

Building Up Trust

Trust is one of our most precious resources.
Read what Ulf D. Posé says about how to build it up – sequel 7:
If you want trust, you need dependability

Every economical crisis is also a confidence crisis. If expectations have not been met and dreams have not come true, this generates insecurity and lets trust dwindle. If trust has crumbled, it is extremely hard to restore. Because there are some requirements for trust to grow. It is based on reciprocity. On the other hand, that also means: every one of us can contribute to its growth – by behaving trustworthy and trusting others. Our series wants to show what matters.

It is part of everybody's life experience that you have to anticipate other people's lack of dependability. The common definition of dependability is also found in the technical field: "Dependability is the characteristic of a technical system allowing you to feel total trust in its functioning". Dependability in the sense of trust means that what someone says or promises will also happen.

The word dependability has two meanings:

On the one hand "something is no longer pending, I have let something go, I no longer need it". On the other hand, it means that "I can depend on something" – for instance a word, an activity or a promise. According to this definition, someone is dependable if he delivers what he promised.

Dependability also means that the meaning of a statement comes close to what is actually intended. At the same time, it is a special way of expressing your appreciation. If someone wants to depend on me, I will try and justify this trust by being dependable. Especially in a world where the morals of paying get worse and worse and promises are delivered less and less, dependability is actually quite indispensable. It is defined by its two cornerstones: uprightness and honesty.

In his study "Sincerity and Authenticity" – which, among others, is often cited by the sociologists Richard Sennet and Charles Taylor-, the philologist Lionel Trilling defines uprightness as "the concordance between emotion and expression". An upright person will refrain from a display of imposing qualities and façade techniques. This is certainly no small feat. Among other things, you need a high linguistic competence in order to express your own emotions and ideas in a pure way.

Schopenhauer thought that maybe uprightness was the hardest business of all. His comment on the topic was: "Your friends call themselves upright, your enemies are". Sufism, the Islamic mysticism, too, has its ideas on uprightness. There, you can read: "On the first step of uprightness, you have to ... see to it that your thoughts are faultless, that you strive towards the right decisions and that you orientate your behaviour accordingly. On the second step, the sole purpose of your existence is to spread the truth and get God's approval. Finally, on the third step, you totally identify with uprightness. Human nature as expressed in all activity and behaviour is linked to loyalty and firmness."

A person is upright if he remains true to himself. Originally, the meaning of the word is derived from "right", meaning "upright, honest, and pure". It is part of uprightness to express your own well-grounded belief without any disguise, i.e. authentically. Today, uprightness in the ethical sense means that the ideas your behaviour is based on are good. To me, it seems like this is the only way to create trust.

Authenticity means more: honesty. There is a Spanish proverb: "Sometimes even the devil tells the truth". No doubt: honesty is a difficult affair – especially if you are

punished in everyday life for expressing your emotions and weaknesses in front of others. Honesty will only have a chance if it remains free from evil and poison. But remember Schopenhauer in his aphorisms on the wisdom of life: “No matter how closely friendship, love, and marriage link people – in the end, you will find that people’s honesty is limited to their own selves and maybe to their own child”.

In other words: a person is honest if he is open without camouflage. This necessitates that he refrains from hidden communication, i.e. he has to give the other party all the information on which his own communication was based. For example, hidden communication does not give the real reason for a question. Instead, it comes up with pretences and secondary reasons. Interrogations are often an example for this method. If someone is caught in such a net of camouflaged communication, the consequences for his self-concept and social relationships might well be extremely detrimental.

We are, however, not talking honesty at all costs. In human psychology, the term “selective authenticity” describes this phenomenon: “Be aware of what you think and feel – and select what you say and do”. Here, too, responsibility is important. Sometimes it can be necessary not to tell the truth, or even to tell an outright lie. In the behavioural sense, only two reasons can justify this: Firstly if your own or someone else’s life is at stake and you have to balance our own and another person’s secrets. And secondly, if what I said would minimize another person’s chances of survival.

The requirement for this is empathy - intuitive competence: the opposite party must be able to identify with what I tell him. Whatever I say must not question the other person’s self-concept. That is where many leading persons make a mistake. They are not concerned about the self-concept of their employees. This equals an acute rejection and is the opposite of successful communication.

Closely linked to honesty is a promise made to someone. Unfortunately, the old Greek proverb also applies here: “Many promise mountains, and then they deliver molehills”. This is still true today. We easily promise things without considering whether or not we will also be able to deliver. This is like playing with fire, because if you promise something, you raise hope – hope which all too often is shattered. Consequently, trust in you will decrease, just like we will no longer trust an enterprise after it has promised and failed to deliver.

The reason for this is not just overestimation of one’s own capabilities; both in humans and enterprises, but also that we tend to delegate the delivery of our promises: circumstances, the boss, the market, the customers, or God himself. As they say: success has many fathers, failure has none.

Yet I often meet people who only make a promise if they are absolutely willing to deliver and after they have made sure that the special circumstances will allow the delivery. Others promise something because good manners dictate it or because they do not wish to offend or because they want to avoid difficulties. Trouble starts as soon as the delivery is claimed. If only we had not promised!

Well, sometimes we are a little cowardly. However, if you want to create trust, you also sometimes need the courage to say No. If you promise something you are actually prepared to deliver, that says a lot about your character: it shows how much you respect the other person. Moreover, duties and promises are what our identity and our personal brand are based on.

Promising something I am not sure I can deliver will invite excuses, and they are the first step towards lifelong lies. Someone who really shows responsibility will refrain from lame excuses – even if this is not very comfortable and will not get you out of

the line of fire. Excuses for reasons of good manners are acceptable in all situations, but excuses that only serve as a masquerade for yourself and others are dangerous.

It starts with us promising to solve a problem without having thought about how it could be solved, and then saying it was not our fault or it was not our responsibility. The blame is put on others. In doing this, we cement problems, instead of solving them. We display a false concern. We no longer distinguish between “this concerns me” and “I am concerned”. The latter means I regret circumstances, whereas the sentence “this concerns me” means something else: I have the duty to do something; I am responsible for delivering on a promise!

On the other hand, if you only promise what you have a very good chance of delivering, you generate clarity of decisions, responsibilities and the readiness to stand up for the consequences. “A man, a promise” – is there anybody who does not know the proverb? If you deliver what you have promised, you not only show character, you also show appreciation. In doing what you said you were going to do, you show the other person that he is important to you. The more people know us to deliver, the better our reputation. Everybody will know that they can rely on your word.

The same is true for enterprises. Marketing experts monitor the reputation of an enterprise and its products. There are even some rankings showing what enterprises promise and how they actually deliver. Those who want to generate a culture of trust will have to deliver what they promised. Making this a general rule, you will be regarded as someone who gives his best in order to deliver on your promises. Even if, as an exception to the rule and due to special circumstances, you cannot deliver, you will still have the reputation of always giving your best.

This is where I have to admit that all the aforementioned criteria will not automatically make you a success. Yet they seem to be indispensable requirements for building up a functioning culture of trust. It is still possible that all these requirements are met and still you fail to create trust.

Let me finish on a personal note. I do not know how often in life I already failed. Yet something remained inside me, regardless of all drawbacks: I will always fight for a good cause.