

Key Communications Strategies for Building a High Trust Organization

By Angelique L. Rewers and Toni Cascio

If trust were a cost/benefit measured on a company's balance sheet, more executives would be concerned with building high levels of trust within their organizations. Even though it's not a balance sheet item, trust has a significant impact on an organization's financial performance and overall success.

While establishing trust with all stakeholders is important, building trust with employees is even more so because the strongest opinions about an organization—good or bad—are held by its employees. Those same employees are responsible for executing an organization's strategy and they play a pivotal role in shaping the perception of an organization among customers, members, shareholders, potential employees, the media and the community.

The harsh reality, however, is that low levels of trust among employees are pervasive. Watson Wyatt found that only 39% of employees trust senior leadership and only 45% have confidence in their management's abilities.

Professional communicators are uniquely well positioned to help their organizations build high levels of organizational trust because trust and communication go hand in hand. Establishing trust is a process: It's a result of a multitude of actions, most of which take place on an interpersonal level, either through face-to-face communication or via written communications. It's the repetitive and consistent nature of these interactions that will create a culture of trust. Here are key steps you can take to begin building high levels of trust within your organization:

Step 1. Do your homework.

To garner support for building a high trust culture, you'll need to demonstrate the potential return on investment. There's a tremendous amount of research that provides evidence of how low trust affects em-

ployee engagement, customer loyalty, investor confidence and financial performance. If your communications function operates with a high level of autonomy, it might be wise to conduct an organizational trust assessment before speaking with your executives.

Step 2. Start a trust dialogue with your executives.

Like any other worthwhile initiative, an organizational trust campaign must have buy-in from the highest levels. The best way to achieve that buy-in is to link the importance of building trust to the organization's business goals. If you've done your homework, it will not be difficult to develop a business case that demonstrates how building trust with employees can directly support those efforts.

Step 3. Complete a two-part, trust-based assessment.

Organizational trust is multifaceted. Do employees trust their peers? Their manager? Senior leadership? And do they believe there is a genuine concern for their well-being? In Part 1 of the assessment, measure these factors through things like employee engagement surveys, focus groups, 360-degree feedback loops, retention rates and exit interviews. Also take a look at all employee communications over the last 12 months. In addition to internal sources, such as executive communiqués, newsletters, town hall transcripts and intranet postings, also include press releases or other external channels employees may read. Evaluate these communications for openness, transparency and honesty. Look at whether or not commitments were made—and if those commitments were kept. Finally, determine if there was consistency in messaging.

In Part 2 of the assessment, pinpoint the key touch points with your employees. Then identify the areas that are either most vulnerable to a breach of trust

or that would cause the most damage if a breach occurred. These will include things like formal and informal interactions with supervisors and internal “customer service” representatives such as the HR help desk. Another major risk is the chance employees receive bad (or conflicting) news from outside sources before they hear it internally.

Together, these exercises will provide a clear picture of the levels of trust within your organization and the threats to building and maintaining it.

Step 4. Build a strategic trust building plan.

Based on what you uncover in your trust-based assessment, develop a long-term action plan that meets your organization’s unique needs.

- ▶ **Develop a risk mitigation plan to address the highest threats.** This may mean offering a workshop for managers that emphasizes how to build and maintain trust. Or it may involve implementing new employee communication guidelines that set standards for the minimum level of timeliness, accuracy and transparency deemed acceptable.

- ▶ **Create SOPs for major risks.** Even with a risk mitigation plan, you still need to be prepared for the inevitable breach of trust. How quickly and effectively your organization responds can make all the difference in whether the hit to your trust levels is a mere chip in the armor or a devastating blow. By creating standard operating procedures for various scenarios ahead of time, your organization will be able to move quickly in the event of a trust crisis.

- ▶ **Define a distinctive organizational mission.** An organization that wants to establish trust with its stakeholders must start with a grounded sense of what defines it: why it exists, what it stands for and what differentiates it among customers, investors and employees. An organizational mission should provide a clear sense of purpose that can be used to dictate consistent behavior and actions in every corner of the organization.

- ▶ **Insist on authenticity.** Arthur W. Page said, “Public perception of an organization is determined 90% by what it does and 10% by talking about it.” Authenticity means your organization’s

The Link Between High Trust and High Performance

It’s easy to see the effect low trust has on an organization’s culture. Backstabbing, red tape, information hoarding and the fear of suggesting new ideas are just a few of the consequences. But does trust also translate to the bottom line? Absolutely.

For starters, trust levels go hand-in-hand with employee engagement—one of the leading factors driving an organization’s financial performance. Gallup Research estimates that disengagement—often referred to as “quit and stay”—costs corporations \$250 to \$300 billion per year.

Low trust levels are also synonymous with low retention rates. And turnover costs money: about 48% to 61% of the wage for that position. This fact is especially daunting when you lose higher paid executives.

Most convincing, however, are the financial results of Fortune Magazine’s 100 Best Companies to Work For. According to the Great Place to Work Institute, trust is the “primary defining characteristic,” accounting for a full 60% of the criteria used to select the companies. Interestingly, the companies comprising the 2007 Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For earned an 18.1% return over three years, compared to a 10.5% return earned by companies comprising the S&P 500. And over the prior five years, the Fortune Top 100 earned an average of 15.7%, while the S&P returned only 6.2%.

Even more convincing is this: Watson Wyatt found that high-trust organizations had a total return to shareholders that was 286% higher than low-trust organizations.

actions match its words and vice versa. It's your job to ensure employee communications are authentic and, if they're not, to have the courage to speak up.

- ▶ **Share more information.** CHA, a U.K. consultancy, found that 90% of employees who are updated often are motivated to deliver added value, while 80% of those who are kept in the dark are not. As a communicator, it's your job to encourage executives to share information more frequently and more openly.

When it comes to trust, it's much more difficult to rebuild it than it is to maintain it. That's why it's so important to be proactive. While there are many variables that will be out of your hands, embracing these principles will help you lay the foundation for a high trust environment. **PRN**

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Employee Engagement vs. Customer Loyalty

According to a recent report conducted by Best Practices, there is a recognizable link between employee engagement and customer loyalty—specifically, companies that engage employees show gains in customer loyalty and satisfaction. Among the findings:

- Development Dimensions International data from a Fortune 100 manufacturing client shows a dramatic 1000% increase in errors among disengaged vs. engaged employee populations;
- 75% of high-performing companies hold managers accountable for engaging their employees; and,
- Only 35% of the full benchmark class hold managers accountable.

As for the report's communications implications, the PR function's ability to encourage cross-functional teams throughout their organizations helps employees understand the function of all business units as they relate to corporate performance. This knowledge can in turn increase the effectiveness of employees' interaction with the customers they serve, thus impacting both employee engagement and customer loyalty.