

Seven Key Leadership Traits: The Trust Factors

Abstract: Applied research in organizations leads the author to highlight 18 traits which are significant to varying extents in the most influential leaders today. Of these, seven need special attention because failure to be consistent in any of these seven 'Trust Factor' traits may lead to long or permanent damage to relationships and the performance of the team.

Introduction

Leadership in the context of managing other people (rather than strategic tasks) is differentiated from 'managing' in that leadership motivates people to follow their leader, whereas traditional managing is more about pushing people to perform. While it is understood that the need of senior managers to demonstrate leadership traits may only comprise a relatively small proportion of working time, the traits are universally acknowledged, by managers in many sectors, to be vital.

Leadership Traits

In working with managers in several sectors over some years, we have accumulated knowledge from one training activity that has been applied numerous times. This data has led us to listing 18 leadership traits. Eight of these can be grouped together under one heading as making up the core of what managers call 'credibility'. Another seven are termed Trust Factors (TF) due to the belief that one failure (to be consistent) in any of these seven key TF traits, can lead to loss of trust and to lengthy or permanent damage to healthy working relationships, and therefore to the efficacy of a team.

In our training courses, delegates are often asked to come up with the key qualities of people that have inspired them as leaders. Although sometimes contradictory, 18 of the traits keep coming up again and again.

Let's list these straight away.

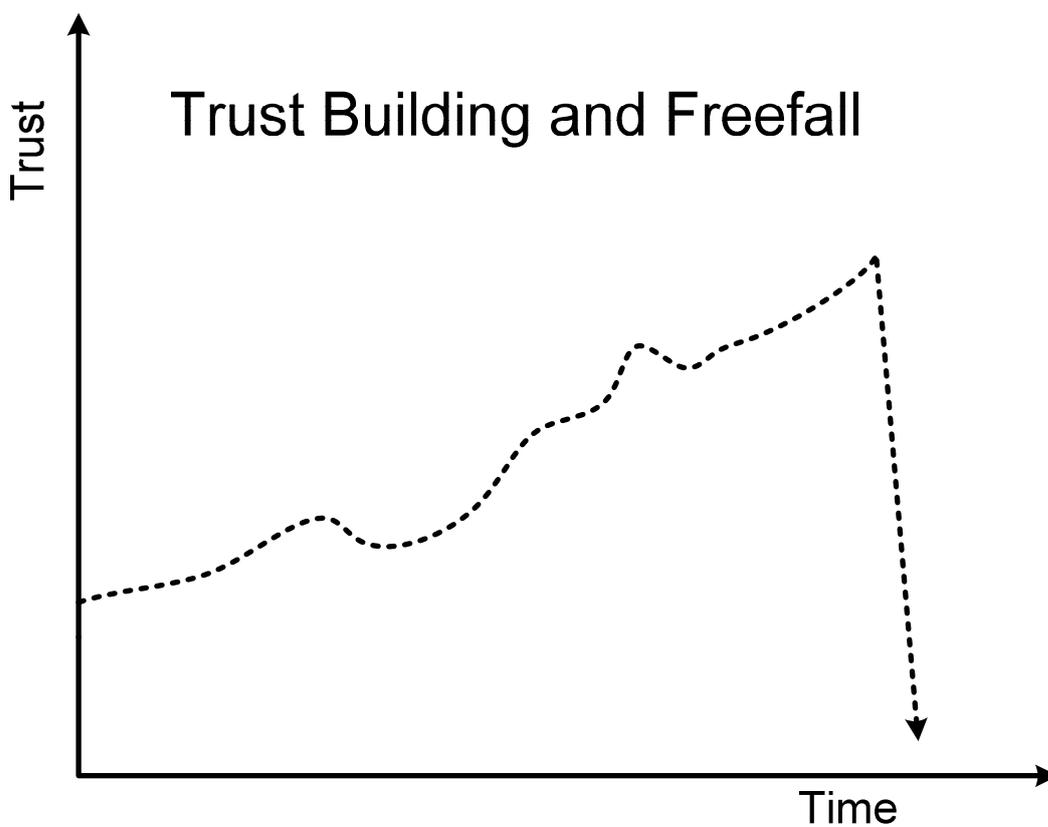
Traits:		Notes:
Personal Skills:		
Clear communicator - big-picture, the details, boundaries and desired behaviors		
Straight-talker		
Flexible		
Reliable, consistent	TF	
Accepts responsibility	TF	Takes the can
Discrete	TF	Safe with information
Credible:		See list of 8
a. Knowledgeable		In specifics
b. Willing to be decisive when urgent action is needed		
c. Crystallizer – can pin-point critical factors in complex situations		
d. Can be charismatic		Not essential
e. Has and communicates vision		
f. Takes (measured) risks		Considered actions
g. Walks the talk	TF	Does as preaches
h. Authentic	TF	The Real Thing
People Skills:		
Listens intently		Can reflect speech
Understands motivations		Flexible approach
Supportive of me	TF	Encouraging
Interested in me	TF	Remembers details

There are seven key Trust Factors that appear to be most common in outstanding leaders, five from personal traits and two that are people-skills. If a leader fails in one of these seven areas it can take a long time to get back the confidence people have lost as a result. This then tends to demark the difference between Trust Factors and the other leader-traits - there is room for occasional lapses in the other traits (you may get away with it) but, a leader must exhibit consistently high behaviors in ALL seven Trust Factors to succeed. Failure to maintain consistent behaviors in any Trust Factor can be very damaging. Here are the seven Trust Factors listed:

1. Reliable & Consistent
2. Accepts responsibility
3. Discrete
4. Walks the talk
5. Authentic
6. (Demonstrably) supportive of people
7. (Demonstrably) interested in people

Trust and Freefall

The diagram illustrates the point. The starting level of trust in any situation depends upon prior information people may have or, upon their first impressions of you from your communications. Typically, at work, a level of 'benefit of the doubt' is given. Over time, trust can build slowly. What managers are saying is that for seven key leadership traits, a failure to perform can lose trust and recovery may take hours, weeks or years to recover in individuals and in the team.



TF Trait: Reliable & Consistent

In groups the word reliability comes up with the word consistent. And these descriptors seem, on the surface, to work contrary to the need to be flexible, another Leadership Trait. However, the caveat is that consistency is related to a given set of circumstances (a context) and the learned expectations of recognizable (and consistent) behaviours in that context. In other words, it is possible to be flexible, but one should be predictably flexible over time in different contexts. An example might be an immediate need for rapid decision-making as opposed to a style of leadership that is more involving in the day-to



day. A reliable leader will behave in predictable ways in each context even though the behaviors are very different. To that extent they can also be rationalized simply – there is comfort and ‘security’ in that predictability – people know what to expect.

We are reliable when people depend upon us. If we set up an expectation and fail to satisfy that, then people will be disappointed or hurt. Failing several times will destroy loyalty and as a result performance may reduce, particularly if you need something that is of no benefit to them but of value to you.

The real problem for leaders is not just an acknowledgment that other people are more or less sensitive to such lapses, it is knowing specifically what those sensitivities are for each and every person. In the following list, set down if you will, your own sensitivities for the actions described as if they had just this minute happened to you for the second time. Provide a rating from zero to ten where the most negative impact on you is ten.

Event: My manager has for the second time recently,	Rating
Postponed annual 1-2-1 on the day	
Changed mind about you attending an important meeting or event	
Failed to put a target department under your command while restructuring	
Introduced some colleagues (but not you) to a dignitary	
Did not give much emphasis to your achievements in the annual report	
Failed to turn up to open your divisional conference	
Backed away from a disciplinary procedure adversely affecting you	
Took credit for a project that you led	
Froze a budget necessary to achieve target	
Froze hiring the talent necessary to achieve target	

Your profile is almost unique. The people who work for you will all have different ones. Clearly, if we fail to make a commitment or meet an expectation then we need a strategy for dealing with that failure. A simple three-step process will help ameliorate the damage done:

1. Firstly, say sorry and mean it. This should preferably be done face-to-face.
2. Secondly, warmly seek feedback from them about their reaction and feelings (if they will share those with you)
3. Thirdly, reflect what you have heard and if you make any promises, then keep them unfailingly.

This process will not necessarily save face but may help you redeem yourself. There are only so many times you can get away with this and again, everyone is different. How tolerant are you? How many times would it take before you would make action to escape the situation completely?



TF Trait: Accepts responsibility

A key Trust Factor, the acceptance of responsibility, is a paramount quality in leaders. When things go wrong, people need to know that the manager is taking initiative and backing up the team. Also, that if push comes to shove, that the responsibility will stop with them rather than be passed down. One false move can poison a little-valued staff-member and that can poison goodwill and have long-term repercussions in a whole team.

When you do take the can, make sure that people know that is what you have done. Brief your people accordingly:

I have had a very difficult meeting with the Board and explained that I have been unable to bring the Strident Project to fruition as funding is still 4 Million short. They have decided to pull the project. This should not reflect on Tim who has worked tirelessly under my direction. We have learned lessons from the experience but I have to say that, even with hindsight, I do not believe we could have done enough to get Strident off the ground. I have taken full responsibility for the lack of success. It is a measure of my belief in Tim that he is to lead the new Probus Project starting the first of next month. We will take the learning forward and with your help and support both agree that Probus will be a success-story.

TF Trait: Discrete

Discretion is also vital. People must learn, over some time, that the confidential information they share is not leaked. Lapses can lead to a sudden and widespread loss of trust. We are privy to much information. It is not clever to express confidential material in any circumstance – it is destructive and eventually the mud will stick. If you lack discretion, you are not yet a leader. You will fail to influence your people and they will not follow you if you are not regarded as a safe-repository for confidential information.

TF Trait: Credible - Walks the Talk

Some organizations are led by people who expect a different set of behaviors (from others) than they are willing to exemplify themselves. There are exceptions, for example MacDonaldis where management at all levels is culturally-expected to serve at the retail-counters and gain from regular exposure to their customers. Walking the Talk is a Trust Factor and so again, we need to demonstrate absolute consistency.



We quite rightly pour scorn on politicians who talk about environmental concerns but travel in limousines and helicopters, and those who talk about the value of family and are caught out having affairs. The errors that we make may not be as monumental but the grapevine is just as effective and can undermine the impact we have with our team. It is also true, in larger organizations, that the image of the most senior people can be tarnished by innuendo and untruth.

Walking the talk is another factor that builds confidence in those around you and to that extent it is very like reliability and consistency. If you are not willing to walk your own talk then you are best to keep quiet and let someone else walk it for you.

To be known as someone who 'walks the talk' at all levels, we need to be accessible and seen by people at those levels. Eating in private dining rooms far from our canteens, having separate buildings and car-parks and private suites where only the powerful are allowed to tread, all these keep our image open to manipulation. To a lesser extent, managers lower down the organization can also suffer from the same process of diminishing impact if they do not understand the necessity to be seen and accessible at all levels.

Let's assume that you are cost-cutting in your area. What cuts will you make overt in your own offices? Let's imagine that you have tasked all your people to bring more added-value to their activities. What added value will you bring and how will you make that obvious?

These arguments may seem facile but they carry great impact in effect. Asking others to go through arduous processes without attending to the same criteria yourself is not a way to win adherence and loyalty. Walking the talk is.

TF Trait: Credible - Authenticity

Authenticity is the opposite of playing the role. It comes from the maturity of knowing that the human characteristics you have in your private life are acceptable and appropriate to those needed at work. Strongly dominating work-cultures may not easily accept natural humanity in the work-place and for most of us those places are best avoided! In another article¹ in this series we focus on that issue and how to align self in the right organization. In other work cultures we can bring the best of 'self' into the job of work in a thoughtful way, with integrity, honesty and absolute believability. These factors are impactful, attractive and inspire the greatest possible loyalty.

¹ McLeod, A.I. Leveraging Human Potential – Mapping Self to Work Culture

TF Trait: People Skill - Supportive

Support that is encouraging both in words and in action increases the allegiance of people. Of course, this support needs also to come from a real desire and, to be appropriate to each individual. This may be something you do outside the context of work but have not yet applied more widely at work. But don't fake it! People generally sense dishonesty even if they cannot analyze why they feel that way. Better therefore to avoid acting; provide support only to those people who you genuinely feel some affinity for. Support skills cross-over with that of listening. To support well you need to listen well. Your support will be encouragement for their initiatives and can involve physical support – provision of an assistant, a quiet area or time for reflection and so on. It is likely too that you will check to see how they are doing and this checking needs to be thoughtfully carried out since it can easily be misinterpreted as over-managing. To get the balance right have conversations and ask questions.

Tom, I'd like to check with you that you are getting the right level of information and support from me at this time, also, to consider any up-coming change as your new project comes on-stream.

The willingness to give support makes a tangible statement about caring about that individual in a professionally-acceptable way. This attends to the varying 'security' needs of people. If they are not worrying about their security they can work with more focus and higher productivity. Small gestures of support may thus have long-term benefits.

Trait: People Skill - Interested in me (remembers details)

This skill also makes the same tangible statement, attends to varying 'security' needs and offers the same long-term benefits.

However, being interested in people is not quite enough to get benefit from this important Trust Factor. We need to exhibit the behaviors that arise from a genuine interest to maximize the impact. The great management guru, Dale Carnegie focused on these skills in his seminal book², 'How to make Friends and Influence People'. Here are some thoughts of my own:

- Have social conversations and remember details such as names of family members, hobbies, interests – especially those in which the person shows animation or excitement
- Recall detail such as when and where they are going, or went, on holiday and ask afterwards about that holiday

² Carnegie, D. (1994, Hutchinson Pub)



- If you give gifts at, make that gift personal to their interests
- Listen and ask questions - they should be talking more than you
- Be genuine
- Have more face-to-face meetings and write more hand-written notes rather than relying on email
- If you share an interest or passion, share that with them but beware of one-upmanship and be brief
- Mix at coffee-breaks and meals, avoid the cell-phone
- Be unhurried, slow the pace, even if you have pressures, let those go for the duration of the conversation.

Do any of these ideas or any that of your own lead to specific actions? Where, when and with whom will these take place?

Conclusion

The seven Trust Factors are a subset of 18 important leadership traits. These seven are particularly important because a failure to be consistent at all times can lead to sustained loss of trust in your team and other stakeholders around your team. People invariably ask whether one can really make changes to leadership traits and in many cases we can. The important factor then is that they come from authentic expression of your self. This may mean borrowing beliefs and values you already have at home and applying them in the work context. It may also mean learning more about yourself and about others. The fastest route to that kind of learning is contained in another article in this series³. Charisma, although not necessary to leadership, is rarely developed by an individual while within one organization. Personal growth, followed by a move to a new culture can create a higher level of charisma within that new culture (where people do not know you and do not have set expectations and judgements about you). All the other 17 in the author's opinion, can be influenced and developed by a committed and authentic manager within their existing jobs.

<Bio>

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³ Leveraging Human Potential - Is there a fast-track to improved emotional intelligence?



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Angus McLeod Associates offers and trains coaches. The company trains managers in the use of coaching skills to use in their day-to-day managing styles. The website provides a significant resource for free information for managers, leaders and coaches as well as free newsletters and access to a library of videos.

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