Jon Saphier

Let's get specific about how leaders can build trust

School leadership literature repeatedly identifies trust as essential for creating high-gain schools — schools where student gain scores are more than one year's worth of achievement at a given grade level. These are schools that get results beyond what their demographics would have predicted (e.g. Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

When educators trust their leaders and each other, academic achievement rises.

Not coincidentally, students also develop trust and a sense of safety in the school community (LaCour, York, Welner, Valladares, & Kelley, 2017).

Trust, however, doesn't develop on its own. Leaders must engage in practices that build it. But what school leaders *do* to build trust has been something of a mystery.

Two decades ago, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) wrote about what they called the "black box" of teaching practices in their work on the need for formative assessment. Their point was to reveal the hidden details of what made formative assessment effective. A similar black box obscures the relationship among trust, adult professional culture, and high-quality teaching and learning that we need to open.

We need to understand what relational trust looks and sounds like when it exists and what effective leaders do to create it.

TRUST IS THE FOUNDATION

Trust gives school leaders the respect and credibility they need for educators to listen to, collaborate with, and follow them. School leaders do not have the range of authority of industry CEOs. CEOs can declare new operating routines and schedules, quickly hire and fire, offer incentives, and give promotions and raises. Principals are also not at the head of a pyramid where supervisors oversee small teams that are easily managed.

Instead, principals are in charge of teachers who mostly work individually and often see themselves as artistic, solo practitioners rather than working side-by-side in teams and being members of an organization. It is no wonder that success as a principal hinges on the ability to unite and focus rather than command and control.

When leaders build trust among their faculty, this trust enables them to advance among faculty members key beliefs that motivate and justify the role of professional learning in schools (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower 2018). Three such key beliefs are:

1. Smart is something you can get. The growth mindset is powerful. We can accelerate the learning of students who are behind. It's my job to get students to believe this and act from that belief. I can learn the tools to do so.
2. The knowledge and skills base for high-expertise teaching is very large. No matter how experienced

I trust you will show me respect by using active listening skills.

or competent I am, I haven't been prepared in significant parts of it. And some items in this knowledge base are more important than others.
3. I can learn more and get better. (I can. I must.)

The first belief gives us a sense of urgency and obligation to reach all students, not just some. The second and third beliefs create a craving to learn more and a rationale for collaboration because of the feeling of "I can't do all this learning alone."

These beliefs generate the drive, humility, confidence, and moral obligation to engage in all the practices we already know successful faculties do. That includes but is not limited to frequent formative assessments, excellent use of data, reteaching to students who don't get it the first time around, deep collaboration, a rigorous curriculum, and the relentless pursuit of learning for *all* students.

Staff members won't be willing to

do all these things unless they trust that they should, that they can, and that they can get results. They also need to believe it will be safe to learn these practices and make mistakes along the way.

TRUST THAT … WHAT?

One of the things missing from the trust literature is this: Educators succeed when they trust that … what?

My colleagues and I at Research for Better Teaching often conduct an exercise with school leaders in which we ask them to fill in that sentence. Working in groups, they list what they expect a trusted leader to show. The following list is summarized from the literature (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Covey, 2006; Saphier, 2018) and is our recommendation for a comprehensive operational definition of the layers of trust. Educators who do the exercise mentioned above will usually come up with many of these same items.

1. **I trust that you are <u>competent</u> and can keep the wheels turning by:**
   - Staying on top of essential operations.
   - Handling crises.
2. **I trust that you think I am a <u>worthwhile person</u> because you:**
   - Consistently notice and comment on the things I am doing well.
   - Are interested in my life outside of school.
3. **I trust that you will make it <u>safe</u> for us to make mistakes by:**
   - Making yourself vulnerable.
   - Acknowledging what you don't know and where you need help.
   - Righting wrongs, apologizing, making restitution.
   - Acknowledging mistakes.

- Showing loyalty by giving credit freely, acknowledging others, and not bad-mouthing anyone behind their backs.
- Holding yourself accountable and sharing how you'll communicate how you're doing.
- Being a constant learner with us and visibly so.

4. **I trust that you will be <u>honest,</u> meaning you:**
   - Give me honest feedback about my performance.
   - Talk straight, let people know where you stand, use simple language, call things as they are, and not leave false impressions.
   - Create transparency, err on the side of disclosure.
   - Confront reality, take issues head on, lead courageously in conversations.
   - Clarify expectations, discuss, validate, don't assume they are clear, renegotiate if necessary.
5. **I trust your integrity — that is, that your <u>motives</u> are for the interest of the children, not your own career advancement because you:**
   - Stand up for important values.
   - Keep your moral compass.
   - Maintain urgency for what needs to be done.
   - Keep your promises and follow-through on your commitments.
6. **I trust that you will act <u>courageously</u> by:**
   - Protecting us from initiative overload.
   - Keeping us safe from toxic behavior internally.
7. **I trust that you make <u>legitimate decisions</u> because you:**

- Solicit input.
- Explain how our input was used and why.
- Can set limits and say no.
- Make decisions for the good of the school.

8. **I trust that you will deliver <u>results:</u>**
   - By highlighting small victories.
   - By getting the right things done.
9. **I trust you will show me <u>respect</u> by:**
   - Listening first and not assuming you know what matters most to others.
   - Using active listening skills.
   - Hearing out different points of view.
   - Valuing my time.
   - Having my back.
   - Sharing difficult information because you think I can get better and deserve the chance.
10. **I trust that you will act in a <u>caring and compassionate</u> way by:**
    - Showing kindness in little things.
    - Being generous.
    - Going the extra mile to show consideration to individuals beyond formal requirements.

WHAT DOES TRUST LOOK AND SOUND LIKE?

The list above is, by nature, a set of abstractions. We also conduct an exercise that brings those into concrete focus and thus brings them alive.

We ask participants to take one of these bullet points and write a vignette about something they would see, hear, or experience that would serve as evidence that a leader is embodying that

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element of trust.

These vignettes can become a playbook for any leader who wants to build trust and respect. By that, I mean that the vignettes are imaginary actions or interactions that can then be made real, not imaginary.

Leaders can track their progress in building trust by turning the "trust that … what" list into a rating instrument (e.g. with a scale from 1 to 5 for each statement) and giving staff the opportunity to complete it anonymously.

It's important to explain to them that your ability to build trust is a key variable in generating the kind of adult professional culture that leads to better student results. In the spirit of transparency and trust building, it is also important to share the results with the faculty, perhaps in a histogram format.

When you present to faculty, describe what was surprising, what was pleasing, and what goals you are going to set as a result. Thank them for being honest and pledge to improve where it is needed. By doing that, you have modeled making yourself vulnerable and the first step in being strong (Saphier, n.d.).

All over the country, we see leadership academies and certification programs forming. Most every major city has one for growing its next generation of leaders. What is absent from these programs, however, is a serious study of how leaders make every school a reliable engine for constant improvement of teaching and learning.

That is what will move our public schools forward. To accomplish that, leaders need skills at building strong adult professional culture. We have known for decades what the attributes of strong adult cultures are (see sidebar above). But we have not identified the practices of leaders who were successful in building those strong cultures.

The visible practices of strong

> ### VISIBLE PRACTICES OF A STRONG ADULT PROFESSIONAL CULTURE
>
> **Learning organization**
> 1. Frequent teaching in the presence of other adults.
> 2. Safety to take risks, be vulnerable in front of colleagues.
> 3. Constant learning about high-expertise teaching.
>
> **Teams and data**
> 4. Deep collaboration and deliberate design for interdependent work and joint responsibility for student results.
> 5. Nondefensive self-examination of teaching practice in relation to student results.
> 6. Constant use of data to refocus teaching.
>
> **Passion and press**
> 7. Urgency and press to reach all students and do better for disadvantaged students.
> 8. Commitment to implement "Smart is something you can get" in classroom practice, class structures, and school policies and procedures.
>
> **Humane, caring environment**
> 9. Humane environment of caring, appreciation, and recognition, getting to know one another, traditions we look forward to.
>
> **Critical feedback**
> 10. Demanding and high standards for development toward high-expertise teaching for all teachers.
> 11. Honest, open communication and the ability to have difficult conversations.
> 12. Environment of reflection with habits of mindful inquiry.
>
> **Source:** Saphier, 2018.

culture are the end products. They liberate staff members to collaborate deeply and improve their teaching. But the work to grow these practices is grounded in trust. A leader's ability to build trust is the necessary catalyst for growing that culture. Let's select people who want to do that and give them skills to be successful.

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