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Jitendra Mishra
Grand Valley State University

Molly A. Morrissey

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Trust in Employee/Employer Relationships: A Survey of West Michigan Managers

Jitendra Mishra, Ph.D.
Department of Management
Seidman School of Business
Molly A. Morrissey

Trust is at the core of all relationships. We spend a lifetime building a trust relationship with our friends and families, but we spend thirty minutes in an orientation session with our new employees and expect to have a successful and productive employee. "For employees to trust the management, they must know that the management shares the basic goals in the long run... and each will behave in ways that are not harmful to the other." It has been reported that more than 78% of American workers are suspicious of management and develop an "us-against-them" syndrome that interferes with their performance. (*Wall Street Journal*, February 1987).

Trust is an essential ingredient in constructive employee/employer relationships, and there is a reciprocal relationship between communication and trust. A trusting climate is one in which people feel free to share ideas, disclose feelings, and work for common goals in a participative manner. Without trust, relationships deteriorate into destructive conflict and communication breakdown occurs. Through communication we establish the basis for trust, and we continuously test the level and limits of our trust of others. Trust takes time to develop. Many supervisor-subordinate relationships are characterized by a lack of trust. Rempel and Holmes, in their article, "How Do I Trust Thee," discuss three fundamental elements of trust: Predictability, Dependability and Faith. Predictability refers to the ability to foretell specific behavior. Dependability is the knowledge that another can be relied upon when it counts. Both predictability and dependability assume that future behavior will be consistent with past behavior. The third element of trust, faith, is the feeling of security that the other party will continue to be caring and responsive.

The primary objective of this survey was to determine ways that managers can use to develop and increase trust. To accomplish this task a total of 426 questionnaires were mailed to both public and private organizations in the six (6) contiguous counties (not bordering neighboring states) of western Michigan (Ottawa, Kent, Muskegon, Calhoun, Berrien and Kalamazoo) representing a wide diversification of economic activities and different industry sections. The survey included all organizations (public and private) in the aforementioned geographic area that employ 50 or more persons. Out of the 426 surveys, 50 were returned marked "No Forwarding Address," while 143 responded, for a rate of 38.03%.

Our results strongly support that more respondents view trust as a belief in the integrity, character, and ability of others (93.5% agreed) followed by the perception that trust is a feeling of confidence and support shown to employees by their employers (91.2% agreed).

Factors that Breed Trust

In the second section of our survey, labeled "Factors that Breed Trust," each manager was asked to respond to a list of five possible factors that lead to trust in their organizations. Each factor was ranked independently of the others. Overall, 96.4% of surveyed managers agreed that communication was a common factor that breeds trust. Giving workers greater share in decision making had an agreement rate of 90.4%. According to the surveyed managers, the third most common factor that breeds trust was the sharing of critical information (87.4%). Finally, the true sharing of perceptions and feelings, and not taking advantage of one's weaknesses and shortcomings were met with agreement rates of 85.5% and 83.6%, respectively.

Our results strongly support that six (6) main advantages of trust (over 90% agreement) are: a) improved communication; b) greater predictability, dependability, and confidence; c) a reduction in employee turnover; d) openness, willingness to listen and accept criticism non-defensively; e) repeat business; and f) a reduction of friction among employees. Our results did, however, point out that the most frequent disadvantage of building a climate of trust was a fear of losing managerial authority (97% agreed).

Advantage	Acceptance Position
• Improved communication	99.2
• Greater predictability, dependability and confidence	98.5
• Reduction in employee turnover	98.4
• Openness, willingness to listen and accept criticism non-defensively	97.1
• Leads to repeat business	94.8
• Reduction in friction among employees	93.4
• More effective and productive employee/employer relationship	78.9
• Improved interpersonal relationships and openness	76.5
• Increased organizational effectiveness and productivity	24.1

Our results demonstrate that trust starts at the top and filters down. Top managers (94% agreed) and middle managers (94.1% agreed) are primarily responsible for building trust because they enjoy hierarchical advantage and greater access to key information. Management must trust employees with information, good as well as bad. In a non-trusting environment, people mispend enormous amounts of energy protecting themselves.

Finally, our results demonstrated that trust is not a function of any popular managerial style, such as participative management, profit-sharing, or management by walking around. Trust is a feeling; it is a belief. It is based on true sharing of perception, openness, willingness to listen and accept criticism non-defensively, and sharing critical information. Our respondents felt that taking advantage of one's weaknesses decreases trust (75.6% agreed).

Real Managerial Power

Real power is earned, not appointed. Supervisors may command subordinates, but the best performances will not happen without an atmosphere of trust.

Managers should desire to work at a level where their actions have a high leverage; i.e., where they can influence many events, decisions, or people by a few key actions. To do this requires first, the delegation of real responsibility and authority to subordinates, and second, a confidence that subordinates will handle their duties competently with a minimum of low-leverage review time.