3-2007

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Taking the Time to Rebuild Trust in Government

By Christine G. Springer

If there is one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family organization, nation, economy and civilization throughout the world that if removed, destroys the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship and the strongest character ... that one thing is trust. Today, it is more important than ever to public managers as trust in government wanes.

In today’s complex environment, organizations must be flexible. They must be able to adapt to constant change. However, change cannot be accomplished if the organization is riddled with distrust within and from without. Empowerment, reengineering, flattened organizations, cross-functional teamwork, organizational learning – while worthy - do not work without solid foundations of trust. Organizational trust is based on three imperatives: delivering results, acting with integrity and demonstrating concern. Community trust is rooted in contribution and responsibility.

Trust is important to public managers because it directly affects the speed and cost of getting things done. For example, consider the time and cost of airport security after 9/11 or the costs for Sarbanes-Oxley Act compliance. The good news is that lost trust can be restored at the community and at the organizational level but not without time and concerted effort.

In high-trust organizations, people trust each other, their leaders and the organization as a whole. They deliver the results needed for the organization to meet its commitments by establishing clear, ambitious performance targets, paying attention to the details of executing new initiatives and providing consequences for success and failure. They act in a consistent and cohesive manner by defining strategic priorities clearly, confronting reality and dealing head on with negative information and challenges, having open agendas, and following through on commitments. When circumstances outside their control preclude them from keeping their word, they are as honest as possible about the conditions that led to the change of course. They understand that even when forces out of their control change things, their reputation for trustworthiness may suffer if such events occur frequently because people will begin to assume that they do not have the competence to make the right decision. That is why they act quickly to halt trust erosion by taking responsibility for the problem.

High-trust organizations also demonstrate concern for their employees by building a one-vision, one organization mindset, showing confidence in employees by doing things like letting them manage their own time without time clocks, establishing familiarity and dialogue between top managers and frontline employees through regular get-togethers or by simply walking around and visiting informally with them, and recognizing employee contributions made either in a formal (award) or informal way (pat on the back).
Community trust is rooted in contribution and responsibility. To me, contribution is the intent to create value instead of destroying it and the process of giving back instead of taking. Principles of contribution and responsibility resonate personally and societally. Microsoft founder Bill Gates and lead singer Bono and Oprah Winfrey are all high profile contributors, but the world is full of individuals contributing time, energy and money in their communities. These two principles are enhanced by today’s trend toward global citizenship and corporate social responsibility. Firms like Intel, Wells Fargo and Procter & Gamble are named by Business Ethics Magazine as the “Best Corporate Citizens” because they recognize that doing good is no longer an added value to their business, it is part of the business itself. This of course is not a new idea. Intentional virtue was part of the original concept behind Adam Smith’s free enterprise system. Restoring trust once it is lost may at times be difficult, but in most cases, it can in fact occur and even result in enhanced trust levels. It means rebuilding trust in countries, institutions, industries, professions as well as in other people generally. As an example, in the Republic of Ireland, leaders over the past 30 years have changed the nation’s focus from inward to outward. They have moved the nation from economic independence to interdependence and have reformed an outdated educational system making Ireland of today one of the world’s leaders in education.

Trust in organizations can be quickly eroded intentionally or unintentionally putting managers, the organizational architecture and culture under pressure. It takes time and effort to build an architecture that supports trust and even more time and effort to change or rebuild that structure. Having a trust sustaining architecture reinforces rather than undermines trust within the organization by promoting aggressive outcome targets, developing aligned performance accountabilities, building high-ownership in outcomes, ensuring superior talent at every level, maintaining systems to share information and instituting a few rigorous strategic controls such as independent bodies rather than the typical immediate boss to report to. That architecture is shaken when highly visible mistakes cause people to question a leader’s or an organization’s ability to deliver results and keep commitments. In order to maintain trust, it is often necessary for a manager to take responsibility for the problem, learn from the mistakes and take decisive action to correct errors. Putting too much emphasis on delivering results can also sometimes encourage ethical violations and over time erode trust in leaders and the organization. Stringent controls may prevent ethical violations however, they may also hamper the autonomy and initiative needed for results. To resolve this dilemma, managers often choose to establish appropriate safeguards that prevent blatant violations without hamstringing employees. They may, for example, conduct a bi-annual organizational audit to insure that ethical violations are not motivated by the organization’s culture. Command and control management sometimes occurs when the drive to achieve results comes without any regard for employees. This threat to trust is often best addressed by the development of new values and principles as well as instituting new formal and informal practices that demonstrate concern for employees such as an emphasis on personal development. Downsizing and reengineering also threaten any trust infrastructure. Negative impacts of both are most often minimized by communicating straightforwardly, directly and truthfully about what is happening and why as well as providing ample support for those affected.

Extending trust to communities, to other organizations and to one another within an organization can bring great dividends and also create the possibility of significant risk. Inspiring trust is a
prime differentiator between a manager and leader as well as the prime motivator for successful enterprises and relationships. Public managers today are leaders who build and maintain trust-sustaining organizations because they have learned how to manage with trust. They use good business judgment and good people judgment to enhance their commitment, instinct and intuition rather than being gullible, indecisive, and suspicious of themselves and others. As a result, they extend and inspire others and find that trust is reciprocal making all the difference in their own life and in others’.