

How inclusive leaders can instill trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

During this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, how can leaders maintain the motivation and productivity of employees worried about their health and financial security, and whose personal and work routines have been upended?

One vital way is by instilling trust – a component of what it takes to be an inclusive leader based on our research on inclusive leadership. That’s because employees feel greater assurance and safety with leaders who are instilled with a sense that their leader can be trusted.

So, how can a leader earn greater trust from employees? According to this research, others must ascribe four qualities to a person to consider them trustworthy. We call these the “4 Elements of Trust.” Here are each of the elements and examples that illustrate them.

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Competence – produce results. A leader can show competence early in a challenge with an inspiring vision of what they want to achieve

and a path that gives a reason to believe the vision will be achieved. The CEO at a cargo transportation company that retired much of its fleet to survive the economic downturn has inspired employees with a vision to explore ways to use technology now for coming back even stronger in five months. The path need not be detailed, especially at first – complicated situations call for careful consideration rather than hasty action. As the situation evolves, the leader’s competence will also be judged by their ability to flex their management approach. That’s because a collaborative approach is more effective to construct well-thought plans early, but a more directive approach is more effective to show employees what needs to be implemented once direction is clearer.

Reliability – perform in a consistent and predictable manner. The trust in a leader’s competence will not last if that competence is inconsistent. Leaders can be seen as reliable by showing that they relentlessly follow-up on promises and are aligned with other leaders on messaging. Frequent updates to employees are helpful for this. Leaders can also remind



employees of the elements of the company that are enduring and therefore the guiding compass, such as its values, mission, or the social purpose it supports. Leadership at a major telecommunications firm is showing that the company will continue to support the community and economy rather than prioritizing the bottom-line during the downturn. It is providing free Wi-Fi services to cash-strapped students and businesses, and accommodating delayed or missed payments, so studies and business can continue.

Openness – provide authentic information, and willingly be open to being influenced. Frequent communication should also be authentic to help employees feel that nothing is being hidden from them that is germane to their well-being. Authenticity comes through when the leader shares personal anecdotes, concerns, and doubts. These impart trustworthiness because the leader is willing to be vulnerable for the sake of others. Conversely, leaders must avoid making communication one-way. Actively seeking employee input, acknowledging it, and using it helps to lessen the powerlessness that employees may feel during a crisis. Several CEOs leading the essential workforce in the logistics and supply chain sector are skipping the hierarchy and showing up at warehouses and docks every day, vulnerable and relatable, to openly connect with a broader range of employees. One CEO even shows up to work every day with his dog.

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Support – address the needs and interests of others. Being open to others enables the leader to have insight into how to better support others' needs. Support can take many forms, such as material resources (equipment to make work-from-home easier), revised procedures (flexible work schedules), intangibles (wellness education), and so on. One company has set up a fund to assist employees who are furloughed while stores are closed, and another grants employees weekly gift cards for local carry-out food. Perhaps the most important support leaders can provide, however, is emotional support by empathizing with what employees are going through, and showing that the leader likewise shares those concerns and is working to address them on everyone's behalf.

Although some may think that it seems a bit manipulative for a leader to generate trust purposefully, the 4 Elements require that it be done authentically. Inclusive leaders must be transparent, vulnerable and act with employees' best interests in mind for actual and lasting trust to result.



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