spend more energy on self-preservation and job hunting than performing at their job.

Employees will do what's necessary to keep their job, but without trust in leadership, they're not likely to go above and beyond to help create an organization with high levels of performance. Consider what this really entails: Workers "going through the motions" means a workplace lacking in innovation. *What organization can afford to be stagnant in today's ultra-competitive economic climate?*

Communication is yet another problem in a workplace that lacks trust. When employees don't trust their leaders, they often avoid communicating with them out of fear of retaliation – or simply because they feel that they can't trust leadership to be honest or upfront with them – so why should they bother returning the favor? *How many great ideas are these leaders missing out on that employees might otherwise have presented?*

## The Flip Side of the Coin

But consider what Bohn says happens when a manager, supervisor, or other leader IS trustworthy:

- Employees who trust their leaders are willing to go the extra mile to ensure their managers and leaders achieve their goals.
- Employees who trust their leaders are willing to do more with less questioning of motives.
- Employees who trust their leaders know they will be rewarded for doing good work.
- Employees who trust their leaders are willing to expose vulnerabilities and ask for help.
- Employees who trust their leaders are willing to raise issues that pose risk to a project or initiative.
- Employees who trust their leaders are willing to offer feedback without fear of reprisal.

## How Employers can Increase Trust

It's important to point out that many business leaders aren't "bad people." Rather, too many don't understand that, as a crucial component of the team whose **words** and **actions** are front and center in the workplace, what they say and do has consequences, positive or negative.

**Good leaders build trust by listening.** To build trust, it's crucial that leadership learns to LISTEN to employees' concerns and seeks to really understand them. They never neglect to take action. Employees who feel that leaders really listen will go a long way toward increasing trust and performance.

**Good leaders build trust by following up.** They say what they'll do and do what they say. If you tell Jim you need the big XYZ report on Monday, chances are good he has it for you, and if he doesn't, Jim has a good reason why he doesn't. If it's a particularly hectic week, he emails on Wednesday and says, "*Sorry, Bill, I am just swamped. Give me another day or two, okay?*" Sounds simple enough, but it's amazing the number of bosses who postpone requests indefinitely or forget about them all together! How hard is it to quickly email or text Bill that he hasn't forgotten? How long would YOU trust a boss who doesn't do what

he says he's going to do? (Editor's note: See this issue's *Lifestyle Tips* insert for more on this topic.)

**Good leaders build trust by mentoring!** Trust is a two-way street. Employees need to trust their employers, but the reverse is also true. Bad leaders are often micromanagers who essentially say: "*I trusted you enough to hire you, but not really to do the job.*" Real TRUST allows the leader to mentor and continually train employees on skills and leadership responsibilities. The ability to delegate holds both the leader and others accountable and builds a strong degree of trust. When leaders don't delegate, they're likely creating excess work for themselves or a select group of chosen people they've decided to trust. Neither works!

**Good leaders build trust by communicating.** This point might seem obvious, but is it? Many business leaders share information only with senior management rather than with their entire team: Often the CEO has the attitude that information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis. But important information has a way of leaking out to team members, and rumors can begin circulating, often with a mixture of true and untrue "facts." Too many business leaders communicate far too little, when over-communicating is actually better! If it's the same info that was shared last week, tell the team nothing more is known as yet. But at least this boss said *something*.

## Summary

A lack of trust is often at the core of dysfunctional office environments. It increases stress, anxiety, and job turnover. The worst part is it doesn't have to be that way. Of course, if your business leader is more like the one depicted in the "Flip Side of the Coin" section of this article, so much the better!

*Additional source: Shelley Smith and Forbes Coaches Council.*

## More on Developing Trust



*By Shelley Smith*

**A** lack of trust in the workplace is the virus that can create a diseased workplace culture. It often begins with leadership and spreads throughout the team, leading to a cycle of unhealthy responses that affect engagement and productivity. Here are some tips for developing trust:

**Leader trust** (*team's trust of their leader*): Ruthlessly examine your behavior and determine whether you're taking any of the actions that can destroy trust, and if so, stop. Maintain transparency and communicate more than you think is necessary.

**Team trust** (*leader's trust of their team*): Give your people what they need to perform, including information, direction, support, etc. Employees can't step up if they don't have the necessary building blocks.

**Lateral trust** (*trust among team members*): Discharge people who undermine the team and refuse to change. Create ways for teams to work together. Examples include job and task sharing, and rotating leads on projects and day-to-day work assignments.

### How to Get There

Using a variety of assessments or surveys can help you analyze your workplace to determine the level of trust in your culture. I recommend the Predictive Index Behavioral Assessment (<https://www.predictiveindex.com/assessments/behavioral-assessment/>) trust surveys, 360 individual and team reviews, and employee experience surveys that measure the manager, job, team, organization, and culture.

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