

Getting Them to Trust You



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By Rob Jenkins | JULY 18, 2017

Years ago, when I was a basketball coach at a small college, I would talk with other coaches about our version of the classic Machiavellian dilemma: Was it better, we wondered, for our players to like or respect us? I generally came down on the side of respect.

After I left coaching to become an academic administrator, I faced the same question in leading and supervising faculty members. At first I thought that maybe it was better to be liked by your colleagues than respected, but I soon figured out that the correct answer was "neither."

The most important thing, by far, was for faculty members to trust me. Everything else was secondary.

It's difficult to earn the faculty's trust — and it most definitely must be earned. I've known new leaders who came in the door admonishing dubious and sometimes jaded professors, "You've just got to trust me." But why should we? First let's see what you do, and then we'll decide if you're worthy of our trust.

As an administrator, you can do two things to win over your faculty: (1) Be trustworthy yourself; and (2) exhibit trust in others. I'll tackle the second of those in next month's column. Now here are some ways that leaders can establish a reputation for trustworthiness.

Tell the truth. And tell it in every situation, insofar as you are able. It sounds so simple, yet telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth can be anything but.

Even administrators who are normally honest are constantly tempted to hedge a bit or color the truth, often because they don't want to look bad in front of colleagues. So they use traffic as an excuse for why they're late to a meeting, when the truth is they lost track of time. Or they say they never received an email that they actually just neglected to read. Small lies, yes, but they chip away at your character and good name.

One way to avoid such lies is to get to the meeting on time and read all those emails. Knowing that the alternative requires admitting culpability can be a powerful motivator. But when you do screw up — as we all do — people are more likely to trust you if you admit it. (Of course, that admission won't help you build trust if the mistake has become a habit.)

Another reason we sometimes lie, as leaders, is that we don't want people to dislike us or be angry at us. So we fudge a little, or sugarcoat the truth, in an attempt to make a less than ideal situation seem rosier than it is. That strategy nearly always backfires, for once people do learn the truth — and they will — they're bound to be even angrier, knowing you kept it from them. What's more, you've weakened their trust in your leadership.

But notice the qualifier: You must tell the truth "insofar as you are able." Sometimes, as a leader, you simply don't know the truth. In that case, you've got to acknowledge as much, even if you fear it will make you seem weak. That's better than pretending you know something you don't — which, again, is bound to backfire. And at other times, you have been entrusted with information that is not yours to disclose. Being truthful in those moments means stating that you're not at liberty to talk about a particular topic. Which brings me to my next point.

Keep confidences. One of the best ways to earn people's trust is to make it clear that their private information is safe with you. As an administrator, you have access to a great deal of data about people — addresses, phone numbers, salaries. Much of the information may be available on the internet, but that does not give you license to broadcast it. Nobody trusts a blabbermouth.

Faculty members will occasionally come to you privately, seeking your advice or perhaps just an ear. Sometimes they might want to gossip about or criticize colleagues — and you should shut that down quickly. Most of the time, however, they just want to talk about themselves: their hopes, fears, and anxieties, or whatever they happen to be going through at that moment.

Most of the time you can, and should, keep their disclosures to yourself. If a faculty member confides that she's fighting breast cancer, you definitely keep that secret. At some point, you may advise her to let her friends and colleagues know what's going on, but that information is not yours to divulge.

Some confidences, though, you cannot keep. If a faculty member lets slip that he's been having an affair with a student — well, no, you can't keep that "just between us." Obviously, for the good of the student, the department, and the institution, you have to report it. Being trustworthy, in that case, means that people know you can be trusted to do the right thing.

Follow through. The older I get, the more I'm convinced that one of the rarest things in the world is for people to actually do what they say they're going to do — when they say they're going to do it.

In academia we're so used to people making promises that go unfulfilled — overselling and underdelivering — that we've become jaded. When we hear the new dean/provost/president talk about making some much-needed change, we tend to roll our eyes and think, "Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it."

If you want people to trust you, be as good as your word. Don't make promises that you know you might not be able to keep. When you tell people you're going to do something, do it. And when you simply can't, then explain why you're not going to be able to keep that promise, and apologize. If you consistently keep your word, and explain when you can't, faculty members will come to respect you and, more important, trust you.

Have people's backs. This is the most important point: If you want to earn and keep people's trust, the best thing you can do is consistently be on their side.

My observation — as someone who's been in academe for 32 years — is that we seem to have bred a generation of academic administrators who care only about themselves, who will throw anyone under the bus without a second thought if they believe it will advance their own careers. That certainly does not apply to all administrators, but the number of people like that whom I've encountered is enough to alarm me — and motivate me to write columns like this.

For faculty members to trust you, they must have absolute confidence that you will have their backs in virtually every situation, whether they are under attack from students, parents, colleagues, other administrators, or outside entities.

I could add, "as long as they deserve it." On occasion, some faculty members will genuinely be in the wrong, and your responsibility as a leader will be either to take appropriate action or to allow them to suffer the natural consequences of their behavior.

Nevertheless, your default position must be to defend faculty members — to take their side unless you have sufficient evidence that you're mistaken.

If you follow consistently these four pieces of advice — tell the truth, keep confidences, follow through, and defend professors — you will have taken significant steps to earn their trust. However, there is one more thing you need to do in order to seal the deal: Trust them as well. I'll talk about that in next month's column.

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