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Office Trust Busters
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By Margery Weinstein

Gossiping employees, workers who don't feel like their manager is always acting in their interest, and those of your workforce who sense they can't take co-workers at their word, are all issues that can mean a big headache for human resources. More than that, though, they all stem from a lack of trust, says Dr. Michelle Reina, who co-founded The Reina Trust Building Institute in Stowe, Vt., with her husband, Dr. Dennis Reina. The institute conducts research on the underlying causes of broken trust in organizations and specializes in tactics for repairing it.

"Business, regardless of size, shape, form or industry, is conducted through relationships, and trust is a critical foundation to the effectiveness of relationships," Michelle Reina says. While the importance of trust is widely recognized these days, with many organizations incorporating it as part of their mission statement or even adopting it as a core competency, there are still plenty of problems for companies in this area, she notes.

Step one is making workers aware of how trust is built, violated and, whenever necessary, repaired, Michelle Reina says. Training programs that define trust for employees and provide them with instruction for preserving and fixing it should be given on an ongoing basis, but primers may be necessary at certain critical junctions in a company's life such as during mergers and acquisitions. "When an organization is going through change and transition, people become unclear of what is expected of them and of their roles and responsibilities," she stresses. "When they're not clear of their expectations, they're also not aware of what agreements they are being expected to honor." Training that emphasizes the importance of communicating concerns directly with managers and co-workers, rather than relying on the gossip mill, therefore, is essential. "Our research over the last 10 years has found that gossip and backbiting is the number one breach of communication trust," Michelle Reina points out. "Nine out of 10 employees experience it."

In addition to unclear (or unused) channels of communication, workers may feel their manager doesn't trust them if they end up doing work that doesn't take advantage of the skills they were hired for, Michelle Reina says. "When people have skills, abilities or insights they are not able to offer, they often feel as though they are not being trusted by

their leaders. They feel as though they are not being perceived as trustworthy, and not feeling trusted, they are not trusting in return." Trainers and HR execs who are able to effectively match employees' skill sets to their work may see an organization that's not only more efficient, but one that suffers a lot less from interpersonal problems.

If you're communicating directly with workers who are well suited to the tasks they've been given, another tip to keep in mind is leaving off the blinders. You need to trust your managers and employees, but not with tunnel vision, Michelle Reina explains. If a manager complains repeatedly about an underling, for example, it does more harm than good to fall back on the age-old wisdom to simply "trust your manager." A protocol should be in place for grievances so the gossip and backbiting mill isn't fed, and the charged employee is given a fair hearing. "When we follow an age-old wisdom like, 'You always trust your manager,' that is an idealization that comes under the category of what is most desired," she notes.
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"It is the responsibility of a leader to be aware there will be some people who at some point in time may become vulnerable and lose their sense of themselves, and may behave in a way that is untrustworthy," she says. "We are human beings, and even those of us who are highly trustworthy do trip up. We do lose our way. We do mistakes. We do lie, and we do violate trust."

For more information on building trust in the workplace, including a Web-based assessment to gauge the level of trust in your organization, visit www.trustinworkplace.com.