

What Have We Learned About Trust From Recent Experiences With Teaming and Empowerment?

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Introduction

Employee work teams exist within the larger framework of an organisation's overall work system, and therefore, any discussion of trust and teams must reflect this context. In fact, trust is at the core of the assumptions about people which organisations make when designing their work systems. One need look no further than the Tayloristic work designs that have dominated the industrial landscape from the turn of the century until today to recognise the implied distrust embedded in such work designs. These workplaces which focus on control and compliance (timedocks little or no sharing of information, low supervisor-to-employee ratios, task level management), operate on the assumption that people cannot be trusted, and this lack of trust breeds non-trustworthy behaviors in return. Those organisations that assume that people are not trustworthy and that implement policies and procedures which communicate this distrust should not be surprised if they "reap what they sow."

In unionised organisations, trust assumptions are also deeply embedded in how labor and management interact to negotiate agreements and to solve problems. In many "traditional" organisations, lack of trust prevents these parties from having an open, honest discussion of issues and interests. Instead, the lack of trust leads the parties to exaggerate circumstances, withhold information and engage in an elaborate series of bluffs and counter bluffs. To the extent that the parties distort, dissemble, and deceive (if not outright lie to each other), it is fairly obvious that such behaviour will yield high levels of mutual distrust.

As a result, many negotiations defer, or fail to address, issues of significant importance, settling instead for very modest agreements (not to be confused with solutions). As most practitioners recognise, the process is so rife with distrust, that often even these modest agreements are reached only after off-line discussions held at the eleventh hour.

It is within this context, then, that we need to consider what we have learned about trust from recent experiences with teaming and empowerment. Not surprisingly, the most important lesson learned is that it is essential that the trust values communicated in the formation of teams and in the empowerment of employees be consistently displayed through the design of the remaining organisational sub systems and processes. Lack of consistency, or "mixed messages" concerning the degree to which employees are trusted will quickly lead to conflict within the work system and an erosion of any trust and goodwill generated by attempts to empower employees. 1

Information

As noted above, one of the essential elements of a team-based work system, which has a major impact on trust, is access to information. It is not that the need for information does not exist in traditional organisations; rather, as we start to ask people to become more involved in the management of the enterprise—to take on more accountability—we need to give the proper tools to them. One of these tools is information.

Unfortunately, what we often find are organisations which say to employees, "you are now empowered," but yet these same organisations are reluctant to give people access to the information they need to act in an empowered manner. One of the fundamental strengths of an effective work team is that people have an opportunity to look at the same business information as their managers. Interestingly enough, when this identity of access to information occurs, team members usually reach similar conclusions as those reached by management. You hear people say that they "didn't realise the competitive situation" or "didn't grasp the impact of specific operational issues." By having similar data, team members can participate as equals in business discussions.

Business Understanding

To the extent that people do have information, their access aids and abets trust. And many organisations do try very hard to share business information. They post data on the walls of the workplace. They show a lot of overheads. Or someone from corporate headquarters visits periodically to run through a multitude of charts. These organisations think "This is great. We are sharing business information." Simply having information, however, is not enough to build trust. If people have no idea what the data mean, then the entire effort to communicate can backfire and cause trust to erode, because people think management is trying to somehow deceive them with fancy charts. What we really are talking about then, is *information-understanding* as much as information-sharing. To use a sports analogy: People must understand the rules of the game they are playing; they also must comprehend specific strategies and the implications of events as the game unfolds. This latter knowledge helps them understand what it is they need to be doing and thinking about as they conduct their business.

If organisations really mean to “empower” teams, they have to be willing to trust people and to treat them as partners in the business. It is hard to be a responsible partner unless one has the ability to understand the economics of the business. Since trust tends to be more of a continuum, as opposed to a gate that is open and closed, where a firm’s employees are along the continuum very much depends upon the degree to which information is shared and people understand it.

It should be said, in management’s defense, that the problem often is not that management withholds information because it actively and wilfully mistrusts other members of the firm; rather, the very existence of an information vacuum can lead to perceptions of mistrust. Fair or not, people will refer situations back to “mental tapes that relate to a more traditional environment, one in which the union management relationship was predicated upon adversarialism, where information was withheld or manipulated, and where mistrust was a guaranteed by-product. In the early stages of the move from a traditional system to a team-based system, many employees typically are looking for reasons to confirm their suspicions that this transition is just another elaborate ruse to con them into doing more for less.

Management Roles

Management roles are crucial to any discussion of teams and trust. What we have seen is that as you move to team-based systems you shift first-line management into coaching types of roles. This shift brings team members in closer contact with individuals in management and support functions. This increased interaction helps teams get to know these management and support people beyond their job description. It creates more personal relationships, and it gives people opportunities to start to develop a better understanding of each other’s tasks and challenges, which in turn, breeds higher levels of trust.

Due Process

Any system that wants to build trust needs to have some form of due process. In unionised environments, this due process is a formal component of the relationship. This formal due process is one of the distinctions between union and non-union environments. Whether it is a grievance system or whether it is a governance system where the two parties work together to address interests, such a system provides the ability to have a structured conversation between equals. Like society at large, organisations are susceptible to scapegoating. The ability of teams and empowered work organisations to have due process systems, particularly interest-based systems, tends to help breed trust.

Organisation Design

Team-based systems imply that employees are trusted to manage some discrete piece of the business. Frequently, however, in the early stages of setting up team-based structures, you will see that both unions and management are hesitant to vest a great deal of power in work teams. Nor are they totally comfortable moving to non-traditional design elements such as variable pay, skill-based pay, self-management, etc. They are, however, willing to take some of the first steps. Over time what you see starting to happen is that as both union and management do what they say, and walk the talk, there is more willingness to be creative—to “open up” the design, and to push power and accountability deeper into the organisation. To the extent, however, that over time the parties fail to do what they say, trust erodes and these systems close up. One is left with organisations that have retreated back to their traditional behaviours behind a window dressing that says “team work.”

Final Thoughts

Based upon the experience of the last decade, it is clear that teaming and empowerment can lead to higher levels of trust and higher performance when pursued within a broader organisation strategy which addresses all aspects of the work system. In terms of unions and management, the trust issue becomes: “Is this type of work environment one that will lead to each of us getting our interests met?” At the start, someone has to take some risks, and generally, management needs to take the first risk. Both parties, however, have to recognise that they may be “burned” a few times. Ultimately, leaders have to be careful not to hold the entire teaming and empowerment process hostage to every incident in which they perceive some slight. If they continually assume ill will, the result is a constant search for data to “prove” that they knew all along that the “other party could not be trusted.”

In the final analysis, trust is based on observed behaviour over time. That this point is not always recognised is illustrated by a recent discussion with a human resources manager. This human resources manager described to me a discussion he had with his boss, during which he was told, “I want you to get the plant manager together with the union representative and the vice president and I want you to have a trust-building meeting.” Needless to say, the client was a bit perplexed by the request. There is still a sense (and I think management owns more of this than labor) that if we get people together and we say, “Trust us,” then we can ask for trust as opposed to earning trust. Furthermore, many organisations say, “We are not ready to go further in promoting teaming and empowerment; we do not have the necessary trust.” These organisations see trust as a necessary precondition, when in reality, trust becomes a by-product of teaming and empowerment. In empowered work organisations, trustworthy behaviors create the opportunity to continue to move the relationship forward along the trust continuum.

Notes

1. For example, implementing “empowered” work teams within an environment in which information is not shared, employees are not educated about the business, or there are insufficient mechanisms to resolve disputes in an interest-based manner.

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