



Rapport-building skills

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Bridging the divide – the importance of rapport-building skills for managers

John Crawley has been advising companies on trust-building and conflict management for the past 17 years. Here, he draws on his experience to highlight the importance of rapport-building competencies in effective people management.

In the UK, I believe there is a significant problem with trust associated with our political, social and commercial leaders. The general public are no longer compliant or impressed simply by rank, status or class. They judge leaders on outcomes, and attribute blame upwards for the slightest perceived decline in their own welfare. Life is becoming more complex, expectations are rising and outcomes are more difficult to deliver. Yesterday's promises are rendered today's failures by the pace of change. Leaders are under much more scrutiny

from the media, who spotlight failure and vilify those perceived to be straying beyond protocols of appropriate behaviour. People expect high standards from their leaders, even if they do not adhere to those standards themselves.

Managers are not immune to this trust divide. Trust is a dynamic not a static element in working life. It is neither automatically given nor earned by following of premeditated moves. The ability to build and





Rapport-building skills

sustain rapport is critical to effective trust-building, and effective management in general, yet it scarcely merits a mention in most managerial competencies.

WHY IS TRUST IMPORTANT FOR MANAGERS?

Trust enables us to communicate effectively, work together, understand and work within the boundaries around our world. Managers need trust from peers and from their bosses so that they can be left to do their job, work in partnership with others, and achieve organisational and individual goals. Managers who build trust with their teams will find that people are open to their ideas, and can connect with their manager and colleagues on some level. They will be more tolerant of disagreements, and more inclined to put their own needs on hold if it might service the greater good. Trust is the forerunner of partnership, and enables appropriate managerial authority and control.

ADDRESSING PARTICULAR DIFFICULTIES WITH TRUST

1. **Trust is a subjective commodity:** We have an inbred ambivalence about trust. We need to trust others as potential friends, allies and partners who can help us achieve our goals, do things for us that we cannot do ourselves, love us, support us and enlarge our scope. Our instincts also stimulate mistrust of others as possible threats; people who may steal our resources, attack us for our territory and misuse our goodwill. Cultural and historical factors also affect trust, and we each accumulate a highly personalised in-built bank of data that we turn to when we decide whom to trust and why.

The answer is not to find the key to unlock each staff member's trust code, but to develop a range of behaviours that are generally seen to engender trust, and avoid those that are generally seen to damage it. My colleagues and I regularly compile lists of such behaviours on training courses, and recently one group produced the two lists shown in table 1. This is a useful exercise to do with your team, or your colleagues.

2. **Flattening hierarchies invites leaders to go for the popular vote:** Building trust is not about finding the common touch – such as appearing in a reality show, or wearing a baseball cap back to front. There is a massive temptation for modern managers to “peer down” – adopt the attributes and behaviours of their team in order to win them over. Managers need to appreciate that there is a range of situations in the

workplace that require different levels of rapport. Sometimes, managers need to direct in a parental way through experience and good judgment. Other situations involve sharing experience with mutual respect and deference, and the manager needs to know how to facilitate and coach. The ability to move in and out of these various states of rapport without losing integrity is critical for managers.

3. **“Them and us” is a difficult bridge to cross:** Despite the lessening of the grip of class, notions of rank and status persist in UK society and still cause divides in the workplace. When resolving long-standing disputes, our team of mediators regularly comes upon “us and them think” between managers and staff, those who have been around a long time and newcomers, between female and male, black and white. This is natural and will never change as long as we cultivate individualism and mistrust of others who are different. Managers need to develop an interest and empathy in other groups' views and positions, not reject or naturally oppose them. Understanding is the key to bridging the us-and-them divide. Impartiality is an undervalued managerial trait, but it informs communication and listening because taking sides always denies us part of the story, part of the information we need to make others effective. Consultation and listening skills are important. Managing the expectation divide is also made easier if a manager develops the art of making sense of what is needed, explaining and building commitment to different ideas and practices.

4. **Following fashion or fashioning our own style:** Fashion can camouflage or enhance character. Management styles come and go, as do the structures and processes that contextualise and condition the managerial experience. People who would have been cited as great listeners in 1914 would not necessarily suit our leadership expectations today. Negative and positive exemplars in our society are often produced and destroyed by an undemocratic media. Effective managers should not consign themselves to the dustbin in the face of new trends and gurus. Excellent managers who can build trust are capable role players and have diverse resources, but their versatility is underpinned by a strong sense of purpose and an ability to engage with the world from a personal position of power, authority and confidence. Managerial trust is based on honesty and consistency, and is enhanced by appropriate and congruent versatility and a commitment to add value to innate abilities.

5. **Trust and change:** Trust is difficult to establish and sustain in a time of rapid change. Much of this change is not signposted and is



Rapport-building skills

externally induced. Most managers are intermediaries in the change process, not initiators. They will often have to deliver difficult messages at times of change, but they will be able to maintain trust if they use the “three Es” ©:

- Explore and acknowledge people’s concerns about change.
- Explain what is needed and what is different in an accessible and realistic way.
- Encourage people to engage with change rather than fight it.

The transition from one manager to another is often a critical time in terms of working relationships, but very little attention is paid to this as it is happening. Many serious conflicts that my colleagues and I encounter began when a previous manager “who just let us get on with things” was replaced by a manager who “only ever talked to us when we got something wrong”. New managers should aim to achieve transition through consensus, by building commitment to new methods, and being transparent about any new management styles they are bringing with them.

6. Rebuilding trust – conflict management and dispute resolution: Unresolved disputes at work damage trust between employees, and if they are not handled well by managers they can undermine staff confidence and motivation. The *Conflict at work* survey in 2005 revealed that 45% of managers surveyed by executive education provider Roffey Park believed that conflict had increased at work. More than half of the 735 respondents – 57% – said that their organisation’s main method of dealing with conflict was “avoiding it”, while 20% cited “bullying” as the main method of conflict resolution.

More progressive organisations are introducing mediation-style techniques to resolve conflict at source. Internal specialists are trained to provide an internal pool of mediators, so that disputes can be resolved in a way that not only solves problems, but rebuilds relationships. More managers are also being trained in mediation skills, and can listen well, remain impartial and facilitate improvements in working relationships. The following skills can contribute significantly to building trust with employees:

1. Behaviours that affect trust

Behaviours generally contributing to trust	Behaviours generally damaging to trust
Consistency	Blame
Responding skills	Undermining
Empathy	Leaking confidences
Decision-making ability	Looking after favourites
Integrity	Yo-yoing inconsistencies
Building skills and confidence in others	Insincerity
Inspirational enthusiasm	Nit-picking nastiness
Listening skills	Getting at people
Intuition	
Toughness	
The ability ask the right questions and look for the reasons behind actions	

1. Reflective listening
2. Rapport-building
3. Impartiality
4. Facilitation skills
5. Win-win problem-solving
6. Defusing skills
7. Assertiveness
8. Influence and persuasion skills
9. Transparency – signposting, getting live feedback
10. Process skills – structure, consistency, taking a step-by-step approach

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