THE KEY TRAIT SUCCESSFUL LEADERS HAVE, AND HOW TO GET IT

by Heidi Grant Halvorson

US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin emerged from a nearly two-hour private meeting early in Bush's first term pledging that they would work together to keep peace, and to usher in a new era of US.—Russian relations. "I looked the man in the eye," Bush said as the two stood together at the medieval Brdo Castle, the site of their meeting. "I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country."

"Can I trust him? I can."

What President Bush had done in that first encounter with his fellow head of state (though I leave it to the reader to decide whether or not he had done it *well*) was something that all human beings do when getting to know one another—he looked at Putin through the Trust Lens. This is the lens that people are wearing when they are meeting you for the first time, or when they feel they are still getting to know you. Its roots lie in humans' distant past, when determining whether another creature meant you harm was priority number one, all day, every day. In the modern era, we worry less about our physical safety (though we do still worry about that, too) and more about whether or not other people are *trustworthy*.

In other words, we want to know whether others pose a threat to us—to our relationships, to our careers, to our overall happiness and well-being. *Are you going to make trouble for me?*, we wonder. We want to know whether our new colleague will be competitive and undermine us at work.

We want to know whether the new couple next door will be friendly and responsible, or whether they'll

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throw loud parties at all hours or constantly complain about the hedges that need clipping. *Is it okay to let my guard down, or do I need to stay on the alert?* When someone else interacts with you—whether or not they realize it consciously—that's what they are wondering, too.

The Benefits of Being Trusted

The benefits of being seen as trustworthy (and the costs of failing to do so) are enormous, particularly in the workplace. Studies show, for instance, that the willingness to share knowledge with colleagues—a sticking point in most large organizations—is strongly predicted by feelings of trust among employees. People are less territorial, and less concerned with "watching their back" when coworkers are identified as friends rather than foes. And employees who trust one another experience greater job satisfaction and less job stress. Not surprising really—what's more stressful than having to continually be on the lookout for coworker sabotage?

Trust is even more important for leaders. For instance, organizations whose CEOs and top management teams inspire trust also have significantly lower employee turnover. And remember those challenging "stretch" goals that you have encouraged your team to adopt? Well, recent research shows that while setting higher, more difficult goals indeed leads to better performance in organizations, it does so *only* when employees trust the leader doing the goal setting. When that doesn't happen—when your employees aren't confident that you have their best interests (and the organization's) at heart—then no one feels motivated to tackle the big

challenges, and stretch goals simply don't get met. So there is a lot riding on whether or not *you* are perceived as trustworthy.

It should come as no real surprise that being trusted is essential to good leadership. When your team trusts you as a leader, they increase their commitment to team goals. Communication improves—ideas flow more freely, increasing creativity and productivity. Perhaps most important, in the hands of a trusted leader, employees are more comfortable with change and more willing to embrace a new vision. When your team *doesn't* trust you, you don't get their best effort or all the information you need from them to make good decisions. And you find yourself unable to inspire, unable to influence, and unable to create real change.

So, What's the Problem?

Assuming that you are indeed a trustworthy person, why is it that your team might not see you that way? The answer lies in the often strange ways in which perception works.

There are two completely contradictory things you can say about how other people perceive you that are both perfectly true. The first is that others can be surprisingly accurate about you based on very little information, or a "thin slice." That idea is probably familiar to you, possibly from Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book, *Blink*. But the second thing you need to know about perception—arguably, the more important thing—is how *wrong* others can be about you, despite having *lots* of information to go on.

The way our brains make sense of one another is . . . complicated. It's also subjective, biased, and chock-full of errors. And we have almost no conscious access to this process, which makes it nearly impossible to consciously correct. On the bright side—human perception is remarkably predictable. If you know something about how it works, it's possible to be more deliberate about the signals you send, to make it easier for your perceiver to actually "get" you.

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Who Is Trusted?

According to research by Princeton's Susan Fiske and her colleagues, to be considered trustworthy you need to come across as both *warm* and *competent*. Your warmth—being friendly, loyal, empathetic—is taken as evidence that you have good intentions toward the perceiver, and it's the very first thing about you that they hone in on. Your competence—being intelligent, skilled, effective—is taken as evidence that you can act on your intentions if you want to. Competent people are therefore valuable allies or potent enemies, depending on their warmth. (Less competent people are objects of pity or scorn—if we bother to think much about them at all.)

The problem is that most people—and especially leaders—see making a good impression as being first and foremost about competence. In their eagerness to demonstrate their skills and talents, they neglect the arguably more important part of the trust formula: warmth. Actually, it's worse than that—people will actively play down their warmth in an attempt to seem more competent.

For example, research shows that when people are trying to appear warm, they are agreeable, engage in flattery, make kind gestures, and encourage others to talk (that is, they are good listeners). But when they want to appear competent, they do the opposite—speaking rather than listening, focusing the conversation on their own accomplishments and abilities, and challenging the opinions of others as a demonstration of their own expertise. In fact, both consciously and unconsciously, people tend to use this knowledge and play down their competence (that is, "play dumb") in order to appear warm, and vice versa.

Most of us see leadership as being *first and foremost* about competence—about strength and confidence and accomplishments. Consequently, we are so eager to prove that we know what we're doing as leaders that we neglect the arguably more important part of the trust formula: proving that we will act with others' interests in mind. In other words, trust is an afterthought.

Harvard Business School professor Amy Cuddy, author of many of the key studies on trust and leadership, has argued that when you project competence *before* warmth, you run the risk of appearing cold . . . and eliciting distrust and fear from your employees. They might respect you, but fearful employees are rarely able to work at their best. And you certainly can't blame them for wanting to jump ship once an offer to work for someone who *doesn't* make them continually anxious comes along.

So, are you a leader who projects warmth—a leader your team feels they can trust? If you suspect the answer might be no, you need to start working on your warmth pronto. In a nutshell, what you want to do is convey the sense that you have your employees' welfare and

Make eye contact, and hold it.

Key Takeaways

- The decision to trust is made almost entirely unconsciously, and is based on the extent to which you project *warmth* and *competence*. Warmth is a signal that you have good intentions toward your perceiver; competence signals that you are capable of acting on those intentions.

- Convey warmth by paying attention: make eye contact and hold it, smile, nod to indicate understanding. Show empathy and concern, when appropriate. Above all, be fair, and true to your word. And be willing to trust first, when necessary, to put the other person at ease.

- Convey competence by making eye contact (yes, it's good for that, too) and sitting up straight. Don't advertise your personal demons. Don't sell yourself short, but don't brag either—a little bit of modesty goes a long way to impressing others. And when you aren't feeling particularly competent, adopt a *power pose*.

- Leaders should always be careful to prioritize warmth, not competence, when trying to inspire trust and loyalty.

interests in mind—that what they experience *matters* to you. Think about how you can use the following strategies to up your trust quotient:

1. *Pay attention.* Make eye contact, and hold it—both when you are speaking and listening. Nod from time to time to show you are understanding what's being said to you. Smile, *especially* when they do. And above all else, really focus on what is being said to you—everyone needs to feel that they have been heard, even when you can't give them what they are asking for.

2. *Show empathy.* Take the time to mentally put yourself in your employees' shoes, to really try to grasp their perspective. Use phrases like "I imagine you must have felt. . . ." to convey that empathy directly.

3. *Trust them first.* Human beings have a deeply rooted tendency toward reciprocity. We are naturally inclined to want to do favors, give gifts, and work to promote those who have done these things for us in the past. And the same holds for trust—

we are more likely to feel we can trust someone who has trusted us first. Avoid micromanaging. Give others responsibility for key tasks. Share personal (but appropriate!) stories, talk about your struggles and challenges, let them know your fallible, human side. Allowing yourself to be a bit vulnerable is a great way to project warmth.

What If "Warmth" Makes Me Uncomfortable?

All that said, if you just aren't the warm-and-fuzzy type, and maybe talking about feelings makes you uncomfortable, fear not. *Warm* does not have to mean "huggable," "nurturing," or "the kind of guy I'd like to have a beer with." Evidence suggests that the moral character aspects of warmth—the sense that you are *fair, principled, courageous*, and *honest*—are highly effective for establishing trust. In other words, to inspire your employees to trust you, be someone they can always count on to do the right thing. After all, this is ultimately what trust is about.

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