

Build A Climate Of Trust!¹

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Sitting at lunch with a group of colleagues the other day, my friend asked me an interesting question. “You’ve been working with both public and private sector organizations for over 30 years,” he said. “Given your experience, what do you think is the most important attribute of a successful and smoothly functioning organization?”

I didn’t have to think about it more than a second. “A climate of trust,” I answered. “No matter what I’m doing with an organization, whether it’s training managers, building teamwork, improving work processes, or conducting surveys, it all rests on building relationships. And *trust is an essential building block of strong relationships.*”

The success of any organization depends on how well people work together to fulfill its purpose, its reason for being. People can have all of the best equipment, all of the latest technology, and all of the other resources they need. But if they don’t trust one another, they won’t work smoothly together. If they don’t work smoothly together, they will fail to produce the best possible product or service.

So... what *should* be done to build trust in an organization?

A Three-Pronged Strategy For Building A Climate Of Trust

People in both private and public sector organizations talk about the bottom line. Private organizations talk about profit and loss. Public organizations talk about staying within the budget and cutting costs. Unfortunately, this constant emphasis on the financial bottom line in both types of organizations frequently leads to less focus on the *real bottom line*—*The Delivery of Customer-Valued Services and Products*. It also shortchanges the *drivers* of that bottom line—*individual employees, the organization’s most valuable resource*.



I build trust in an organization by applying the following three-pronged strategy that focuses on managers, processes, and teamwork.

Strategy 1: Help Managers Develop An Empowering Organizational Culture

My first strategy for building trust is to train managers and supervisors how to develop an empowering culture, a culture in which people feel a strong sense of ownership about their work. Employees who own and feel in control of their work believe managers trust them.

Managers trained in the traditional school of management see their primary job as making sure employees get the work done. A focus of their job is to carry out decisions from above by passing them

¹ From: http://www.arniedahlke.com/110731_Build_A_Climate_Of_Trust.pdf Take a moment and explore Arnie’s other Timely Tips at: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

on to their employees, whose job is to implement those decisions. Unfortunately, employees end up protecting themselves when making mistakes, instead of viewing those mistakes as opportunities to learn and improve. The result is a “survival” culture.

In contrast, I train managers how to be facilitators or catalysts. They help employees unleash talents and develop skills. They support their employees, working to bring out their best. They promote continuous learning and collaborative problem solving.



They involve everyone in shaping and owning the organization’s mission. The result is an empowering culture. Employees feel safer, better about their work, respected, confident in their managers, and informed about what is happening in the organization.

When employees feel empowered, they feel trusted.

Strategy 2: Develop Efficient And Cost-Effective Processes

My second strategy for building trust centers on process change—modifying existing processes or developing new ones. I spend considerable time training everyone in an organization in process improvement methodologies and tools. I give them a short course in appropriate measurement and statistical approaches.

I then use *Strike Teams* to tweak processes. I call these teams “Strike Teams” to emphasize that they are small, short-lived process improvement teams—they are explicitly formed to strike quickly to improve one specific process, instead of a standing committee that meets periodically over a long period of time. People come together to attack a specific process, continue meeting together until they have achieved a desired end, and then disband.



My use of Strike Teams teaches employees to approach every problem they run into with a problem-solving mindset, instead of a finger-pointing, blaming mindset.

Typically, the more people get involved in such teams, the more they view problems as challenges to overcome rather than opportunities for fault-finding. They feel better what they are doing and better about their managers.

The more employees get involved in participating in Strike Teams to redesign their own work processes, the more empowered they feel, and the more they feel trusted by management.

Strategy 3: Promote And Cultivate Organization-Wide Teamwork

My third strategy is directed at the organization as one whole entity. I use several techniques in this strategy—for example, newsletters that promote teamwork, organization-wide training focused on learning how to improve communication and cooperation, and interactive meetings that bring people together from different parts of the organization.

An interactive technique I have found to be particularly effective is what I call *Inter-Section Problem-Solving*. (In describing this technique, I use the word “section” to refer to any organizational unit, such as a department, a local workgroup, or a manager or supervisor group.)



Relying on the key processes mapped during the process improvement training, I ask each section to form a “panel.” The panel identifies how their work is in any way made more difficult by something another section does. I also ask them to come up with a series of recommendations to other sections about processes that those sections could change to overcome such difficulties.

I then facilitate a series of *panel meetings* in which each panel shares their suggestions with people in other sections. These meetings give every section an opportunity to develop and discuss their suggestions and resolve problems among them. During my facilitation, I keep the discussions focused on problem-solving—I stop people from griping and faultfinding. Each panel meeting is transcribed and the results are distributed to all sections.

Many inter-section problems get solved during a panel meeting. Many more are improved later as sections pour over the meeting transcriptions. In addition, the panel meetings reinforce two important mindsets: a *problem-solving mindset* and an *interdependent mindset*.

It doesn't take more than a few meetings for people to face a problem with an attitude of "how can we fix it" rather than pointing fingers at someone to blame. And people see and appreciate what others are contributing to the organization's success, which highlights their sense of interdependence. They come to view the organization as a blend of many levels and many sections, working together as one organization-wide team to produce customer-valued products or services.



As a result of such organization-wide team activities, people throughout the organization end up feeling a higher level of mutual trust.

Final Note: Three Cautions

First: Invest the time. Building a climate of trust in an organization essentially means changing its culture. And culture change does not happen overnight. All too often I have seen organizations try strategies similar to those I've described, only to become frustrated because they don't seem to be getting results fast enough. They end up giving up too early. Don't fall into that trap.



Second: Implement these strategies as much as possible on-site. Early in my career I conducted many off-site retreats and training programs. People typically left those sessions with a sense of accomplishment, feelings of togetherness, and excitement about how they would do things differently in the future. Unfortunately, after a time back in their work setting, it became business as usual. The norms of the old organizational culture took over.



Third: Implement the three strategies concurrently, as one coordinated effort. Implementing them partially will not yield the same results as applying all three together as one three-pronged strategy. Implementing each individually will build some trust. But implementing them all together as one very visible, organization-wide effort will signal your commitment to truly building a climate of trust throughout your organization. In turn, it will maximize the return value of your investment of money, time, and people in the effort. So, as much as possible, anchor this three-pronged approach in the daily life of your organization.



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