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When trust breaks down, restoring it takes more than blind faith

By Dennis S. Reina, Ph.D. and Michelle L. Reina, Ph.D.

George didn't understand what went wrong. Mary, the corporate meeting planner, was furious with him. "I am not sure what I said or did that caused her to be so upset," said George. "I thought I did a good job at the podium, but somehow she lost confidence in me. How did I breach her trust? More importantly, how do I earn it back?"

Sometime in your speaking, training, or consulting career you may have experienced a similar situation. The circumstances may have been different but the outcomes were the same: trust was unintentionally broken and your relationship with the client ended. How do you rebuild trust when such circumstances occur? First, it is essential to understand how trust impacts client relationships. Business is conducted through relationships and trust is the foundation. You

depend on your relationships with your clients to survive, and those relationships depend on trust to thrive.

Was George clear on what Mary had expected of him? Probably not, given how furious she was with him. Did Mary perceive that George was operating with his own self-serving agenda, inappropriately selling from the stage? George promoted his products at the back of the room during his speech even though Mary clearly laid out the guidelines against it.

Botched relationships and breakdowns in trust with clients, bureaus, colleagues and co-workers speak to the need for building trust – now more than ever. When trust erodes, relationships are compromised; people shut down, pull back and are hesitant to col-

laborate. These dynamics highlight a natural phenomenon – trust will be built and broken. In order to create sustainable trust, you need to know how it is rebuilt.

Mary felt extremely let down, disappointed and betrayed by George. George equally felt disappointed. He was frustrated that he was not given all the information regarding the extent of the changes taking place within Mary's organization. It was a missed opportunity to fully utilize his motivational skills.

Rebuilding trust requires healing. A mistake people make is to assume that once broken, trust may be re-established on its own, over time. This view is unrealistic, irresponsible and compromises your trustworthiness.

OBSERVE AND ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Start with awareness. Notice what your client is experiencing and acknowledge it. Pay attention to both the blatant and subtle behaviours that are building and breaking trust. Healing begins when we acknowledge what has occurred, the impact on people and the relationship, and the resulting losses. It is common for people to slip into justification and explanation when responding to the loss of trust. Your client will experience this tendency as failing to hear their views and as insensitive on your part. As a result, they feel discounted, diminished and invisible.

George needs to acknowledge that he breached his agreement with Mary not to promote his products from the podium and not delivering the content as promised. No excuses, rationalizations or justifications. When Mary sees that George is “coming clean,” she may offer that she failed to disclose all the information about the changes within her organization.

ALLOW FEELINGS TO SURFACE

Give people permission to express their concerns, issues and feelings in a constructive manner. When trust breaks down, people often feel anxious, vulnerable and tend to question themselves and others. Create a safe

opportunity that allows your client to express their anger, frustration and doubts. Doing so helps them begin to let go of the negativity they are holding, freeing up that energy for rebuilding the relationship.

When Mary expresses her disappointment, it is essential that George be fully present and listen to Mary, not only to what she is saying, but to how she is saying it. George must not get defensive even if Mary does. He needs to give her space to express herself and acknowledge the impact of his actions.

GET SUPPORT

Recognize peoples’ needs. Another common mistake is failing to seek support during challenging times. “I can manage on my own,” is a common phrase. Rebuilding trust is hard work. Talk with a trusted colleague for support. Acknowledge what is yours to own. Something quite powerful occurs when the breach of trust is truthfully acknowledged, not twisted, justified or defended. There is a releasing quality when people shift from finger-pointing to seeking to understand; from judgment and criticism to considering extenuating circumstances; from abdication of responsibility to problem solving and taking responsibility; from loss to possibility. We often need support to fully under-

stand what occurred, its effects, and the actions necessary to move through the healing process.

George may need support before speaking with Mary regarding the issues. Talking with a trusted friend may help George sort out his feelings and support him in taking responsibility for his role in the situation.


REFRAME THE EXPERIENCE

Put the experience into a larger context. People are supported to reframe their experience when they are encouraged to look at the bigger picture, extenuating circumstances, the business reasons for change and explore opportunities that the changes present. Help people realize there are choices. During challenging situations, people may feel vulnerable and at the mercy of the situation. Realize that while you may not have control over what has occurred, you do have control over how you choose to respond.

Both George and Mary have the opportunity to learn from this situation. They need to: look at the big picture and extenuating circumstances influencing their actions, ask questions versus make assumptions and realize they have choice on how to respond. Doing so helps them take responsibility for their actions. George needs to take the initiative in this rebuilding process since he is the service provider to the client.



**REBUILDING TRUST REQUIRES
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TAKE THE TIME AND MAKE THE
COMMITMENT. WHEN TRUST IS
LOST, IT IS REGAINED ONLY BY A
SINCERE DEDICATION TO THE KEY
BEHAVIOURS AND PRACTICES THAT
EARNED IT IN THE FIRST PLACE

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Take responsibility for your role. People immediately recognize when you spin the truth or try to cover your mistakes. Trust is further diminished. Taking responsibility means acknowledging your mistakes or oversights. Telling the truth, without justification, demonstrates your trustworthiness and exposes vulnerability. Doing so makes it safe for others to expose their vulnerability and take responsibility for their behaviour. Sometimes three simple words, "I am sorry," go a long way to rebuilding trust.

Make amends and return with dividends. Rebuilding trust does not simply mean giving back what was taken away. It means returning something in better shape than it was originally and it means strengthening relationships.

George needs to take the initiative, admit his mistake and apologize to Mary to start the healing process. He needs to ask her what he can do to make it up to her. This is critical for rebuilding the relationship; particularly if George makes amends and pays back with dividends.

FORGIVE YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Recognize that forgiveness is freedom. Anger, bitterness and resentment deplete a person's energy and interfere with relationships and performance. When you forgive, you help free your-

self of the emotional baggage. You open up possibilities for the future by changing your attitude about the past.

Shift from blaming to focusing on needs. Blame and resentment are toxic to you and your relationships. You can help cultivate a healing, trustworthy environment where forgiveness takes place. Help others shift from blaming to focusing on individual needs, roles and the needs of the relationship. Pay attention to conversations that need to occur and listen for what needs to be said.

Whether Mary forgives George or not, it is important that George take responsibility for his actions and shift from blaming to focusing on the needs of his client. He needs to ask Mary what she needs to hear or have done to put this issue to rest. And George needs to forgive himself, not emotionally beat himself up for his actions.

LET GO AND MOVE ON

Accept what is so. Acceptance is not condoning what was done, but experiencing the reality of what happened without blame. You can accept what is so when you separate yourself from your preoccupation with the past and invest your emotional energies in creating a different future.

Take the time and make the commitment. When trust is lost, it is regained only by a sincere dedication to the key

behaviours and practices that earned it in the first place. The journey back to trusting is not an easy one. However, by listening, telling the truth, giving the benefit of the doubt, seeking to understand and practicing trust-building behaviours, you will find your way.

George needs to realize he is only human to help him shift from dwelling on his mistakes to hopefully learning from those mistakes. His ability to practice trust-building behaviours and steps to rebuild trust will strengthen his current and future relationships.

While not easy, rebuilding trust is essential. The cost of not doing it is too high to be ignored. By being self-aware and choosing to practice trust-building behaviours, you can play an instrumental role in rebuilding trust and renewing relationships with your clients. **SOI**



Dennis S. Reina, Ph.D., and Michelle L. Reina, Ph.D., are pioneering experts on building and rebuilding trust to drive business results and co-authors of *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization*.

• www.reinatrustbuilding.com