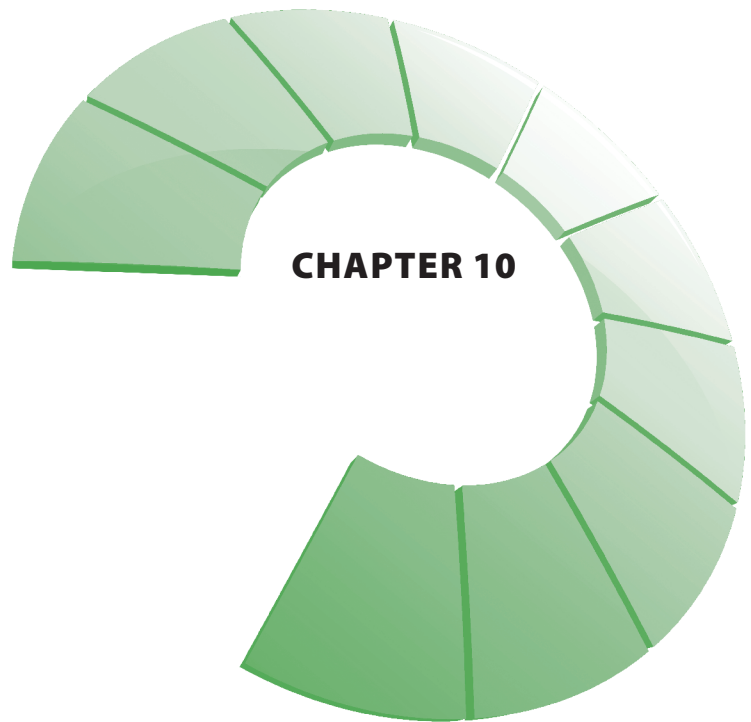


Building trust



WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Our school leaders and leadership teams are confident that leaders are honest, sincere, benevolent, reliable, and competent.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE NO OPINION DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Our district leaders take steps to ensure their trustworthiness by intentionally focusing on honesty, sincerity, competence, reliability, and benevolence.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE NO OPINION DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Our district leaders take seriously the way others view them and recognize how their actions affect themselves and others.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE NO OPINION DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Our district leaders regularly remind themselves of the coherence of body, language, and emotions.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE NO OPINION DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Our district leaders make clear declarations, requests, and offers so staff members know what work is expected and can develop effective strategies to achieve those expectations.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE NO OPINION DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Our district leaders routinely demonstrate the power of presuming positive intentions.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE NO OPINION DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

Although many think of trust as an intangible, effective leaders in learning systems know the importance of taking steps to create the conditions in which trust flourishes. In *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M. R. Covey and Rebecca R. Merrill state that individuals can take steps to increase others' trust and improve the quality of life of those surrounding them, enhancing the results all are able to achieve (2008).

Leaders in learning systems inspire confidence in those around them. They gain others' trust by acting with sincerity, reliability, and competence. Those who trust the leader believe the leader has their best interest at heart, as well as the organization's mission. They believe the leader is honest and straightforward and believe that they can count on what the leader says.

When trust is broken, relationships falter; people become inauthentic, and their chances of working collaboratively decrease. When trust is strong, mutual respect and interdependence flourish, providing the basis for trusting relationships, and staff are more likely to be honest about their problems and more willing to ask for help when they need it.

Learning system leaders use a variety of strategies to gain people's confidence and inspire them to effectively implement innovations. These concepts help leaders build and sustain trust in an organization:

- Leaders demonstrate coherency. They recognize the effect of the coherence of their body, language, and emotions on their relationships.
- Leaders recognize how their actions affect themselves and others.
- Leaders share similar positive characteristics; they are self-aware, honest, sincere, competent, reliable, and presume others' positive intentions.

“There is one thing that is common to every individual relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy, and civilization throughout the world—one thing which if removed will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love. On the other hand, if developed and leveraged, the one thing has the potential to create unparalleled success and prosperity in every dimension of life. Yet it is the least understood, most neglected, and most underestimated possibility of our time. That one thing is trust.”

—S. M. R. Covey with R. Merrill,
2008, p. xxvii

Demonstrate coherency

Learning system leaders are consistently vigilant about the coherence of their own body, language, and emotions and work to deepen that awareness. They recognize the effect of that coherence on their relationships.

When the body is not well, leaders pay attention. Effective leaders recognize that when they are ill, they send powerful—if unintended—messages to others. Their attitude may unintentionally dim,

and others may perceive these emotions as negativity about how the organization is progressing or about work quality. Some leaders say, “I am really good at hiding my emotions,” but science does not support that statement. The majority of what we communicate to others in person is nonverbal. Researchers have gauged anywhere from 60% to 93% of communication is nonverbal.

Leaders understand that the body affects emotions, and the result often is manifested in language. In turn, language affects individuals’ bodies as well as emotions. Some scientists report that emotional distress affects the body in the same way as physical traumas. However, many people recognize the effect of language only at an unconscious level and fail to recognize the connections. The English language is full of statements that reflect a deeper understanding of how body and mind are tightly related: “He was paralyzed with fear.” “She shouted for joy.” “She ripped him to shreds.” “Those words pierced him like an arrow.” Learning system leaders understand that each of us is a complete system, relying on coherence of body, language, and emotion (Psencik, 2011).

Recognize actions’ effects

Integrity and honesty are central to being a learning system leader. An effective leader is who she says she is and does what she says she will do. Those surrounding the leader watch for signs that the leader is honest. Others must believe that the leader is reliable. In today’s fast-paced world, many leaders overcommit. When they fail to follow through, their inaction chips away at trust.

Leaders model sincerity and demonstrate personal integrity by remaining consistent in their words and actions. When working with teams,

leaders in learning systems are intensely aware of how their conversations and others’ comments may hinder a team member’s creativity or learning. When leaders give fake praise or feint telling the truth, others sense the discrepancy. They are sensitive, too, about comments such as, “Well, that is a good idea, but in my experience . . .” or “I understand what you are saying, but we tried that and it never worked!”

Teams unsure of their leader’s integrity in words and actions may adopt a “wait and see” attitude. Seeing that the leader’s words are congruent with the leader’s actions, however, elicits the feeling

Leaders create trust when others see that the leader’s actions are congruent with the leader’s words, eliciting the feeling that the leader is sincere and authentic.

that the leader is sincere and authentic. When team members trust that their leader can achieve what she says she can, they don’t hesitate in their work.

Develop personal qualities

The best leaders are self-aware, honest, sincere, competent, reliable, and presume positive intentions—and actively work to strengthen these qualities. They spend time thinking about who they are and articulating the principles that guide their actions and attitudes (Psencik, 2011). Dennis Sparks (2007) says we become clearer about who we are by clarifying assumptions in writing and by talking with others about these assumptions.

Leaders understand that how they observe the world causes them to create or close off opportunities for themselves and everyone they lead. They recognize how their own observations affect every

interaction, every conversation, and every decision. They guard themselves from limiting opportunities for themselves and others based on their personal perspective or “lens.” Effective leaders ask, “Are my observations of the world limiting opportunities and the possibilities of breakthrough thinking?”

The learning system leader understands the power of intentions. Most people wonder, “Does the person I am working with have the best intentions toward me?” Covey and Merrill (2008) term this idea *benevolence* and say leaders should ask themselves, Am I authentically aware of the needs and interests of those around me, and do I value the contributions they make?

Jim Meehan, British psychologist and poet, puts it this way: “Having spent many years trying to define the essentials of trust, I arrived at the position that if two people could say two things to each other and mean them, then there was the basis for real trust. The two things were ‘I mean you no harm’ and ‘I seek your greatest good’” (Covey with Merrill, 2008, p. 80).

Although engaging more people and perspectives may take more time initially, doing so can help ensure an initiative is implemented successfully.

Skilled leaders establish a culture of respect and personal regard for all when they demonstrate respect and regard for each individual in the school, listen intently to others to identify breakdowns, and work to find common ground. They do so by making clear declarations, requests, and offers. They establish conditions of satisfaction so that staff members know what work is expected and are ready to learn effective strategies to achieve those expectations.

Implications for district leaders

Building trust is challenging. Historically, relationships between district officials and school staff have been distrustful. In fact, recently one school-based facilitator planning a session with central office staff reported that her school staff friends joked she was “going over to the dark side.”

In addition to following the core principles of trust, in all interactions, leaders

- Act transparently and openly;
- Constantly, purposefully reiterate their vision and expectations;
- Model what it means to be purpose driven;
- Seek continuous feedback about the impact of their decisions; and
- Know all principals and teacher leaders personally.

Successful district leaders ensure they discuss potential decisions with those affected before finalizing the decision. This simple principle is a powerful demonstration of the leader’s openness. Group decisions that consider each person’s observations are often better than those made independently by district leaders. Although engaging more people and perspectives may take more time initially, doing so can help ensure an initiative is implemented successfully.

Learning system leaders are “keepers of the vision” and thread the district’s principles, norms, mission, and vision through their conversations with teacher-leaders, principals, parents, and school board members. Each reiteration clarifies the vision and helps those who affect student learning internalize it. With a clear sense of that purpose, leaders are not afraid of feedback and develop systems to gather input from students, parents, community members, and staff. They may host regular community forums for others to share ideas.

Highly successful district leaders see their role as one of service and support. They build relationships with school principals and others so that staff members get to know one another well, support each other, and develop a feeling of community.

A group of principals one of the authors worked with witnessed the concept in a Learning Forward video. The video showed teachers collaborating in a learning team in Ford Middle School in Allen, Texas. The principals' task was to characterize Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning embedded in the team's work. One principal observed that underlying the teachers' learning was a great sense of trust.

"These teachers feel free to lead, to set up classroom observations, to share strategies," the principal said. "There is no principal present, but his support is evident in the freedom they feel to do what is best for students. No one said, 'I don't know if we can do that; we better ask our principal first.'"

Implications for school leaders

School leaders face virtually the same issues as district leaders. The added challenge for school leaders in developing trusting relationships is that so many more interactions occur in schools each day—interactions between the principal and

parents, principal and teachers, teachers and students, and between teachers—and any of these interactions could break down a culture of trust.

Effective principals form strong relationships with staff, students, parents, and district leaders. Staff members want a trusting relationship with the principal and to feel that the principal has the best intentions for them. School leadership teams want trusting relationships with their peers so that they are able to coordinate actions in ways that focus on everyone's learning. Principals want to create trusting relationships with and among teachers so that teachers develop strong relationships with students and their parents. Parents want to trust the principal, teachers, and other staff so they feel confident the school cares about their children and has their best interests at heart. Students want to know the principal well and to feel that they can count on him or her. Most important, students want to feel safe in their classrooms with their teachers, which is most likely when the relationship is built on high levels of trust.

In a learning system, effective school leaders start to build trust when they take steps to ensure that the school's work aligns with the district's goals and vision. They model respect for all those responsible for meeting the district's goals and achieving that vision. They seek feedback from those they serve to ensure staff members have the confidence to learn. Because they are in a dynamic relationship with the staff, feedback flows freely within the school and with district leaders, ensuring transparency and openness.

Trust serves as the connective tissue that allows teachers to question current practices, take risks, and try new strategies, because they are confident their leader supports and encourages their creativity and innovation as they work to achieve their goals.

Trusted leaders create learning organizations

I had a friend say to me once that after your first seven years as a leader you really have to leave because you've done everything you came to do and everything you know how to do. That's the old paradigm, in which the leader came in as the change agent with specific skills and traits.

Now, leadership is about creating learning organizations. It's about being the lead learner who helps move the organization toward new places even when you're not quite sure where you're going because you don't have that skill set yet. Nevertheless, you work alongside everybody to develop and move forward.

Leaders need some longevity to be able to achieve goals that result in meaningful change. Leading a district to become high performing takes building staff members' trust and their confidence in the leader's integrity. It also requires the leader's coherence. When I look at why I've been able to sustain my work as superintendent for 15 years in my district, it has been because of the relationships I've built. Because of my relationships, when I say to staff, "Trust me on this," they're more likely to do so, and to give me some latitude. If you're not in relationship, then people question your motives.

You have to *demonstrate* competence and character. Staff have to know that you'll hold true to your promises, and leaders need to realize that everything we say to people, in their minds, is a promise. I constantly need to ask myself, "Did I follow through on what I said I would do?"

The little things that a leader does matter a lot. If the little things aren't in line, then the big things won't be in line. Leadership requires taking an

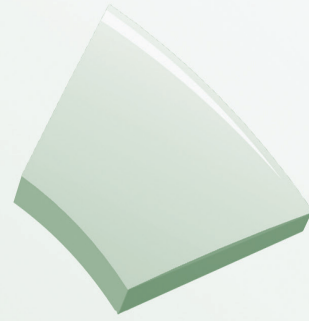
interest in people. I know everybody who works here by name, and I usually know their spouses' names. We have 1,600 students and 300 staff, so knowing everybody's name and being pleasant and spending a couple minutes with everybody at some time isn't hard. If I'm in a large, urban environment, I can't do that, but I'll have other people who are able to do that and break the system down into smaller pieces.

Every year, most districts turn over 8% to 12% of staff, and so leaders constantly have to build new relationships. I've taught administrators that when we interview candidates, we have to try to get them all to fall in love with us because we're going to hire some of them and we want them to love us before they start. We have to be humanistic and thought provoking, and convince candidates we're going to feed their personal as well as intellectual needs. When we do our new teacher training, I'm usually teaching them for five days. I want them to see my instructional capabilities so that when I talk about instruction, they know I know what I'm talking about. And it's also about spending time with them. I go into their classrooms before school opens and ask if I can help set up their rooms and if they have everything they need to start the year. Taking that interest in new staff builds relationships.

When we care about each other, we do more for each other. As that old adage goes: "People don't care what you know until they know that you care." That's true in any learning organization.

— Mike Ford, superintendent
Phelps–Clifton Springs (N.Y.)
Central School District

Reflection questions



- How do members of our district leadership team intentionally focus on and build trusting relationships?
- What strategies or protocols do district leaders use to ensure transparency?
- In what ways do I, as a leader, reflect on how well I am exhibiting the qualities of self-awareness, honesty, sincerity, competence, and reliability?
- Do I keep at the forefront the idea of presuming positive intentions?
- How well do the leaders in our district demonstrate personal integrity?
- What are some examples in our district of someone acting with coherence of body, mind, and spirit?