

Avoiding Enemies of Trust

Common Behaviors that Inadvertently Damage Trust at Work¹ and How to Avoid Them

Enemies of Trust: Sincerity

1. *Failing to update.* Changing your mind about a decision or direction without letting everyone concerned know you have, and why. This will guarantee that people who only heard you before you changed direction will think you are not acting in alignment with what you've said.

Avoid this enemy by making sure when you change your mind you take the time to let everyone who may have heard your first decision/direction know. Include an explanation of why you changed your mind, particularly for people who may have been invested in the original decision/direction. The most common enemy people face in doing this is time. But the payoff for taking the time is maintaining the trust of the people you work with.

2. *Not being clear about your priorities.* Talking about how you would *like* something to be when you are not fully committed to making it happen because it is not a priority for you now. Unless you make it clear you aren't committed to it the listener may expect you to take action to make it happen, especially if you are a leader. When you don't actually do anything (because, after all, you aren't strongly committed to it and there are other things you are more committed to that need attention) the listener may question your sincerity.

Avoid this enemy by first, keeping in mind that when you talk you are creating expectations in the listener's mind, especially if you are a leader. *Manage those expectations well.* When you talk about something you would like to see happen "sometime, somehow" make it clear you are not committed to taking any action on this anytime soon. The expectation you want to create for the listener is that you aren't going to do anything specific right now, even though you may want to see it happen. Conversely, when you are talking about something you *are* committed to doing make it clear you will be taking action to support it. The more specific you can be about what actions you will take and when the more accurate the listener's expectations will be.

3. *Confusing what you aspire to with what you can do.* Talking about how you aspire to be or do something as if people can always expect it from you when you are not (yet) really able to do it or do it consistently. An example is a boss who proclaims he wants honest feedback from his employees. And he really thinks he does. But as likely as not when someone gives him feedback he doesn't like a habitual reaction kicks in and he shuts the person down. The employee expects a more open response and would likely lose some trust in the boss's sincerity at that point.

Avoid this enemy by first being honest with yourself about your ability to consistently act as you would like to. If you realize you can't do it all of the time don't say anything about it (e.g., don't tell your employees you want their feedback). Or, better yet, tell them you want to change your behavior and are still learning and practicing so they know what to expect. For example, say something like, "I want and need your feedback. I want to hear both positive and negative input. I know I sometimes react defensively when I get negative feedback. I am working on listening openly but have not yet mastered that skill. Please share your feedback with me and, if I do get defensive at that moment don't hold it against me. I always realize it after the fact and promise never to hold any honest feedback you give me against you."

¹ Common behaviors that often damage trust in the four *domains of trust* described in *The Thin Book of Trust: An essential primer for building trust at work* by Charles Feltman

4. *Speaking from different sides of your mouth.* Saying something to one person that may appear to contradict what you've said to another. There are four reasons for this: 1) you may not see any obvious contradiction between what you say to two different people, but *they* do; 2) you may not be able to say everything to one person that you can to another for some reason; 3) something changes between the time you talk to one person and the other; 4) your desire to please people by agreeing with them or telling them what they want to hear is stronger than your desire to be as honest as you can with people.

Avoid this enemy by as much as possible using the same words when you talk about something to different people, especially if it's something they see as important. If you can't give as much information about something to Bob as you can to Joan for some reason, let them both know this is the case and why. If something changes between the time you talk to Joan and when you talk to Bob so that Bob gets different information, go back to Joan and make sure she is updated. Finally, if you tend to change what you say or how you say it to fit what you think different people want to hear, understand that people may feel good about you in the moment but if they come to believe you are changing your story from one person to another they will distrust your sincerity.

5. *Telling "probable truths".* Saying something as if it *is* true when in fact you are not completely sure it is. You might think is probably true (so it's low risk to say it is), or you would like to be true ("people will be more likely to give my project the go-ahead if they think this is true"), or you plan to make it true ("I'll tell her I made that phone call, and I will do it this afternoon"). You may have done this once or twice and it's turned out to be okay. However, if people find out what you say in these situations is not actually true in more than a couple of instances they will begin to question your honesty, competency, or both.

Avoid this enemy by recognizing when you would like to say something is true but you are not completely sure it is. This, of course, takes being unstintingly honest with yourself. When the idea does arise to tell a probable truth **stop**, take a breath, and check your personal integrity meter. Ask yourself: Do I really want to do this? What does it mean for my sense of integrity if I do? Then begin by saying something like: "I think this is true (or accurate, or correct) and I can't say so for sure at this time. Here is the information I do have..."

6. *Omitting/withholding.* Omitting or withholding useful or important information without telling people or establishing a good reason for doing so. Sometimes we omit something because we don't consider it useful or important. Problem is others may think it is. We may also simply forget to mention it. In other instances we may leave something unsaid to protect ourselves or someone else. No matter what the reason, people will usually discover that you withheld something and when they do they may assume you intended to "hide" it from them, that you did so for your gain, and they will distrust your sincerity.

Avoid this enemy by taking the time and effort to understand what your audience considers important information and/or what they would consider good reasons to withhold it. Then you can determine what you need to say. The other important thing to remember is that when you know you need to withhold some information you need to let people know you are doing so and why.

Enemies of Trust: Reliability

1. *Saying "yes" to a request when you don't have all the information.* Sometimes you may say yes to a request when you are not completely clear about what you are being asked to do or deliver, and when it is expected. When someone asks you to do something and you say "yes" they

assume you are going to do exactly what they want. The trouble is, if you aren't clear about exactly what they want, how they want it done, or by when, you can easily fail to deliver in their eyes.

Avoid this enemy by using your knowledge of the elements of a complete request² to ask the person making a request of you questions that will give you any missing information.

2. *Saying "yes" to a request when you really should make a counter offer.* You may automatically say "yes" to a request even when, if you stopped to think about it, you know you can't fulfill it. This happens often when the boss is the one asking. But if you can't fulfill the request for any legitimate reason (not enough time or resources, missing information, other demands, etc.) it is better not to commit to fulfilling the request *as it has been stated*. This is where a *counter offer*³ comes in.

Avoid this enemy by making a practice of stopping, taking a breath, and considering whether you can really deliver on exactly what the requester is asking or directing you to do. If you believe you can't deliver, and saying "no" is not a good option (see below), figure out what you can do and make a counter offer. Even if it's your boss. Let him/her know what the situation is (e.g., you've got too many other things on your plate) and ask for help prioritizing ("What commitments will you support me on revoking and/or renegotiating?")

3. *Believing "I (or we) can not say no".* Every time you say "yes" to one thing you are by default saying "no" to something else. In some organizations "we can't say no here" is part of the culture. For some people it is a personal assumption: if I say "no" I won't be seen as a good employee/team player/person. Either way, it is a sure setup for damaging trust. People who say "yes" too often find themselves overworked, stressed, and often resentful. And they inevitably fail to fulfill at least some of the promises they make, which degrades others' trust in them.

Avoid this enemy by first checking the validity of your assumption: do you really *have* to say yes? Prioritize to whom (e.g., your boss) and in what situations (when "the whole team need is counting on you") you *do* need to either say "yes" or make a good counter offer. For any other situation, stop, before you say anything take a breath and think about whether you can say "yes", need to make a counter offer, or just say "no". In truth we can always say "no", and there will be some consequence to doing so. The real question is whether the real (as opposed to imagined) consequences of "no" are worse than the consequences of saying "yes". Practice taking a moment to consider the real consequences before you say "yes".

Note: If this is a common situation in your team/organization, initiate a conversation about the real costs of continuing to do this. See if people will agree to changing how you make and respond to requests, and supporting each other in being honest about saying yes or no to a request. See *The Thin Book of Trust* for more on this.

4. *Failing to let your customer know something has changed and you will not be able to keep your promise.* This is a common problem in many organizations. You promise to do something and subsequently discover that something will prevent you from completing it on time, or at all. It could be a change in the situation. It might be that you didn't anticipate a resource you would need wouldn't be available when you need it. Whatever the problem, if you fail to go back to the person who is expecting you to complete the work when and how you promised you would and let them know you are not going to BEFORE you get to the deadline it will damage their trust in you.

² See *The Thin Book of Trust*, p. 26, for elements of a complete request.

³ See *The Thin Book of Trust*, Chapter 4, for more on counter offers, including examples.

Avoid this enemy by making a practice of letting your customers know as soon as you know that you can't fulfill.

Enemies of Trust: Competence

1. *Failing to understand and agree on success measures.* You may offer or agree to do a job or task without coming to an explicit understanding of how performance and success will be measured. This can work in your favor if your performance standards are higher than other stakeholders. But if yours are lower in even one or two aspects of the job your competence will be called into question.

Avoid this enemy by taking the time to thoroughly discuss standards and expectations regarding performance and success with key stakeholders before taking on a job, role, task, or initiative.

2. *Overselling yourself.* Knowingly embellishing your abilities and/or glossing over your lack full competence in certain areas in order to get a job or role you would like. You may get it, but once you start fumbling in those areas stakeholders will quickly lose trust in you.

Avoid this enemy by acknowledging your limitations and asking if the stakeholders would be willing to support you as you learn to do those aspects of the job you are not yet competent in.

3. *Failing to recognize your limitations.* This can come from the belief "I'm a fast learner". You've often been able to pick up new skills and competencies quickly so you believe you can always fake it until you make it. It can also come from simple hubris. Either way, sometimes it works. But as you get into more complex and demanding roles and responsibilities this approach can backfire, usually with disastrous consequences.

Avoid this enemy by practicing authentic humility. It starts with knowing and being completely with yourself. Find out what the stakeholders' measures for success are. Honestly catalog what you can and can't do well relative to the job. Go to the stakeholders and tell them what you know you are competent at and what you aren't as yet. Ask them if they'd be willing to support you in learning what you don't know.

4. *Failing to ask for help when you need it.* Even if you do due diligence on others' expectations for a job or task, after you get into it you may find there are aspects you have difficulty with. You may be tempted to fumble your way through, believing others will cut you some slack, or even that you can hide your incompetence. This rarely works and usually results in loss of trust.

Avoid this enemy by going to the key stakeholder(s), explaining the situation, and asking for the help you need as soon as you realize you need it.

Enemies of Trust: Care

1. *Failing to listen to others.* If you rarely or never ask for or listen to others' thoughts, ideas, cares or concerns they will begin to believe you don't have their interests in mind.

Avoid this enemy by asking about and listening to others' ideas, opinions, interests, concerns, and/or feelings. This is usually all it takes for people to feel that you care about their interests. But remember: you can't fake listening. Working on your computer, checking email, texting, or putting even some of your attention on something else (e.g., the cell phone in your hand) will be interpreted as not listening and therefore not really caring.

*Note: If you can practice what is sometimes called *generous listening*, that is, listening with your full attention and without judgement, stronger trust will be built more quickly. To do this, start*

by setting aside any preconceived ideas about what he/she is saying, such as: I already know what he's going to say, I like/don't like her point of view, I agree/disagree with him, she's right/wrong, etc. This is a skill the most effective leaders cultivate and use.

2. *Never making yourself vulnerable.* When you wear a mask of invulnerability people won't trust that they can be open with you. At work this can translate into withholding ideas, information or important feedback. It can shut down creativity and innovation. We all know that human being has flaws, fears, is at times sad, confused or angry, and sometimes struggles or questions him/herself. If you don't let any of your own vulnerabilities this show people may see you as strong, but will also question your ability to really care about them and their interests.

Avoid this enemy of trust by allowing yourself to be authentically vulnerable. This means acknowledging to people you trust that you do have cares, concerns, fears, that you sometimes make mistakes and wrestle with issues. The most effective leaders, for example, selectively disclose some of their cares, concerns and shortcomings to trusted colleagues. When you are willing to trust others enough to be authentically vulnerable with them they will be much more likely to trust that you care about their interests, as well. Being authentically vulnerable does not mean you just pour your guts out to people. This can create a deep sense of distrust in your competence, especially if you are a leader. Also, especially for leaders, being authentically vulnerable does not mean disclosing information that can increase employees' anxiety.

3. *Failing to consider others' ideas, opinions, interests, concerns, and/or feelings.* If you make decisions without soliciting input from the people who will be affected by them, they will question your concern for their interests.

Avoid this enemy by inviting and actively considering input from the people who will be affected by your decisions to the greatest extent possible. This is especially important if you are a decision maker. Also, clarify how a decision will be made: by group consensus, by you alone, by a subgroup, etc. After listening, respond with something like, "Thank you for your input. I understand your concern and I can see the value of what you're saying. I will definitely consider it when I make my decision."

4. *Failing to clarify team interests.* A leader often doesn't have the luxury of getting to know the individual interests of everyone on their team or in their department, let alone considering them in every decision. Most people in organizations understand this. But if the leader doesn't appear to decide and act in the best interests of the team/group people will quickly stop trusting that the leader has their shared interests in mind.

Avoid this enemy by taking the time to have the team to come a complete shared understanding of and commitment to team intended goals/outcomes, values, and the expectations everyone has of you and each other regarding working together.

5. *Appearing to "side with" everyone.* If you ask for input from several people prior to making a decision and talk to each individual as if you will decide/act in accord with their specific interests, inevitably someone is going to feel shafted when you do decide in a way that doesn't support their interests.

Avoid this enemy by being clear that you are gathering input for a decision or an action and will thoroughly consider what they have to say. Make sure they understand that what you ultimately decide to do may not completely coincide with their individual interests but from your perspective it will be the best decision for the team/group/company.

6. *Creating an information vacuum in times of change.* When things are changing and you have confidential information others would like but you can't share it with them for good reason, they will usually begin to believe you do not have their interests in mind. For example, it is

known that your company will be laying some people off. As a manager you know who the people in your department are that will lose their jobs, but you are mandated not to disclose this information before a certain date. This creates an information vacuum that people will inevitably fill with fear fueled rumors, a situation that drastically interferes with getting work done.

Avoid this enemy by sharing as much as you can as often as you can. Let people know you will tell them everything you can, and why you can't give them certain information (such as who will be laid off). Your honesty will build trust, especially if those people already trust you. Most people will interpret what you say as caring for their interests.