Creating a Foundation of Trust: Four Leadership Strategies

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Attracting and retaining the best people requires a corporate culture that values mutual trust and openness. In this article, Jay Gordon Cone explores four leadership strategies for building open and collaborative relationships in the workplace.

No one can predict the future, but over time, people do learn to predict the kinds of behaviors they can expect from their leaders.

We accept that trust is a key enabler of efficient and productive working relationships. We're less sure about what it means to say we trust someone and even more perplexed by what it takes to engender trust. Let's call the *moment of trust* that point in time when you have to make a decision and the outcome is both uncertain and dependent what someone else chooses to do. In this article, I want to come at the *moment of trust* from the perspective of the leader who wants to create conditions favorable to trust.

In particular, I want to focus on the three primary factors that impact the choice someone makes in a *moment of trust*: 1) How uncertain is the outcome? 2) How high are the stakes? 3) How familiar is the situation?

Business leaders can't do much to lower real risks or to alter a person's prior experience with trust. They can, however, impact the level of uncertainty their team experiences and raise the chances that someone will opt to trust.

Certainty helps people feel in control. Uncertainty can have the opposite effect, causing people to doubt, grow fearful, and imagine the worst. The higher the stakes, the greater an impact uncertainty will have, and the greater the reward for mitigating its effects. Successful strategies to deal with uncertainty can create a "virtuous cycle" of trust and positive outcomes. A series of positive outcomes creates a new shared history for team members to draw on.

How do you raise people's tolerance for uncertainty? Model the behavior you wish to see: openness, collaboration, and genuineness, for a start. Then, consider the antidote to uncertainty and fear: consistent and reliable information from a trusted source. Here are four specific behaviors trustworthy leaders consistently employ.

1) **Clarify what's been decided and what hasn't**
Everyone's been in meetings where management poses a problem, then "brainstorms" the answer with everyone at the table. Trouble is, the decisions have already been made. The meeting is just a way to break the news, and maybe get some appreciation for how tough

a decision it was to make. These "answer key" meetings rarely fool anyone, and tend to create resentment rather than trust.

Transparency is the answer. Letting people know whether they're being convened to react, provide input, or decide will accelerate decision making and give people clarity about their roles during times of uncertainty. Without transparent decision making processes, people fill in gaps in information with their own inferred data, which may be rife with judgments and biased conclusions.

Argyris' Ladder of Inference (Figure 1) shows how conclusions are reached; most of us are so facile at the process we're not even aware we're constructing a world that may have little correlation to others' reality. In a team environment, a heavy reliance on inferred data can impair the productive functioning of the group and give rise to rumor and suspicion.
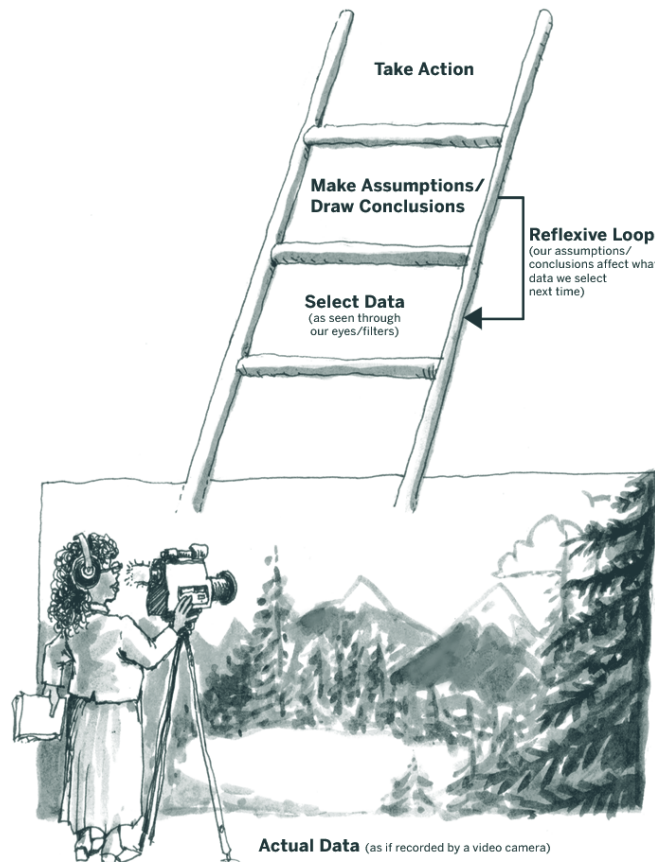

Figure 1. The Ladder of Inference is based on material from *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* by Chris Argyris. This model is adapted slightly from the derivative model presented in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook (page 243)* by Art

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2) Model openness and vulnerability

A team takes its lead from the person in charge. If you demonstrate that it's okay to make mistakes, and that you don't have all the answers, it builds more trust within the team than a top-down style will. Strengthening the group begins with skilled, authentic engagement. As the team grows stronger, the group leader can relax the hierarchy somewhat. The overall goal is to get team members to give one another the benefit of the doubt and take risks together in creative, collaborative work. The best leaders are those who can walk through the cafeteria, sit down for a chat, and still get up in front of a group of 400 and command their respect. Don't base your leadership style on some idealized version of the perfect leader; be the perfectly authentic version of yourself and others will trust you.

3) Balance inquiry and advocacy in communications

When should I communicate through asking for information and when should I communicate through expressing a point of view? It may be one of the toughest parts of a leader's job to keep team members up to date while listening to their thoughts in a way that demonstrates both your empathy and your flexibility. Trusted leaders are those whose opinions are known and yet they remain open-minded when presented with new information.

One way to find a good balance is using the Inquiry and Advocacy model (Figure 2). It shows a range of communications behaviors, with authoritative, top-down communications on one end of the continuum. On the other is questioning or inquiry behavior, that shows your willingness to hear what people around you have to say, and demonstrates your understanding of their ideas. In small group settings, a balance of inquiry and advocacy can yield excellent results. Use a combination of expressing and soliciting opinions. When people are willing to be open with one another, you have a foundation for building trust. Good give-and-take between team members also raises people's levels of involvement because they feel they have a personal stake in the outcome. When group buy-in to a decision is high, execution is more likely to be successful.

Figure 2. Inquiry and Advocacy model.
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4) Share a consistent vision
Leaders know what they want. Collaborative leaders find opportunities to clarify what they want to others in a way that invites dialogue without second-guessing. Goals focus teams and lessen uncertainty. Organization-wide goals over the long term let people know that there is a guiding hand at the helm, and a shared set of objectives. Achieving those objectives demonstrates congruence between what is stated and what is done, reinforcing that trust is warranted and that the next challenge may be accomplished.

The object here is not to eliminate uncertainty. It is to recognize the interrelationship between people being uncomfortable because they don't know what is going happen, and their willingness to trust others whom they perceive to have more control over the situation than they do. Having trust in a leader goes a long way toward alleviating that anxiety. No one can predict the future, but over time, people do learn to predict the kinds of behaviors they can expect from their leaders. Trustworthy leaders replace uncertainly about a situation with predictability about how the organization will respond.

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