Want Your Employees More Engaged? 700 HR Professionals Say Strengthen This 1 Leadership Trait

This characteristic scored highest for getting employee commitment (versus just compliance)—here's how to develop it.

By Scott Mautz  Author, 'Find the Fire: Ignite Your Inspiration and Make Work Exciting Again'  

CREDIT: Getty Images

Despite the efforts of many a well-intended leader, the crisis of disengaged employees still rages on in so many companies. Understanding how to better motivate employees and even how to build better relationships with employees remains at the top of many leaders’ agendas (second only to banning all infuriatingly noisy keyboard typers from the office).
A recent study on the state of employee engagement published by HR.com surveyed more than 700 HR professionals. One of the key survey questions asked was, "Which of the following factors are most highly linked to employee engagement in your organization?"

What was at the very top of the heap?

**When employees feel they can trust their leader.**

77 percent of survey respondents cited this as the most important factor. It's an attribute that can't be overestimated in importance, in fact.

Think of the opposite for a moment. You've likely had a leader in the past violate your trust. Do you still remember the occasion? I bet you do. Do you fully trust that person now, perhaps even after he or she tried to make amends? I bet you don't.

There's no recovery in the face of a breach of trust. But you can build a stronger foundation of trust. You can become more trustworthy. Here's how:

**1. Truly listen and act on what you hear.**

George Bernard Shaw once said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Communication not only breaks down when the sender isn't sending well, but also (more commonly) when the receiver isn't receiving.

Listening isn't waiting for your turn to talk. It's committing to absorbing what the other person is saying and sending signals of absorption (a head nod, a knowing smile, etc.). Then comes the acid test--do you actually act on what the person has said? Visibly doing so sends the clear message that you've been actively listening--and that the transmission had an impact. Thus, people will trust that you'll listen in the future, and will trust you more in general.
2. Give credit where credit is due.

If you've ever worked for or with a credit-gabber, you know trust quickly erodes.

While you're amply doing out that credit, make sure it's warranted. Leaders that hand out praise for every little thing to every single person erode trust almost as fast as the opposite--so make it warranted and worthy.

And don't forget to humbly and graciously take credit when it's bestowed upon you. Sidestepping credit up to a point is admirable, but you don't want to be disingenuous if you and everyone else know that you were an integral part of the thing you're receiving credit for.

3. Care about their careers as much as they do.

Talk to employees about their careers. Really understand what they want in them. Help them articulate what they want, not what they're supposed to want. Have a career marketing plan for them where you plot out who their key career influencers are and how and when to target them with what exposure and messaging.

4. Practice what you preach.

People look for congruency to make sense of the world. When you say one thing but do another, it creates an incongruence. In such times, people try to make sense of who you really are and what your agenda really is. That's not where you want them spending their energy.

When the words don't match the pictures, trust exits stage left.

5. Be transparent--always.
There's nothing more transparent than when someone's not being transparent. And when you catch someone being less than transparent, it creates searing doubt.

Of course, there are cases when a leader can't be transparent, like when they can't disclose information for a variety of reasons. I'm not talking about these instances. I'm talking about when someone has the option to be upfront and forthright and chooses instead to withhold information, to tell half-truths, or to operate with hidden agendas. Just...don't.

6. Model selfless behavior.

Nothing draws trusts like acting on someone's interest other than your own. Do it once, and you'll create a good feeling. Do it a few more times, and you'll create a few fans. Do it as a default, and you'll create a following.

Trust is a bridge in so many ways, and a pathway to driving engagement. So take the wheel.
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