



Build Your Reputation as a Trustworthy Leader

by Ron Carucci

I recently had to deliver feedback to an executive, let's call him Gabe, based on data I'd collected. He found this painfully difficult to hear: "People struggle to trust you." His defensiveness was intense. He insisted he had kept his commitments, delivered positive results, and hadn't ever acted deceitfully or unscrupulously. And all of those things were true.

Like many leaders, he was shocked to learn that the standards of trustworthiness have risen significantly as the world's experience of honesty and trust have descended into a freefall. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that government, NGOs, and media have continued to lose trust while business barely hangs on as the only institution people view as competent and ethical. People's expectations and definition of trustworthiness are broadening for leaders, and it takes a lot to gain that trust.

The findings of my 15-year longitudinal study of more than 3,200 leaders on organizational honesty for my book, *To Be Honest: Lead with the Power of Truth, Justice, and Purpose*, also show that to earn and keep trust, leaders must accept that reliability and integrity are merely table stakes. They don't, on their own, earn you a reputation of being trustworthy. They may get you labeled as dependable or easy to work with, but to be trusted consistently requires more. If you want to be certain that the people you lead see you as trustworthy, here are four practices to master. My research revealed that if you do, you'll be 16 times more likely to earn and keep the trust of others.

Be who you say you are.

Consciously or not, we all navigate the world guided by a set of values that are revealed by our actions. We may say we value compassion, but if the first question we ask upon hearing someone plowed into our new car in the parking lot is, "How bad is the damage?" instead of "Was anyone hurt?" our commitment to compassion appears pretty thin. Others judge our trustworthiness by the extent to which our actions and words match. Here's how to make sure they do.

Embody your stated values. The first thing you must do is articulate your values so others know what to expect. Importantly, though, good intentions don't count. One of

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the issues in Gabe's feedback was that he routinely extolled the importance of teamwork and being an "all for one" team. But during meetings, he became impatient with others' updates and was sarcastic with his feedback. Although he didn't intend it, his actions intimidated others and prevented them from participating, so he'd lost their trust.

Your values serve as a yardstick that others use to gauge their experience of you. If you haven't articulated them, people are left to make assumptions that may not align with what you believe. And if you have articulated them, as Gabe did, be especially vigilant about embodying them. Make a list of your most important values and for each, define the ways you intend for them to appear in your day-to-day actions.

Acknowledge any say-do gaps. None of us are consistent all the time. Identify the places where your actions have belied your values, leading to unintended consequences for others, like Gabe's behavior in meetings. Where necessary, apologize to those who've experienced those consequences. Otherwise, as with Gabe, the hypocrisy people attribute to you will erode trust quickly. But demonstrating humility for the impact of those moments can be a trust multiplier as people see that you're humble enough to take responsibility when your words and actions don't match.

Treat others and their work with dignity.

In an economy where people's primary output is often a reflection of themselves — their ideas, insights, and ingenuity — the importance of treating both the contributor and the contribution with dignity is vital. People are more likely to trust colleagues who graciously regard what they do as a distinct part of who they are. Here's how to do that.

Create opportunities for others to shine. Look for ways to allow others to showcase their talent. For example, invite people who don't have high visibility to present their critical projects to wider audiences in your organization. Or encourage those who host meetings you attend to hear a pitch from someone you know has a great idea but is struggling to get it heard. Maybe you can connect someone you know with career aspirations to people within your organizational network who might be able to help them advance their dream. Become known as someone who dignifies the contributions of others by making sure they're seen and celebrated across the organization.

Be a safe place to fail.

Fewer moments call for dignity more than when someone's efforts fall short. People inherently trust others they feel no need to hide from, especially in the shame of failure. When others make mistakes, even substantial ones, make sure that accountability

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includes keeping their self-respect intact. Balance expressing your disappointment with making sure you remain an ally, doing whatever you can to help them get back on track.

Balance transparency with discretion.

Discerning when to be vulnerable and open and when to protect confidences are both key to being transparent. You earn trust when you disclose information that helps people learn who you are and how you think, as well as when you withhold information while being transparent about why. Here's how to strike the balance.

Set and keep information boundaries. Be clear on what information you'll share about yourself, and with whom. Disclosing things about your life, like family, outside interests, social life, and even certain challenges, opens a window into who you are behind your work persona, creating greater connection and trust between you and others. Further, be generous in sharing work-related information, never treating it as a source of power or using it to signal that you know something others don't. Sharing information about the status of projects or that might help others make informed decisions enables them to see you as a helpful source of trusted data. Lastly, make sure you keep confidences. Steer clear of your organization's gossip and rumor mills. People who have trusted you with sensitive information must never feel that their trust was misplaced.

Offer and invite dissent and feedback. Embolden others' voices through rituals that invite people to offer out-of-the-box ideas and candid feedback or express personal vulnerability. For example, open meetings by having people write down ideas, feedback, or questions on index cards and then randomly choose one or two to discuss. Doing this anonymously to start makes it safe for people to participate freely. One leader I worked with regularly asked her team after sharing her thinking, "Where am I out to lunch?" By soliciting pushback, the quality of her ideas improved significantly.

It's equally important to use your voice to offer feedback and dissent in the service of helping others improve their ideas and work. If you struggle to be candid with important people in your life, worrying about how they'll react, it likely means you haven't earned their trust. Don't let your discomfort keep you from offering input that could fuel their growth. People naturally trust others who care enough to graciously bring them hard information that others won't.

Build bridges that unify.

If the last year showed us nothing else, it's how fragmented our world has become. We've developed trigger-happy impulses to take sides, hunkering down with those who see the world as we do. It's hard to know just how disjointed our organizations will

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feel as we transition to whatever the next form of “going to work” will take. But those who help create a sense of unity across their organizations will be far more trusted than those who perpetuate division.

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Turn rivals into accomplices.

The vast majority of an organization's most important work happens across departmental boundaries. Unfortunately, those boundaries create silos, and those trying to work across them can become rivals, often due to competing metrics and priorities or accumulated distrust. But the greatest value created in organizations also happens at its "seams" where key functions meet. For example, sales and marketing should both create a great customer experience. Those who build alliances across those boundaries earn greater trust, not just from their own teams, but from teams that once scorned them. The courage to serve a greater good with others instead of remaining antagonistic toward them shows a willingness to put your ego aside and trust those you might once have struggled to trust — in turn, inviting greater trustworthiness.

Be fascinated by others to create belonging.

When people feel safe enough to be themselves, they naturally trust those who extend that safety. The busyness of daily routines, compounded by having been separated from colleagues for more than a year, makes it hard to notice others' unique qualities. Look and listen for important details people share about their lives — perhaps a hobby, a recent trip they took, or an aspect of their family life — as these offer important entryways to cultivating belonging. Express genuine enthusiasm to hear more about what you learn. When people believe you care about the things they care about, you make them feel welcomed. And the more you learn about what's important to others, especially people different than you, the less likely you are to misjudge them, securing greater levels of their trust.

There is no currency in organizational life more valuable than trustworthiness. We can no longer presume we have it just because we believe we haven't done anything to breach it. In times of unprecedented uncertainty, it's critical to earn and keep the trust of others every day. If you hope to enjoy a career of great influence and impact, start by cultivating a trustworthy reputation. Remember, somewhere in your organization, a colleague is sharing a story about their experience of you at their dinner table. What story do you hope they're telling?

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