It seems ironic that in an increasingly “what’s in it for me?” world, a high level of trust is essential to leading-edge safety performance.

Here are some alternative ideas, as well as ten points for boosting trust for safety professionals and for the safety function.

The Impact of Trust

First off, here’s a contrarian view. A high degree of trust is not critical if you’re willing to settle for a minimally acceptable safety record. You can see this by just looking around at those organizations that seem to be doing “OK” with leadership styles that run the gamut of being leaden-handed or minimally existent.

Leadership guru Peter Drucker recently said that would-be leaders spend far too much time trying to come up with the right answers when they should instead be asking the right questions. Some critical questions regarding low-trust/acceptable performance companies might be:

1. Is the company doing OK because of that leadership style?
2. Is performance acceptable despite their culture and style?
3. Have you ever seen a global safety leading company that pays short shrift to employee morale and trust? I haven’t, in my twenty one years of working with predominantly Fortune 500 companies throughout the world.

Organizational culture is a surround system—that which everyone knows is true but is rarely written down nor directly observable. It’s like the air around us, a mixture of many components, invisible yet still detectable.

If culture is like air, trust is oxygen. By itself, trust has minimal effect. But it is a crucial element to igniting the spark of leadership vision, motivation and communications. A thin trust atmosphere only supports a diminished flame. Generally, the greater the trust, the higher the likelihood individual and group behavior will improve, fanning an organizational safety culture and performance that thrives.

From the perspective of employees, I think of “trust” as their willingness to risk being vulnerable, by what they say (how honest can I be?) or do (how involved will I be? what will I report? to what level will I even try this new method? etc).

Trust is founded on two perceptions—intent and ability. According to Douglas McGregor (who developed the Theory X/Theory Y concept of organizational culture), intent refers to employees’ belief they will “not be taken unfair advantage of deliberately or accidentally.” Ability means having the skills and organizational power to consistently make promised changes occur.

In essence, trust is a test of any leader, one which—whether we know it or not—we are periodically reassessed by others. Like any measurement, the two determinants of leadership trust are validity and reliability. Validity means do we as leaders do what we say we are going to do? Can we effectively make things happen (as promised)?

Reliability refers to our consistency. Can we be counted on to be congruent in our words and actions? Do we seem to have a central set of values on which we rely? Here’s an irony: I’ve heard many say they would rather have a “trusted” enemy, one who you can respect and count on to take a consistent viewpoint (though...
it’s not yours) than a sunshine-only supporter.

When tests are applied, not surprisingly, trust levels are low for many companies. Executives feather their own nests at the expense of shareholders and employees, worker pension funds vanish, politicians misrepresent intent and intelligence, employees are told to never take safety shortcuts on one hand while being exhorted to work faster and harder to get product out, companies attempt to convince employees that reductions in health care and other benefits are not takeaways (even those that may in fact be critical for company survival) but are actually “good” for their workers and much more.

Numerous studies from the Hay Group, Watson Wyatt International and other polling organizations reveal that employee trust, though risen from post-9/11 lows, still hover at the 50% level. Meaning about half of workers don’t believe in their leaders’ truthfulness and/or abilities.

If you operate in a ferociously competitive business world, would you want to go into battle with half of your team not respecting the intent or skills of those setting direction? This often leads to individuals spending inordinate amounts of time covering themselves rather than furthering their mission, being distracted from seeing changing risks and opportunities, wasting time and effort on non-essential tasks, looking to bail out of the fray with a minor issue, grievance or manufactured injury.

So, sure, many executives might be diagnosed with having Morality Deficit Disorder, politicians lie and trust is low. While this affects us all, at least in the background, it’s most important to focus on your own company-specific trust issues.

As an example, a Senior Safety Manager reflected on the predominantly positive changes within his international manufacturing company, but for trust issues, “Working together instead of against each other has had big impacts. This has been a transformation over the years. Still, the slightest issue or inconsistency can cause major disruptions. A lack of trust is the biggest obstacle that must be overcome. Too many people don’t trust the other—(they think) what are they hiding and why?”

Another safety professional wrote she saw a lack of trust on the part of upper management: “In my opinion leadership has taken a step backward, especially upper management. I believe they have gone to a challenge mode. They do not trust the decisions that the joint safety committee make and put undue pressure on the management representative to change their decision.”

There are some who believe that developing trust solely resides in the bailiwick of senior management. I agree that, by their honesty, integrity, consistency, concern—or lack thereof—executives make a big impact on organizational trust levels. But we as safety professionals are in a unique position. Our charge of promoting safety is perhaps the only area in organizational life that everyone, at least verbally, agrees is important (albeit for different reasons). With the potential of fluidly moving around and possibly impacting everyone in the company—from executives through line staff—we have the potential to catalyze significant improvements in morale, communications and trust.

While trust can be weakened by one major action or inaction at the top, it can also be rebuilt by many continuous actions on a person-to-person level; even in a low-trust company, we can, at the very least, boost trust for ourselves and for the safety function.

Trust is especially critical for safety professionals in that, in the eyes of executives, our credibility comes to a large degree from how others perform. We are seen to be doing well when workers, supervisors and managers work and live with a strong Safety mode.

4 Leadership Steps for Reaching Others

Developing trust is important here, but not the only, key element in leadership. I believe there is a four-phase process for solidifying a team towards positive ends:

a. Get their attention
b. Elicit their interest
c. Nurture their deeper trust
d. Enlist their commitment

These phases are not linear. Ironically, it takes a base level of trust to even get the attention and elicit the interest of others. If I don’t believe your intent is positive, that you have ulterior motives that far overshadow your concern for my welfare, I’m unlikely to even listen with any credence to what you begin to tell me.

On the other hand, even if you’ve gone through these four phases with some success, remember that attention, interest, trust and commitment
are not just won over once. I know of no trust inoculation. Assuming that all is fine and will be so forever backfires.

Nature tends toward entropy (breakdown). It takes much longer to build a bridge than to blow it up. Without ongoing reinforcement, trust and commitment tend towards disintegration. Failure to continually inject more energy into a relationship leads to people feeling taken for granted. This goes well beyond trust; as many have found, even head-over-heels love can sour and curdle without renewal.

**Ten Keys for Boosting Trust**

If arguably, trust is an essential foundation for building receptivity, buy-in and encouraging improvements in attitudes, skills and behaviors, what can we as leaders do to boost worker trust?

1. **Start by huddling with a select group of employee and senior management leaders to arrive at a joint agreement about the current level of trust within your company.** How will you find out more info? To where are you trying to move? Getting a fix on organizational trust levels may not require employing one of numerous standardized metrics—such as the Organizational Trust Inventory, Measuring Organizational Trust and others, which you can find on the Internet. These normed instruments can sometimes be useful for generating “objective” data to present to skeptical leadership groups.

   But, ironically, I’ve seen situations where a resistant group of executives didn’t trust nor buy into these tests. What usually works best in these situations is to help leaders select what they think is important to measure and then chart their dimensions.

   Personally, I’ve gotten best data through interviewing a sample cross-section of organizational members, then organizing responses around common themes (e.g. a credibility drop-off after the last contract negotiations, the perception that senior management is sincere about safety performance but middle management is not, etc).

   By the way, neuroscientists at both Baylor College of Medicine and University College London confirm that even individual responses to trust can be measured. MRI scans have revealed that the caudate nucleus region of the brain is activated by and responds to thoughts of trust. Interestingly, the caudate nucleus is also important in central motor integration and overall information processing.

   However you determine where you stand on the trust continuum, remember that with the act of asking you are setting expectations you will do something to improve trust levels.

2. **Provide perspective to your team on developing trust.** In my experience, if you think you have trust issues, you undoubtedly do. Using an inventory to measure trust is like administering a questionnaire to your spouse to determine if he/she really loves you. The affective response is rarely adequately captured by true-false or multiple choice question sets.

   On the other extreme, those that are adamantly sure they couldn’t possibly have trust issues are usually most at-risk. I’ve found that “those that need it most, don’t get it” (that’s likely why they need it most).

   It may be helpful to have at least one member of your team who ascribes to the “trust doesn’t mean squat” school.

3. **Look for areas of inconsistency or mixed messages; do what you can to reduce these.** Classically, the “Safety vs. Productivity” apparent conflict is a common source of mixed messages. To elevate your safety culture, this has to be dealt with (but goes far beyond this article).

   In addition, most organizations with which we’ve worked have other inconsistencies as well—e.g. what is supposed to get you promoted vs. who is actually promoted, expectations of safety standards for contractors working alongside employees vs. those for your own people, what is measured in safety vs. what is rewarded, etc.

   Seeing inconsistencies objectively and clearly is prerequisite to reducing them—and thereby boosting your reliability.

4. **Carefully craft communications to the organization about what your objective.** Setting higher expectations is critical for improvement—people will more likely expend energy in elevating performance when they believe they have an achievable goal.

   But the flip side is, for your own credibility (after all, we’re trying to increase not further torpedo trust), be sure you can deliver to at least some degree on what you focus. You might communicate that your objectives are a work in progress, these
improvements occur over time, and you regrettably don’t have a magic wand to make all problems go away. Would that you could.

No company is in the primary business of boosting the trust of their own employees—this is a means to an end (of heightened safety, efficiency, productivity), not an end in itself. Like the foundation of a tall structure, trust is an invisible support upon which upper floors are constructed.

In line with this, I’d recommend not including the word “trust” in your communications. The word often seems touchy-feely and not sufficiently performance oriented.

Instead, you might talk about “strengthening organizational consistency”, “moving towards the next level of safety performance”, “improving safety communications”, “increasing safety participation” or more.

Consider admitting examples where “if-we-knew-then-what-we-know-now”, we would have done things differently. Caution: be prepared for company attorneys to ardently attempt to squelch any proposed admissions of “error.” Remember that attorneys’ charge is to protect the company from all risks. Taken to an extreme, you shouldn’t have employees, can’t sell services nor products, couldn’t agree to anything—as these all incur some risk.

But I suggest there is also risk inherent in not having strong relationships with workers. Communicate both honestly and strategically carefully. Our purpose is to create connection and build honest trust, not fuel lawsuits. I’d recommend cultivating relationships with the most-compatible lawyer at your company, explain your objective and ask for advice to help maximize honesty while also minimizing backfire risk.

Attorneys will often strongly counsel not to release any information until all decisions have been fully made. The problem I’ve seen is that employees keenly feel the breeze when the winds of change are in the air. Not providing any information at all only fuels the rumor mill and can lower leadership credibility and trust. Better to release interim reports, even to the point of telling others the final decisions have not been made, you cannot say anything further, but will let all know as soon as you can. In other words, when they know things are going on outside their ken, better to tell them you can’t tell them than to keep them in the total dark. The former approach shows greater respect, even if they really wished they could know the whole story, now.

5. Seek out and tap the perceptions of a range of workers, especially low-trusters.

In an article in the Wall Street Journal, Dr. Benjamin Brewer wrote about improving patients’ participation in their own health regimen, “Getting to the truth requires a climate of trust built upon relationships and experience.”

Don’t wait for disgruntled workers to come to you (or worse, spread negativity to all peers around). Make them part of your braintrust. As long as you treat them with respect, show you value their opinions and don’t get defensive, they can be a valuable source of information you might not otherwise receive. And building bridges of trust with most-upset employees can result in a significant movement toward greater open-mindedness. And to your receiving the benefit of the doubt in the future.

Frame the meeting at its start (“While we’ve had differences of opinion, we both have strong concerns about making this a safer work environment. I’d like to hear your ideas and anything else I should know.”)

Of course, if the floodgates do open—ironically, a sign a some trust—dirty water is likely to spill out first. In these situations, defensiveness douses glowing embers of trust. But how can you not get defensive when an angry worker seems to take relish in attacking you, Safety and the company? Take notes when the trust-challenged person streams negative reactions. This sends the message you are listening to and value what he says; it also keeps a record for later review. And, as important, it gives you a reason to not have to maintain continuous eye contact, making it easier to not get defensive.

Do your best to listen and not interrupt—give them up to two minutes to get things off their chest (even if you have to figuratively bite your tongue). There are many other personal techniques for maintaining equilibrium under pressure; employ whatever you’ve found works for you.

You’ll likely receive a range of suggestions, some of which you may decide to put into place. You can increase your credibility by implementing worker suggestions as soon as is feasible, then publicly crediting the person who offered the idea.
6. Ask yourself, “How will this affect employee trust?”, prior to any new communication, equipment or tool dissemination, training intervention initiation, proposed change in policies or procedures.

Just by asking yourself and culture team this question, you’ll make plans for implementing new plans so they promote and not diminish trust building. By considering trust and directing your attention here, organizational valuing of trust will raise.

7. Assess your Safety motivation messages (delivered by upper management, supervisors, you); tune up opportunity-based safety motivation, tune down fear-based threats. Old-style safety motivation is based on a do-it-or-else message (“...or you’ll get killed”, “...or you’ll get hurt”, “...or you won’t be able to see your children”, “...or you’ll get fired”, etc). Threats reduce trust. And ironically, the fear approach to safety motivation backfires whenever a workers doesn’t use PPE or follow prescribed policies and procedures and doesn’t get hurt nor written up.

8. Reduce the blame game. It’s an easy tendency for anyone to blame others when things don’t go well. But blaming diminishes trust and fails to model a high level of personal responsibility (something most Safety Professionals ardently want to see in others). For example, if you believe that a significant portion of workers comp claims are fraudulent—and I think there will always be some claims-faking—consider asking your team and yourself what the Medical Director of a large telecommunications company did of his group, “How do we develop a culture where people are not looking to bail out (with a carpal tunnel syndrome)?”

While it’s important to take reasonable actions to prevent fraud, just don’t go over the top by assuming that most claims are faked, that everyone is guilty until proven innocent. Suspicion breeds mutual distrust. I see this last mindset pervasive among leaders of many companies, which, not surprisingly, have significant trust problems.

9. Screen and implement new initiatives so they are consistent with trust-building (no matter the topic). Make sure that any person or system you bring in promotes personal responsibility for safety on the part of everyone on all levels, then demonstrates practical ways to implement this.

For example, rather than tell workers, “Don’t carry on stairs or you’ll fall”, it’s more honest and respectful to tell them, “If you carry on stairs, you increase your risk of falling. So if and when you carry on stairs, here are some methods to reduce your risk of getting hurt.”

10. Develop a strategy for influencing senior management to boost organizational trust. You may do this solely with internal resources or by utilizing outside specialists.

Focus should be on tangible strategies that executives can consistently implement to simultaneously elevate morale, confidence and receptivity, with minimal time commitment. These might include becoming more visible in safety (e.g. taping executive lead-ins to safety videos, preparing them to most effectively present an introduction for a safety conference), sending out statements about the company’s commitment to safety (that you can ghost-pen), “light of day” statements they have embrace the value of safety, expecting reports of consistent safety actions from their direct reports, and much more.

Have you ever reflected on the amazing things people are willing to do when they truly believe in something? You can tap this power to move towards higher level Safety by boosting trust within your company. By developing organizational trust skills, you can help catalyze significant turnarounds in Safety performance and culture, with individuals, groups and companies. I’ve seen this happen throughout the world.

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