

Technology changed a lot over my thirty-three year technology career. I started as a programmer who knew how every piece of hardware and software in our environment worked. At the end I was a VP who was tailed by IT staff when I entered the server room to make sure I didn't touch anything (only partly kidding).

I couldn't execute my strategic responsibilities and still keep up with the operational details of the evolving technology. I had to learn to trust others with the expertise that I lacked. But my neck was in the noose if they failed.



### To Trust or Not to Trust...

We've all heard stories of blindly trusted people acting untrustworthy. So it's tempting to resort to the old Russian proverb that Ronald Reagan made famous, "trust, but verify". That may be useful rhetoric, but the need to verify usually sends the message, "I don't trust you".

For example: You're an HR leader who has faithfully assured legal compliance for years. Your CEO's friend recently paid hefty fines for being unknowingly out of compliance. So now your CEO is bringing in a third-party to verify your HR compliance. Does that make you feel trusted?

In a healthy context, you might see the value of the audit. But if trust is low or you feel like you're being targeted in some way, your loyalty and commitment will take a hit.

### Leveraging a Healthy Culture

This is another case where having built a healthy culture pays dividends. Here are a few culture traits that facilitate managing risk while maintaining trust:

- **Transparency** – Secretive cultures foster suspicion and undermine healthy disclosure. While some things do require confidentiality, a "need-to-know-only" culture leaves people dreaming up their own dark theories about what they don't know. That fosters fear, distrust, and more secrecy. If the norm is to put things on the table, it doesn't make someone feel "called out" when they're asked to reveal details.
- **Collaboration** – Break down the silos. You probably have smart people throughout the organization with expertise (or just healthy curiosity) who can ask good questions outside their own domain. Create forums for cross-functional engagement to educate and expand team members' understanding of the big picture of the organization. This will simultaneously build trust while generating disclosure and some peer accountability.
- **Shared mission/vision/values** – Most people (especially since you've hired well!) are energized when they know they are co-contributors to a challenging objective they believe in. When the purpose and ground rules are clear and relationships are strong, the benefits of reciprocal disclosure can overcome the fear of vulnerability.
- **Safety** – People hide their mistakes if they expect to get beat up or punished for admitting them. Healthy vulnerability is easier in a culture where the norm is openness about sharing and learning from mistakes. It starts with leaders setting the example by sharing what they're learning from their own mistakes and failures.

### Reducing Risk with a Culture of Trust

You have to be trusted for others to offer transparency. That transparency reduces the risk of giving trust. Your culture is yours to build...