Leadership, Commitment, and the Failure of Trust – What Companies Must Do to Thrive

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Abstract

Employees limit their commitment and organizations fail to be competitive for predictable reasons that have been well-documented (Nobel, 2011). According to the extensive research of the Gallup corporation, much of that failure is attributed to ineffective leadership (Clifton & Harter, 2019). The primary failure of those who lead is their inability to be perceived as being worthy of their employees' trust – a problem that organization leaders have faced for decades (Barnard, 1938). Trust, the willing followership of a leader in the expectant hope that the leader will honor implied promises (Caldwell, 2019), has been elusive in organizations of all types, according to research reported in the ***Harvard Business Review*** (Bingham, 2017).

Keywords: leadership, trust, engagement, stewardship, employee commitment

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on identifying how organization leaders fail to earn the engagement, trust, and commitment of their employees – a phenomenon that occurs so commonly that more than three-fourths of all employees worldwide (Clifton & Harter, 2019) describe themselves as not fully engaged at work and fifteen percent of all employees actually describe themselves as negatively engaged (Harter, 2021). Engagement, a measure of the degree of personal ownership and commitment that an employee has toward work, is widely acknowledged as a key factor to organization success – yet those who lead many organizations are clearly struggling to fully engage their employees (Anitha, 2014).

We begin by reviewing the importance of trust and trustworthiness and their relationship with employee engagement. Citing the work of several scholars, we emphasize the critical importance of leaders engaging their employees if companies are to thrive in the globally competitive workplace. We then identify seven fundamental reasons why so many organizations are ineffective in engaging their employees and achieving their goals. We conclude the chapter with a challenge to organization leaders to address these seven problems that plague so many of today's organizations.

2. Trust, Trustworthiness, and Engagement

The relationship between trust, trustworthiness, and employee engagement has been extensively addressed by recent research about employee relationships and organization effectiveness (Edelman, 2023). In this section, we briefly review some of that research in context with its importance for organizations as they struggle to survive, to thrive, and to flourish.

2.1 The Significance of Trust

Despite a consensus that trust is the glue that holds organizations together, trust in leaders and organizations has dropped precipitously (Collins, 2001). Although the definition of trust has sometimes been difficult to pin down, trust is widely understood to be a byproduct of how individuals view the actions of others through the lens of their own personal experiences and values (Caldwell & Hayes, 2007).

Trust, the decision to make oneself vulnerable by cooperating, complying with, or relinquishing control or power to another party; is a risk-taking action that is undertaken in the expectant hope that this other party will honor perceived duties that are owed as part of a reciprocal relationship (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). As individuals assess their willingness to trust others, four powerful factors influence the trust decision (Vroom & Yetton, 2010):

2.1.1 Whether the Obligations Expected of the Party to Trust are Within Their Capacity to Perform

Individuals assess the context of their situations, the resources available to them, their own capabilities, and the likelihood that they can reasonably accomplish what they are expected to do.

2.1.2 Whether the Other Party will Honor Their Commitment by Responding with a Specific Benefit

The other party's likelihood of providing a benefit in return for the cooperation required is also assessed, based upon the relationship that exists between the parties. Perceptions about the likelihood of receiving that responding benefit include the other party's integrity, her or his ability to provide the benefit, and the history of the relationship between the parties.

2.1.3 Whether the Anticipated Benefit is Deemed Significantly Important to Justify the Behavior Required

The benefit is assessed in context with its relative importance and value, depending upon the needs of the party expected to act to obtain that benefit.

2.1.4 Whether There is a Perceived Ethical Duty Owed by One Party to Another

Extensive research has confirmed that it is not uncommon when two parties are involved in working relationships that they fundamentally differ as to whether an ethical duty is owed to the other party or the precise nature of any duty (Rousseau, 1995). That difference is common, even when the parties have had a past relationship and perceive the other party to be generally cooperative.

Perceptions about obligations owed between the parties frequently result in the deterioration of trust and the future unwillingness of the parties to take a risk and to trust each other (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Although trust is essential for great relationships and effective organizational performance, acquiring trust and building commitment can be extremely difficult when trust is perceived to have been breached. Those who seek to earn trust must work hard to understand its complex nature.

As an integrated combination of beliefs, values, and intentions, trust behaviors are the byproduct of a complex and subjective calculus that is often a sub-conscious determination (Weick, 1995). Building trust requires that individuals and organizations work hard to ascertain others' expectations about the nature of duties owed in relationships. Only by understanding the other party's perceptions about those expectations are the parties able to create high-trust relationships (Rousseau, 1995).

The nature of trust is that it is a decision made on a continuum and is based upon the subjective values of the trustor. Diagram 1, indicated here, identifies the continuum of trust and its subjective nature.

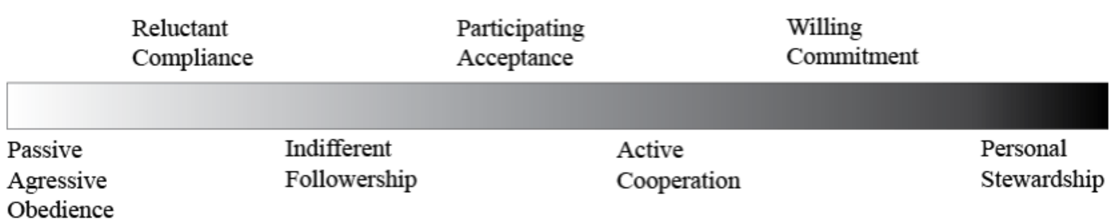

Diagram 1. Continuum of Trust

This trust continuum reflects the degree of willingness by the trusting party to cooperate, comply, and relinquish personal control to the other party (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017). Under conditions of relative distrust, a party may choose passive aggressive obedience – working to formally defined job tasks and doing no more. Overseen directly by a supervisor, a party may reluctantly comply to avoid punishment. Indifferent followership occurs when a party is only partially committed to an organization's outcomes. Participating acceptance acknowledges the legitimacy of those outcomes. Willing commitment embraces an organization's goals. Personal stewardship is fully engaged personal ownership of an organization's goals.

As those who seek to be trusted endeavor to understand the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and priorities of those with whom they work, that effort will enable them to improve their ability to establish relationships based upon trust to achieve common goals and create strong relationships. Trust has often been described as an elusive quality, often built upon cobweb-like threads which can easily be destroyed (C0vey, 2005). The importance of understanding trust's contribution to cooperative efforts and stronger relationships makes it essential that leaders not only understand the elements of trust but develop the skills, character, and insights required to build trust and sustain it (Caldwell & Anderson, 2019).

3. Trustworthiness as a Subjective Perception

Trustworthiness is, in every case, a subjective perception of the worthiness of one party to be trusted by another – as viewed by the perceiving party's subjective lens (Caldwell & Hayes, 2007). Trustworthiness is a moral combination of virtues perceived by one party that attribute to another party's ability, credibility, and reliability in the pursuit of an intended purpose or shared goal that is associated with the parties' relationship (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Implicit in this general definition is the perceiving party's belief that the party who is trusted possesses a combination of qualities that enhance that party's ability to act (Vroom & Yetton, 2010).

In a classic article about trustworthiness, Roger Mayer and colleagues explained that trustworthiness is based upon the perceived party's ability, integrity, and benevolence (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Diagram Two represents how perceived trustworthiness impacts the decision to trust another party.

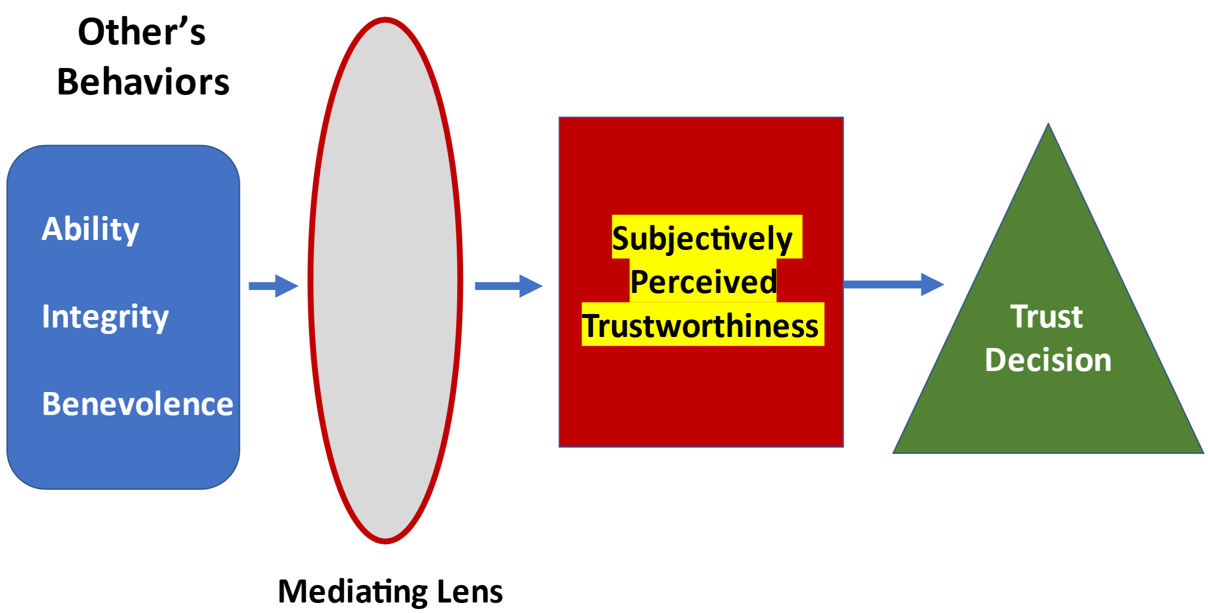

Diagram 2. Trustworthiness and the Trust Decision

As indicated in Diagram 2, the behaviors of the party being observed are viewed through the mediating lens of each person. That lens is a function of each individual's life experiences, expectations, beliefs, and values (Caldwell & Hayes, 2007). Through that lens, the perceiving party evaluates the actions and behaviors of the other party on a continuum and makes a subjective decision about that other party's relative trustworthiness. The trust decision is made based upon each perceiver's subjective criteria for evaluating trustworthiness (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). As suggested in Diagram 1, the trust continuum reflects the degree to which the perceived party is identified as trustworthy (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017).

Only when leaders are regarded as worthy of trust are employees likely to do much more than comply with the requirements of a job. The research about Quiet Quitting affirms that an alarming 50% of today's employees are reluctant to do more than comply – thereby demonstrating "calibrated contributing" by meeting the minimum requirements of their job descriptions. Until leaders and organizations demonstrate to employees that they are worthy of being trusted, employee commitment and trust are likely to be withheld – to the detriment of organizations (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017).

4. The Nature of Engagement

Employee engagement and the willingness to trust are highly correlated constructs. In fact, the Trust Continuum, which was provided in Diagram 1, reflects the varying levels of commitment of employees – with an employee's commitment at the level of personal stewardship matching a fully engaged employee (Caldwell & Anderson, 2019).

For employees to maximize their highest level of commitment to their employers, those employees must be willing to go the extra mile to help their employers to achieve their companies' objectives. The research about Positive Organizational Scholarship affirms that organizational leaders who create "high trust" cultures in the workplace obtain high levels of employee productivity, creativity, and innovation in return (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2013). That level of commitment, often labeled "Organizational Citizenship Behavior," enables organizations to outperform their competitors and obtain and sustain a competitive advantage (Organ, Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 2000).

Fully engaged employees demonstrate an enthusiasm about the work that they perform and view their work as personally fulfilling. As Clifton and Harter (2019) noted in their extensive research, employees who are fully engaged do so because they have an established positive relationship with their supervisors, believe that their organizations and leaders are committed to their personal and professional growth, believe that they are compensated based upon their contribution to their organizations, and work in a full-time position which they consider to be a career or a calling, rather than merely a job.

When employees are fully engaged, they are less likely to leave their organizations, feel connected to their colleagues, love their jobs, experience less burnout, speak positively about their company to friends and colleagues, and encourage the people with whom they work to do their best (Quantum Workplace, 2023). Unfortunately, the evidence from a ***Harvard Business Review*** study found that employers rarely understand what actually motivates their employees. According to the ***Harvard Business Review*** findings, what employers think employees want from work does not actually match employees' priorities (Stein, Hobson, Jachimowicz, & Whillans, 2021).

5. Why Companies Fail to Thrive

Although it would seem remarkable that employers struggle to be trusted and fail to understand what actually motivates their employees, a growing body of evidence over the past several decades seems to confirm that the decline in employee commitment is a full-blown reality and a root cause of the reason why so many employees are dissatisfied at work and why so many companies seem to struggle to succeed.

We suggest that there are seven compelling reasons why today's leaders and organizations are failing to earn the trust of employees or fully engage them as committed team members. The good news is that there is ample evidence to cite from for practitioners and academics to consider as they consider these insights.

5.1 Ineffectiveness Selecting Leaders and Managers

More than five decades ago, a highly regarded leadership scholar explained that although much has been written about leadership, the subject really has not been well understood (Bennis, 1959). That expert, Warren Bennis, noted that understanding what constitutes effective leadership has consistently been elusive. Since that 1959 publication, other leadership experts have offered principle-based suggestions for selecting and developing leaders (Covey, 1992) – but the latest research confirms that the leadership problem continues (Edelman, 2023).

A disturbing reality in many organizations is that Human Resource Management (HRM) staff simply lack the skills to identify the qualities required of effective leaders and have little or no understanding of how to assess candidates' skills accurately (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2015). Alarmingly, according to a study reported by Randall Beck and James Harter, "companies fail to choose the employee with the right talent for the job 82% of the time" (Beck & Harter, 2023). Whether the problem in selection is due to incompetent HRM personnel or ineffective Top Management Teams is a subject that has been repeatedly argued. However, the bottom line for organizations is that trust in leaders is low and the low regard of employees toward leaders and supervisors is a deterrent to employee commitment (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

5.2 Inadequately Trained Supervisors.

Even though it is a knowledge- and information-based economy (Covey, 2005), it is the rare organization that invests adequately in the training and development of its employees and most organizations have only a dim understanding of how much they invest in creating and sustaining their intellectual capital (Bassi & Van Buren, 1999). The extensive research by Gallup has found that only one in ten persons "possess the talent to manage" (Beck & Harter, 2023) but despite that compelling statistic, few organizations adequately emphasize training and developing their management staff or their potential leaders. The clear message of employees to employers has been that the workplace culture and the ineptness of those who lead are the reasons why employees limit their work commitment rather than going the extra-mile (Clifton, 2023).

The Gallup research determined that 70% of the variance in the success of organizations was a function of the effectiveness of their managers and supervisors, confirming the importance of developing and monitoring the effectiveness of those key employees (Clifton & Harter, 2019). Given the ineffectiveness of so many managers and supervisors, Gallup recommended that employers aggressively invest in the training and development of current and future managers and leaders, but the current trend in many of today's organizations is that adequate management training is not consistently being provided (Harter, 2006).

5.3 Unethical Conduct of Management Personnel.

Employees trust leaders when their conduct matches their words (Schein & Schein, 2016). Managers and supervisors have failed so completely in earning the trust and credibility of their employees that Damron (2018) reported that 58% of employees surveyed indicated that they would rather trust a stranger than their boss. A ***Harvard Business Review*** article by Sue Bingham (2017) also reported that fewer than 50% of lower-level organization employees do not trust the organizations that they work for – noting that supervisors routinely "skate the edges of ethical behavior, hide information, take credit for others' hard work, or flat-out deceive people."

Although the decline in ethics and morality has occurred at all levels of society, the failure of ethical conduct in business has become so routine that people seem to be more shocked by honesty than by immoral conduct (Collinsworth, 2017). The "new morality" is what was once considered "the old immorality" in a world where trust in leaders has continued to decline (Harrington, 2017). Although scholars like William Cordeiro (2003) have argued that the only solution to the decline in business ethics is ethical managers, the evidence suggests that confidence in the ethical conduct of leadership has eroded rather than improved (Edelman, 2023).

5.4 Inability to Respond Quickly to Change

The inability of organizations and their personnel to respond quickly and effectively to change is best evidenced by the decline and disappearance of many of the world's most highly regarded organizations. Companies cited as great innovators and the leading businesses in their industry have routinely lost their competitive advantage, failed to keep pace, and gone out of business (Pugh, 2023).

Leaders and organizations have failed to adapt to the attitudes and perspectives of Generation Z (Knapp, Weber, & Moellenkamp, 2017) and Millennial (LaCore, 2015) employees who view the importance of work far differently than the employees of prior generations. Rather than viewing their offered employment opportunities as an opportunity and a high priority in the lives of their job candidates, managers and organization leaders have been surprised to find that the new generation of employees do not consider their careers to be the most important priorities of their lives (McCrindle & Fell, 2019).

5.5 Adopting Short-Term Thinking Strategy

Managers and leaders in large corporations have been guilty of taking a short-term view of strategic thinking for more than two decades – and have repeatedly paid the consequences (Pfeffer, 1998). Dennis Carey and colleagues (2018) have explained that, although a short-term mindset might satisfy short-term investors by artificially inflating stock prices, there's a larger long-term price to be paid. They emphasize that long-term thinking that emphasizes the creation of value for customers is far and away the best strategy for today's organizations.

Failing to invest in acquiring the capital equipment, developing the skills of personnel, and failing to keep current with evolving industry technology sacrifices tomorrow's requirements for a temporary but artificial financial boost that compromises the future and fails to honor the stewardship obligations of organization leaders (Caldwell & Anderson, 2019). Although short-term thinking may respond to the subjective self-interests of investors and stockholders, it is counter-productive to the long-term interests of employees who depend upon leadership for their long-term livelihood.

5.6 Hiring Temporary, Contract, and Part-time Employees

In the past twenty-five years, the workforce has dramatically changed and the social contract between employers and employees has been significantly rewritten. Historically, the implicit relationship between employers and employees had been that an employee who performed her or his job well was confident that (s)he was secure in her or his employment and would have a stable career (Brown, 2005).

Research conducted by Harvard's Larry Katz and Princeton's Alan Krueger found that 94% of the new jobs created in the United States between 1995 and 2015 were part-time, temporary, contingent, or contract employees (Katz & Krueger, 2019). The trend toward hiring part-time, temporary, or contract employees to avoid paying employee benefits has continued – particularly with the advent of the job shortage in which wages dramatically increased for service employees (Autor & Reynolds, 2020). Meanwhile, employees have clearly indicated their overwhelming preference for full-time employment as one of the criteria for a "great job" (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

5.7 Settling for "Good" when "Great" is Needed

Michael Porter (1998) explained that firms are unable to create and sustain a competitive advantage when their products and services only rise to the level of being "as good as" their competition. Unfortunately, many businesses are guilty of failing to understand the inevitable truth that "good is the enemy of great" and that they cannot succeed long-term unless and until they differentiate themselves from their competitors (Collins, 2001). The pursuit of excellence depends upon the ability of company leaders, managers, and supervisors to earn and retain the trust and commitment of their employees by creating integrated systems and by understanding the role of leadership (Albrecht et al., 2015).

Outstanding organizations excel by creating a culture of greatness that treats employees with great regard and makes them "owners and partners" in the process of continuous improvement (Block, 2013). The ability to thrive and flourish requires a complex combination of technical, interpersonal, and leadership skills in which those who lead are committed to be true servants to those with whom they work (Cameron, 2021). Greatness in organizations is not a one-time occurrence but is the by-product of constant effort, genuine commitment to others, and leadership that focuses on honoring ethical duties owed to all stakeholders (Quinn et al., 2020).

Despite the compelling evidence about these seven factors, the associated problems are continually cited as contributors to the decline in trust in leaders and organizations. Apparently, the efforts of employers to learn from the available research and the quality of instruction at even the best colleges and universities have failed to get through to today's supervisors, managers, and Top Management Teams – and perhaps the solutions to today's employee relations problems are not really understood by the scholars and alleged experts who teach undergraduate and graduate business courses.

6. A Challenge

Leaders do not intend to fail, yet many obviously do. The causes of these failures are many and the price of success is high. Although most organizational leaders are striving to do their best, they also recognize that their best efforts often fall short of what is required to survive – much less to thrive and flourish. Unfortunately, the evidence seems clear that the current strategies, philosophies, assumptions, and management approaches are far from effective in a global economy which has become exponentially more competitive.

Nonetheless, what a growing body of evidence seems to confirm is that many leaders need to rethink the relationships that they create with employees in order to build the trust and commitment that is key to extra-mile employee performance. Creating a work environment that treats employees with great regard and that demonstrates a long-term commitment to employees' welfare has been shown to motivate employees and involve them as deeply engaged team members in the pursuit of organization goals. Although there are no guarantees for success, leaders who address the seven factors contained herein strengthen their ability to earn the dedication of those with whom they work and to create organizations that thrive and flourish.

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