

The Trust Factor

Trust is the single greatest factor driving successful client relationships.

Who do you trust? What is their role in your personal or professional network? How influential are they in your decision making? How important are your relationships with your most trusted friends and colleagues? How do those relationships compare to those you are just beginning to build trust with or those who have violated your trust? Now, turn it around. Who trusts you? The answer to this question is a good measure of how well your net “works.”

In previous posts we’ve established that a) network connections are only as strong as the communication between two networked individuals is effective; and b) messages, which differentiate, offer context and are authentic, are most effective in creating meaningful communication.

Now let’s put the icing on the cake and understand what makes certain members of a network more influential and indispensable than others. The answer is one of the most basic components of interpersonal relationships: trust.

Relationships in which trust is present are the strongest and therefore most resilient. Whether it is an economic downturn or a difficult business situation on the table, when the going gets tough a trusted advisor is often the first call on the list.

A “trusted advisor” is an individual considered trustworthy of sharing our visions, dreams, fears and frustrations. Trust is a topic of so much power and influence that authors David H. Maister, Charles H. Green and Robert M. Galford have written an entire book on the subject. The details they outline are well worth the read. In the interim here’s a taste of the overall philosophy.

Trust typically is created at the individual level, between people, and usually in conversations that display three major trust factors: honesty, selflessness and integrity. Trust is earned over time and through the course of many conversations and interactions, during which we consciously and unconsciously determine a person’s trustworthiness. There are four factors that play into the measure of trustworthiness. They are credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation.

Credibility is determined by the words we speak. In a sentence, we might say, “I can trust what she says about intellectual property; she is very credible on the subject.”

Reliability has to do with our actions. We might say, for example, “If he says he’ll deliver the product tomorrow, I trust him, because he’s dependable.”

Intimacy refers to the safety or security that we feel when entrusting someone with something. We might say, “I can trust her with that information; she’s never violated my confidentiality before, and she would never embarrass me.”

Self-orientation refers to the focus of the person in question. It’s all about whether the person’s focus is primarily on themselves or on the other person. We might say, “I can’t trust him on this—I don’t believe that he cares enough about me, he’s just focused on what he’ll get out of the deal.” Or more commonly, “I don’t trust her—she’s too concerned about how she’s appearing, and not really paying attention to me or my needs.”

So, if you’re thinking about how to build trust, think about these statements and how your actions and reputation align with these factors. At the end of the day, people trust other people, not institutions or companies. You’re never selling the products and/or services of your company without also selling yourself. The components of credibility and reliability are sometimes used to describe companies, but at least as often are used to describe people. Conversely, intimacy and self-orientation are almost entirely about people.

This is where your personal brand and reputation come into play to stand alongside the image of the company you represent. What’s your personal brand? What do you stand for?

Think also about how trust can expand your network. If a trusted advisor recommends someone they trust, don’t you also trust them more and more quickly than a referral from another source?

In a world that is increasingly connected, but also increasingly impersonal, the role of trusted relationships is ever more critical. Without trust, you’re left to compete like a commodity on features and price — along with everyone else.