Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal
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Viewpoint

Fostering interpersonal trust as a norm in organizations: five key starting points

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A great deal has been written about trust, including guidance on how organizations can foster interpersonal trust. And, while this guidance has value, little has been written about how organizations move beyond "mechanistic" strategies intended to just increase interpersonal trust. The purpose of this article is to encourage leaders to embrace and live strategies that deeply embed trust into the cultural and fabric of an organization. I believe that trust should be so pervasive within the organization-employee relationship that it becomes an automatic reflex and an organizational norm. Trust should be a work habit.

An organization's capability to achieve its strategic objectives depends upon its ability to attract, develop and leverage human capital. Human capital, though it never appears on a corporate balance sheet, is often is the most valuable asset that an organization owns. People join organizations because organizations offer access to the resources and opportunities that they must have to satisfy their personal needs and achieve their professional goals. Organizations need people to function. This convergence of need sets the stage for organization–employee exchanges of value. And, for the most part, these exchanges are defined by the terms of the employment contract. Mutual promises are made and the expectations, rights, duties and reciprocal obligations of all parties are explicitly stated and their values assessed. And, at least in theory, when an equitable 'rate of exchange' is agreed upon, the contract is ratified. But there are just a few problems with this scenario.

What of the "unknowns", "intangibles" and "unspoken" expectations. And, if they are unknown, unknowable and/or unspoken, how can they be quantified or their values assessed? If unquantifiable, how will the employees or organizations be able to believe or trust that the other will honor the unknown, unknowable, yet perceived obligations and expectations? Another problem is that modern economic realities have wreaked havoc on the traditional organization–employee relationship. Expectations regarding long-term commitments, mutual loyalties and job security, have been degraded and replaced by uncertainty. When economic realities dictate, companies "downsize", "right size", "merge", "re-engineer", "reconfigure" or just cease to exist. In this environment, employees and organizations are no longer constrained by the assumptions of the "traditional" organization – employee relationship. One resultant collateral damages is diminished interpersonal trust. Just these few examples would appear to be more than enough to lessen the potential to trust within the organization–employee relationship. Given this grim scenario, how can one expect interpersonal trust be an organizational norm or a reflexive habit.

Rousseau et al. (1998) defined trust as a "psychological state" where one accepts a vulnerability to another based on the positive expectations of the intentions and/or

behaviors of another. A common and pessimistic reading of this definition sees trust as a state in which one trusts another just not to engage in opportunistic behaviors that would do harm to the relationship. While this blind and mutual reliance on a "do no harm" assumption may be enough to facilitate the exercise of explicitly stated contractual obligations and expectations, I do not believe it sufficient to motivate the granting of free and open access to "all" human capital.

Success and longevity in today's hypercompetitive business environments demands access to all human capital, including 'extra-contractual' behaviors (i.e. conscientiousness, civic virtue, sportsmanship and altruism) not explicitly noted in job descriptions. Participation or non-participation in such discretionary behaviors is often the employee's response to their perceptions of an organization's intentions. So, how can organizations earn the needed access to all of its human capital?

I believe that access to these extra-contractual behaviors and attitudes will be granted to the organization by the employee only when the employee *believes* that somewhere within the employment relationship a comparable and compensating value will be offered. If organizations are to experience benefits beyond that which is noted in the employment contract, there must be an "affirmed" mutual trust between the employees and the organization. This view of trust goes beyond the expectation of "do no harm" to a more generative idea of trust based on positive affirmations of an organizations good intentions towards its employees. I believe that this dimension of trust is only accessible when employees experience, within the employee – organization relationship, organizational behaviors that signal and "affirm" that the organizations has good intentions toward its employees?

The strategies used to gained this access should be designed to benefit to employees and to "cue" positive affirmations of the organizations good intentions. I believe that the continuous exposure to these contextual cues will result in interpersonal trust becoming an organizational norm or habit.

Habits are a response to dispositions that are activated automatically by the contextual cues that co-occurred with responses during past performance (Neal *et al.*, 2006). The idea of direct contextual cuing proposes that when behavior sequences are repeatedly performed in similar contexts, the mind forms direct links in the memory between the behavior and the context (Neal *et al.*, 2006). In this case, the "cue", the employee perception of a provided benefit, signals the nature of the organization's intent toward the employees. The context is perception of interpersonal trust. The question then becomes, can contextual cuing be used to establish interpersonal trust as an organizational norm or habit.

Below are five examples of how organizations can use cueing strategies to facilitate and affirm interpersonal trust as a norm within their organizations.

Contextual cueing strategies

- *Communicate with your employees and determine what they want and need*: Communicate with and empower employees. Most want to be more than "stake-holders"; they want to feel as though they are "full-partners" in the enterprise (Terez, 1999). Whether its children's daycare, eldercare assistance, educational

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reimbursement or equitable compensation, find a way, without suspending normal business logic to give it to them.

- *Create an employee-friendly and safe environment*: Health and safety compliance, adherence to compensation regulations and health benefits should be the minimums. The workplace should be free from physical harm, psychological or social harms. Create and nourish an environment and culture where employees are encouraged and empowered to learn and innovate – a place where mistakes are not punished and failed efforts are not criticized. Make it safe to contribute.

- *Invest in your employees*: Invest in your employees and your organization by providing opportunities for continued learning and professional growth. Take an interest in their potential career paths; it sends the message that the organization's vision includes them.

- *Provide opportunities for meaningful work*: Terez (1999) proposed that there are 22 key sources of meaning in the workplace. Work's "purpose" was the most cited meaning key. Purpose relates to the desire of people to make a difference regardless of the type of work they do. Ownership, fit, oneness and relationship-building were also among the top five most frequently cited sources of workplace meaning. If work is to motivate employees, then organizations must address the sources that give meaning to work.

- *Become an employer of choice*: Organization must earn the reputation of valuing its employees by contributing to the ability of the employees to meet their personal and professional needs. Maslow (1943) asserted that people are motivated to achieve a certain hierarchy of needs. When the most dominate of the unmet needs is satisfied, one is then free to attempt to satisfy the next most dominate unmet need, and the process continues until the entire hierarchy of needs is met. Whether you agree with Maslow or not, it makes sense for organizations to provide employees with great opportunities to satisfy their personal hierarchy of needs better than rival employers. Your employees benefit and your company will become an "Employer of Choice".

Conclusion

The list above is a limited example of the types of efforts and behaviors in which organizations can use to cue their employees regarding the nature of their intentions. The strategies are not stand-alone devices to manipulate employee perceptions. They should to be used within a system of employee centric, well designed and sincerely intentioned strategies that when implemented results in what Neal *et al.* (2006) described as "repeated performed behavioral sequences". The presence and frequency of these will cue and motivate an automated response of trust. I believe that once a critical mass of such "contextual cues" are deployed, and the resultant affirmations are experienced by employees, the automated response will be interpersonal trust. I believe that interpersonal trust will become the default employee psychological state, an organizational norm and a work habit.

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