

Trust and/or Transparency

A Paradoxical Relationship

Transparency is often touted as foundational to building trust. And it can be – or not...

We live in a culture that equates our *desire* to know something with our *right* to know it. We feel entitled to tap into the endless free-flow of information, believing that anyone who holds anything back is hiding something and can't be trusted. Except, of course, that we choose to keep some things private and we can be trusted.

The trust/transparency paradox is that transparency can help build trust; but where trust is high, transparency isn't required.

If I hire an electrician to wire my house, I trust his competence and don't expect him to "transparently" tell me every step of how he's going to do it. I expect his competency in that area to far exceed mine, so I don't have the context, understanding, or interest to be able to process what he might reveal to me in the name of transparency.

If I don't trust the electrician's competency, character, or motives, I'll either not hire him or perhaps get a competent person I trust to oversee his work.

Trust and transparency work together like this:

- When trust is high, transparency is easily offered, but not in demand.
- When trust is low, transparency is withheld but in high demand.



However, there is a wildcard. Sometimes transparency in a low trust environment *decreases* trust even further. This can happen when facts are disclosed that the recipients don't have the context and capacity to comprehend. For example, the disclosure that our organization had a million dollar profit last year might be understood very differently by a minimum wage worker than by a billion dollar investor. There may be complex factors that determine whether that number is good news or bad.

Underestimating or overestimating our audience's capacity for making sense of our transparency is dangerous. The solutions aren't always simple, but here are a few foundational principles to keep in mind:

- The top priority of a leader is the growth of their followers. Invest the time and energy to help them comprehend the realities they want to understand.
- Trust is a two-way street. The more you give trust, the more you'll get it. Leaders gain the trust of their followers by trusting them. Followers gain the trust of their leaders by trusting them.
- Good leadership places the needs of our followers ahead of our own. Is the purpose of my transparency self-serving or do I have their needs in mind? We learn those needs by listening, not assuming.
- The easiest time to build trust is when you don't need it. Continuously paying attention to building a healthy culture and right relationships is the best way to avert a trust crisis.

No leader can afford to take trust for granted. It is the most valuable resource we have. And it's hard to gain and easy to lose.

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