

Trust but Verify – An Oxymoron

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"Trust, but verify." The phrase became a part of pop culture when Ronald Reagan began using it in talking about US relations with Russia. He used it frequently with President Gorbachev to the point that Gorbachev once asked him why and he replied, "Because I like it."

Trust, but verify and what you are really verifying is that you don't trust. That is a real good idea when nuclear warheads are the issue. It is a bad idea in many of the ways leaders apply the phrase in leading teams.

This is not an argument against effective business management, good systems and processes. It is an argument for shift in leadership perspective.

"This is business, it's not personal, and you have to earn my trust." It is an interesting statement that I have heard a bunch of times and would be justified in saying it myself based on things that have happened in my business career. What I've learned, however, is that it is always personal and that people really can never earn your trust. Trust is something that is given, not earned, and once it is lost it is not coming back.

"People have to earn my trust." I don't say it, I don't believe it and if you do you are sabotaging your success and the success of your team, and here's why.

1. With people who are important to your success as a leader, trust must be the starting point not some illusive locked door to which you hold the only key.
2. Trustworthy people who somehow have to earn your trust have to navigate the unknown territory of your personal baggage - something they can never fully accomplish.
3. The "must earn my trust" mentality cuts both ways. Set your critical business relationships up by presuming that others are adversaries rather than allies and you end up on both the giving and receiving end of negativity.
4. Effective teams in business spend their energy collaborating and taking action for the good of the business. People who have to play games to earn the boss's trust waste time and money.
5. The absence of trust between people on an executive or other team is expensive and the cost goes beyond the work day and isn't just in dollars.



It is a big challenge not to allow the down side of trust to define our leadership perspective. Dishonest, disruptive, nefarious, vindictive, manipulate and outright bad people are a reality. Sometimes they end up on our team.

Trust is a starting point and criteria for solid relationships and effective teams. It is not a precursor to naiveté. There will be evidence when a team member is playing below the line. Pay attention when intuition raises the caution flag. Get busy understanding why. Don't allow trust to obscure reality.

Trust is one of those words that raises the hair on the back of the executive neck. It is an elusive objective with multiple meanings and it conjures stupid consultant tricks like trust falls and Kumbayah around a camp fire.

To simplify - trust is confidence in our relationships with others. It is based on our perceptions of them in three arenas.

1. Competence – Has the skill, experience, credentials and capability to meet the responsibilities of their role.
2. Compassion – Persistently takes action for mutual benefit and the good of the whole.
3. Integrity - Consistently acts from a set of guiding principles, keeps commitments and is predictably positive in behavior.

Over many years working with many leaders I am sure that those who operate from the perspective that those around them are not trustworthy are in reality seeing an uncomfortable reflection in the mirror.

Effective leaders and effective people do not let the lowest common denominator define their perspective or leadership philosophy.



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