

Trust

The memory I had of nurses when I was in kindergarden was painful. I was either sick when I saw one or was going to get a shot. There were no “in-between” visits, no social calls.

I remember once having a childhood physical and the doctor ordered a shot. The nurse stretched down my undershorts to expose my hip. Then I felt immense pain. But it didn't take long before it stopped, because the nurse had stopped trying to push in the needle. She explained to me that I was tightening up my butt so much, she couldn't get the needle in! We were probably going to be there all day unless I relaxed.

She told me to look at the pictures on the wall. She told me it wouldn't hurt. She was right; looking at the pictures didn't hurt. She assured me she would let me know when she was going to try to give me the shot again. So I stood there, bent over with my butt hanging out for what seemed like eternity. I carefully studied the handful of old pictures on the wall of the examination room.

Then, unannounced, she came back and nailed me. That lying, stealth nurse. She didn't tell me it was coming, like she had promised. She hadn't knocked on the door. She must have “tip toed” in while I was concentrating on the pictures. While it got the immediate job done, it did have a lasting impression on me.

So when, a few weeks later, I was sent to see the school nurse, I didn't quite know what to expect. But I certainly wasn't thrilled. She didn't seem to be all that different. She wore the same uniform and the same hat. She immediately recognized my apprehension. She told me it wouldn't hurt. Yeah, I'd heard that one before. She explained the test she was going to give me. She gave it to me “step-by-step.” It was a

hearing test and I was to wear heavy, black earphones and tell her when I heard small beeps and in which ear I heard them. She took the time to explain the equipment she was going to use and how the test worked.

She told me that if I didn't pass the test, they would make sure I sat closer to the teacher and she would give me special attention. She also told me that if I didn't pass the test, I would need to see some doctors. I asked her if that would hurt and she told me she didn't know. She was honest with me. Then she said, "This is just a test we are giving every kindergartener. I don't expect any of you to fail."

"Okay," I said. We proceeded with the test.

A lifetime of trust can disappear with the wrong step. Trust is about keeping first things first. It is about reassuring people of the steps that need to be followed and why--even the steps that may be painful or difficult.

It is amplified with B2B. The crash of the "dot-coms" should be a lesson in trust to all of us. We trusted others and optimism, when we should have been looking at fundamentals. When companies were bleeding resources profusely, we should have questioned their ability to stand on their own. In fact, speculators propped them up and we didn't want to see that as a red flag. They weren't realizing profit on the immediate horizon, while telling us of their glorious business model that would provide spectacular returns in the not-too-distant future. We still didn't see the red flags.

They confused customer payment with investment capital. They thought these monies coming in to their companies were the same thing, when they should have been writing them down on opposing sides of the ledger. And we bought it: Shame on us.

They asked us to trust them, and they hadn't earned our trust. We pay for our mistakes. They'd best not try that again.

The feeling of trust (or mistrust) is transferable. We all have been in the situation where a colleague has promised something to a customer and never delivered. Then when we meet the customer, we are expected to not only explain the other person's behavior, but also "pick up the pieces."

This happens all too frequently in business. We are all busy. We all get preoccupied. When we are with the customer, we write actions down on our "to do list"

or place 3M Post-its™ all over the edge of our computer screens. Those “notes” come with the good intentions of following up on that product return that should have been credited by now, or creating that special extract, or setting up that “uncomfortable” meeting with the management team.

We have left the customer with the impression that we would follow through on something. We view it as just another task of uncertain importance; they view it as a commitment.

So when the note falls off the computer screen and we cannot read our writing any longer, or it gets passed over to the IS department and placed on the stack of a zillion other things to get to “some day,” or gets tossed out in the despair of ever getting caught up, we have actually betrayed a trust.

I wish I could count the number of times I have walked into a customer site to explain a new B2B feature and was handed a task like this, which I consider outside of “my realm.”

Whether you want it or not-- “Tag, you’re it!”

It has now become your job to get it done and to satisfy the customer. It is your job to follow through to completion. This is not just calling Bob to see if he has done something; this is calling Bob, facilitating the completion, and going over Bob’s head if necessary. Doing “whatever it takes” and then closing the loop with the customer.

Trust is transferable. Mistrust is transferable. Our trading partners believe we come out of the same training school (and to some degree we do). They believe it is not just Bob who has failed; it is your whole company that has failed. If Bob can’t get it done, why should Duane be able to get it done?

Trust can be spent, either intentionally or unintentionally. Others can spend it in your company on your behalf, such as your boss. If you make a commitment to attend a function or make a speech and your boss takes away money for the travel budget, for example, he has jeopardized your relationship. He has spent “trust” on your behalf. For a while you can no longer be trusted to make certain commitments. You now may need to qualify your commitments. You now have baggage to take on your journey with trading partners. That can be a heavy load.

With B2B we bring a new agenda to the table, but we also bring with it our track record as a company and as individuals. We are in the daily battle of proving ourselves.

Trust is not a “sometime” thing. We need to demonstrate consistency in our B2B dealings. When trust is lost, we need to understand what caused it to be lost. We need to face the failure in a forthright fashion and rectify the situation, where possible. This means getting down to the root cause and taking corrective action to permanently monitor and prevent its repeated occurrence.

You need to think of B2B as not only a better way of handling transactions, but also establishing a better relationship with your trading partners. Maybe you cannot (or even should not) deal with how things have been handled in the past. But you certainly have control and responsibility over the future.

A large part of reestablishing or, for that matter, establishing trust is communication. We have to tell people what is going to happen. We have to reassure people (in and out of our organizations) of the steps that need to be followed. We need to be clear about the uncertainties we have and how we may be mitigating risk. We need to facilitate communication (in multiple directions) to the point of over communication.

Trust must be demonstrated. Praise others for their trustworthiness. Acknowledge it when you observe it in others. But be cautious about expounding your own trustworthiness. Why? Trustworthiness is a perceived value. What is important is how others judge us, not how we judge ourselves. A simple misunderstanding can have long-term impacts. It can be perceived as a failure of trust when it really should not be. Regardless of whether or not it is a failure of trust, the resolution is the same—communication, driving down to the root cause, resolution, restoration, and reconciliation.

Trust is something that has to be nurtured. In our busy lives we tend to get distracted. We put off making that phone call or writing that note to the customer. Once it is put off, it becomes increasingly difficult to get it back to the top of the priority list.

I used to set aside one day every other week to call customers. I had over 80 customers with whom I was implementing an EDI solution. I wanted to communicate: encourage, check status, cajole, thank, or just say “hi.” It was brutal.

There were lots of returned calls and messages. There was lots of catching people at the wrong time. Plus a good deal of “follow-up” work slithered back onto my plate. But two weeks later, come “hell or high water,” they received another call from me.

It got easier for me and for my customers over time. They probably didn’t know I was calling the whole market, but they did know I was going to be persistent with them. They knew I wasn’t going to take up their valuable time (but they probably didn’t know why-- that I had 79 other calls to make). They learned I couldn’t escape completing all those follow-up activities that resulted from earlier calls. They learned they could not either. They learned to trust me. Not just that I would communicate with them again soon, but that I would report my lack of progress, my confusions and my failures as well. They learned to trust that I was a man of my word, and when I had let them down once, they knew I would redouble my efforts to get it right the second time.

It is far easier to nurture a relationship than to reestablish one. But it needs and deserves our full attention. This is the hard work behind B2B.

In B2B, we need to consider trust a “high calling.” Most of us never intentionally try to be untrustworthy. It isn’t our nature or our character. We like a view of ourselves as people upon whom others can depend.

We have a view of the business world where trust is only important some of the time. It is only important when it serves a specific purpose. In B2B, however, trust is important all the time. By nature, B2B engages other companies. We rely on other companies for our success. We cannot do it alone.

We also live in a time when technology options abound. These two factors, taken together, help us understand that we need to mutually agree upon our path forward, timing, and resources. We need to implement with both the tools and the people with whom we are comfortable. One company can take the lead, but others need to be in full agreement.

Sometimes there need to be incentives to get others to invest. But at the foundation there needs to be agreement and commitment to do the work together. We might be able to get others to do their part once by threat or sheer force, but that fails

over time. Certainly they would not seek us out the next time, if an interesting business opportunity came along.

Real trust, however, prevails. When we have successfully taken others through a project, when we have demonstrated commitment and built trust, then the next time we propose a project, everything goes much easier and faster.

Trust is built. Trust is earned. There is no easy path, no magic formula. Not only is it hard work, it has to be consistently applied. We have to make it a top priority.

Trust dies but mistrust blossoms. - Sophocles (497-405 B.C.)



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