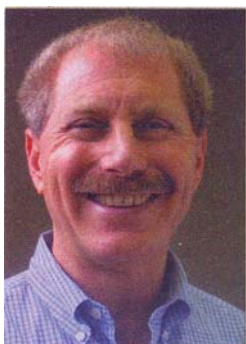


BUILDING TRUST FOR SAFETY

BY ROBERT PATER

Trust is a cornerstone of an effective safety program. These steps can help you nurture trust in your organization.



My friend's father was a plant electrician before he got hurt. Highly skilled guy, very bright and motivated to excel at whatever he puts his hands on. But that's the problem. He can't easily put his hands on anything. He has no ability to torque/twist his wrist, due to cumulative injury to small carpal bones in his hands. After corrective surgery, he was supposed to be on light duty to heal but his supervisor changed his job title and had him work his old job. He wound up permanently hurt. His employer denied his long-term disability claim on a technicality. He ran out of savings trying to hire an attorney to fight his case. He can't work - can't even help his daughter install a fan in her new house. He feels terrible, and all his coworkers know about this and remain angry.

It's probably no surprise that employee trust for leadership is low, and that this affects safety performance. There's some good news; a recent Watson Wyatt study of nearly 13,000 workers reveals that trust levels are rising slightly. The percentage of employees who express trust and confidence in their senior executives increased from 44 percent in 2002 to 51 percent in 2004 (back to about the same levels as 2000). The bad news is that, even with this rise, about half of all workers don't trust their leaders.

Less than one-third of workers believe their company does a good job of helping poor performers improve. My experience is consistent with this data; very few organizations do an effective job helping those who've had repeat accidents get out of their "frequent flier" pattern.

Why bother? Because trust can provide a competitive edge. An International Association of Business Communicators study associated high levels of trust with improved profitability and customer satisfaction. Employee trust boosts program and procedural buy-in, helps the learning of new skills, raises efficiency and provides you and your company with a competitive edge. Trust me, if you can become skilled as a trust builder, you will always be respected and in demand.

What can you personally do to boost trust for safety performance?

1. **Acknowledge** employees' concerns as valid and that they may have good reason for suspicion. Let them know when you have mixed reactions to new procedures or policies, rather than maintaining an all-is-wonderful front. Root out - don't wait - for mixed messages that are broadcast in the name of safety (Hurry up, but don't take shortcuts"). Be the one to find inconsistencies first in policies, promotional or contractor requirements. Let them know when you've made mistakes (abolish know-it-all-ism and never-wrongism). Practice tolerance for different learning and communication styles, as well as levels of risk tolerance.

2. **Seek out and reply.** Don't avoid or squelch resisters - seek them out. Some will, in reality, be spokespersons and provide meaningful information to help your planning. Further, you can reduce push back by their getting angry reactions off their chests in a safe manner. Make "thank you" your default for receiving negative feedback; don't let yourself become defensive (which can reduce your credibility). Become an "early responder;" get back to people quickly on their concerns (doesn't mean you'll solve everything, just respond honestly). Watch reactions build and develop a nip-it-in-the-bud approach. Reduce blaming anywhere it is related to safety (in accident investigations, with "accident repeaters," etc.).

3. **Perspective.** Remind yourself and others that we live in challenging and changing times. Long-past promises may have been well-intentioned but short-sighted. Be straightforward about organizational realities. Reframe expectations, making them more realistic. Remind employees at all levels of the benefits of safety, and don't merely expect them to change because you say so. Endeavor to use less-loaded words that still do the job (e.g. we always speak of "becoming more in control of your personal safety" rather than "you will be held accountable"). Dedicate yourself to continuous improvement, even if your safety record isn't currently where you'd like it. Try new things; don't just recycle the same old stuff.

4. **Involve.** Activate safety committees by training them, and give them real work with high expectations. Enlist select workers as peer instructors and safety change agents. Recruit allies for safety - up, down and sideways (vendors and customers too). Practice effective delegation. Ask for advice - don't try to do it alone. Respect the fact that there are many different ways people can become involved.

5. **Persistent patience.** Abandon the quick-fix mentality and go for continuous improvements. Weave safety into all communications. Ask yourself, "How will this new tool/procedure/promotion affect safety and trust?" Make training honest, practical, involving and enjoyable. Spread credit generously. Continue to ask questions of others and of yourself. Boost your own credibility and trustworthiness.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great." Trust, like the buried foundation of a building, is not always directly visible, but critical for erecting a stable structure. Keep trust formation in the back of your mind and consider it in your underlying plans. Help make trust in safety a cornerstone for improved personal and organizational performance.

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