

Leadership Practices that Build Trust

A Closer Look at Trust and its Importance in the Principal-Teacher Relationship

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In the past twenty years there has been a steady increase in research around the importance of trust in creating and sustaining effective and successful schools. There is increasing evidence that trust is paramount in the success of students and that it plays an important role in the success of school reform. Research indicates that what leaders do in their daily practices in the work place, can build trust. The concept of trust depends on individuals, relationships between individuals, and the context or culture in which these relationships occur. At each level, there are varieties of factors, which facilitate or inhibit the building of trust. The presence of trust in schools allows for a number of positive outcomes. The quality and strength of human relationships between the school leadership and the teaching faculty make a significant difference. Trust is embedded in our relationships. For that reason the cultivation of trust by principals is central to school improvement. Principals clearly play a central

role in determining both the overall levels of trust and the specific expectations within a school. It is apparent that leaders, who are able to build and foster trust, create an improved school environment. We need to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of trust. The benefits of a high trust school are abundant and the value of increasing the principal's awareness and appreciation about how to nurture and develop a high trust school is significant.

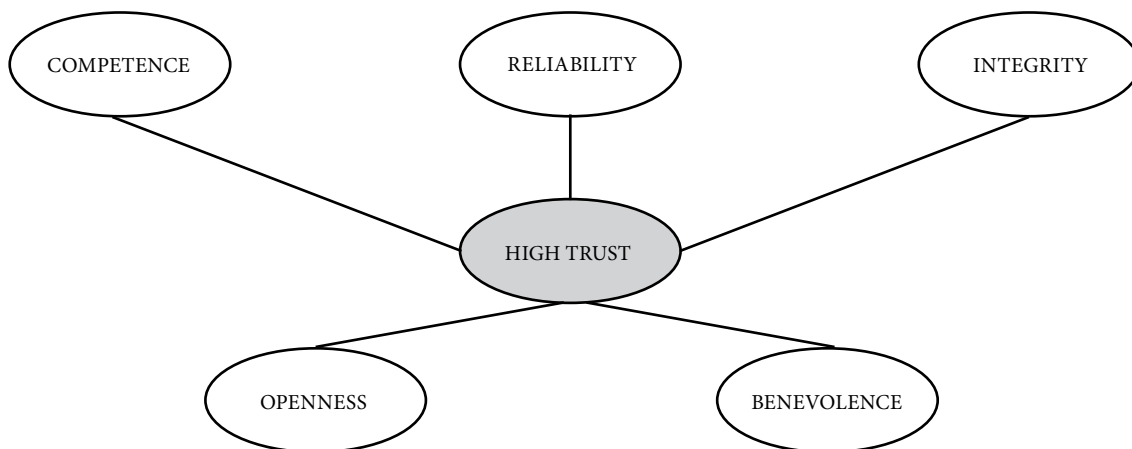
When teachers trust the principal, they are willing to be innovative in their classrooms, the fear of failure diminishes and job satisfaction increases. Teachers collaborate and work more closely with administration when they have established high trust relationships. Problem-solving skills are developed and conflict resolution skills are improved as they work together to develop the high trust relationship.



Defining Trust

Trust can be defined as one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party. Trust entails a willingness to take risks in a social context. We act this way based on confidence that others will respond as expected, we can rely on them and they will act in mutually supportive ways. Evidence suggests that the most effective way to build trust is through on-going positive interpersonal relationship between two individuals.

Increased positive contact between individuals tends to increase levels of trust since levels of trust are directly correlated with the strength of the relationship. Trust is like moral capital. Relationships that have trust will reap the benefits of cooperation while those without trust will struggle for survival. The key qualities of a person giving rise to perceptions of trustworthiness include: benevolence, competence, integrity, openness and reliability.



Three Levels of Trust: Basic Trust, Marginal Trust and High Trust

Trust can be framed on a continuum; we begin at the basic stage of trust, move to the marginal trust stage and finally attain the high trust stage. In the high trust stage principals will be much more effective school leaders and able to accomplish more towards school improvement.

Trust is built on consistent positive exchanges and interactions between principals and teachers. The word positive in this context does not mean without conflict. A high trust leader would confront inappropriate behaviours and decisions, and challenge teachers to improve their performance as educators. We assume that trust relationships begin at the level of basic trust when principals and teachers first begin their initial interactions.

In the basic trust-building stage, principals need to be consistent in the values they express and the behaviours in which they engage during their work. When a principal first starts at a school the relationship with faculty members will begin at the basic trust stage. All relationships have the possibility to develop from the basic trust stage to the marginal trust stage and then to the high trust stage. However, some relationships may stagnate in the basic trust stage. We may only see competence and reliability working but we may not have openness, benevolence or integrity that would move the relationship to the next level.

In the marginal trust stage, we may see competence, reliability and we also add openness but we may be still missing benevolence and integrity. To some degree all five qualities are employed at all three stages. Some of the qualities of a trustworthy leader are more critical at some stages compared to others. At the basic trust stage or the marginal trust stage, it would not be recommended that a principal take on a large restructuring project.

When a principal consistently uses practices that encompass all five qualities, we move to the high trust stage. The high trust stage requires principals to demonstrate consistently the behaviours of reliability, competence, openness, integrity and benevolence. In theory in a high trust school, the principal will have moved through the three levels of trust and at the different levels of trust they will have used different practices to build teacher trust. A school in which there is high trust is likely to include a principal who is:

- communicating a belief system that promotes the children's needs first;
- uniting people in a common goal or vision;
- restructuring the school to facilitate low- and high-risk interactions between administration and staff members; and
- promoting shared decision-making; can be depended on by the teachers to come through for them and does have the best interests of the teachers at heart.

In a high trust environment, we should see an improved change process, reduced stress in the working environment, improved job satisfaction for teachers, improved student achievement and better instructional programming.

Given the evidence, it is reasonable to suggest that leaders engage in trust building by engaging people in the social-emotional process of building mutual trust. Increased trust in schools increases teacher efficacy and

innovation, and fosters a context that supports and encourages student achievement. Trust is developed by creating two key dimensions; first the positive conditions that allow people to be vulnerable to each other and secondly by on-going positive social exchanges. The principal's hierarchical position in the school allows them to be the most dominate force in creating an environment of trust. The trust relationship between the principal and the teachers is the most fundamental relationship for establishing a climate that would allow for the greatest number of positive outcomes in a school. A high-trust relationship between the principal and the teachers will translate to high-trust relationships between teachers, between teachers and students, and between the school and the greater community. Since all other stakeholders are in more vulnerable positions than the principal is, the principal has the formal power to create a culture of trust.

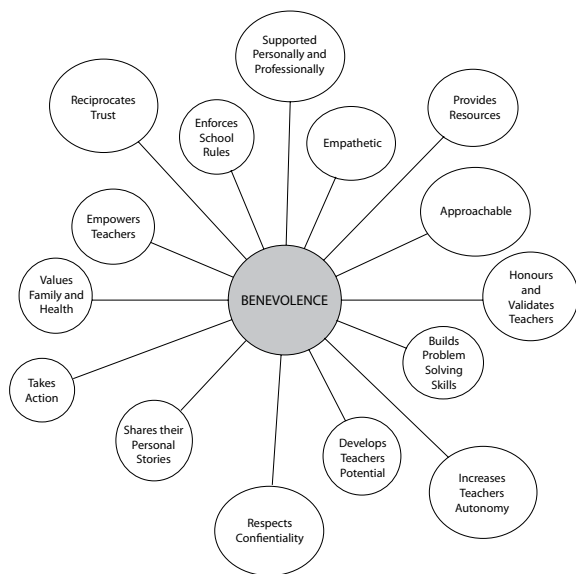
Skills and practices identified by principals and teachers emphasize that principals who focus on supporting teachers both personally and professionally, by showing care, understanding and empathy generally build high levels of trust in their schools. Supporting and validating teachers' work, valuing family and health, developing teacher potential, empowering teachers, building reciprocal trust, developing teachers' autonomy, being approachable, taking action and respecting confidentiality all play an essential role as building blocks in the relationship between teachers and principals. These principals are benevolent.

Practices that reflect strength of character include treating teachers with respect, clear and defined values, clear expectations, acting as a role model, demonstrating equality, showing a clear vision and direction for the school, having a positive attitude and keeping their word. The characteristics describe an individual who cares about being fair and just; a person with high integrity. A principal acting with integrity combined with benevolence will be very successful at trust building.

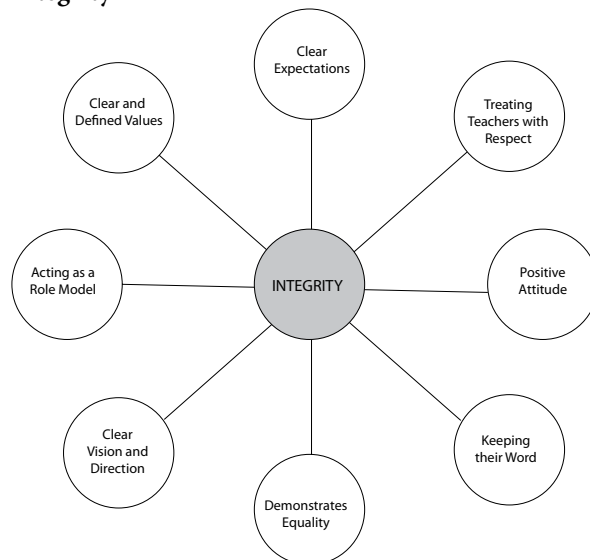
The amount of information that the principal is willing to share with their staff members and how they share that information ultimately determines the level of openness in the school. The following are all essential elements in good communication and the trust-building process: transparency; honest and forthright explanations; gathering input; acting as a buffer around workload; providing information in a variety of formats; giving honest and forthright explanations; and competently working with parents. Principals who are open have more success in building high trust.

When principals are considered reliable by the staff, teachers know that they can depend on them to provide support and the necessary tools for them to do their jobs. Principals that are consistent and follow through give teachers every reason to have confidence in them. To move these skills to the level of benevolence the principals would have to perform at an exemplary level. For example, a principal acting reliably will show interest in a teacher's personal and professional growth. A principal acting with benevolence will support, guide and challenge a teacher's personal and professional growth. Principals who develop high trust will demonstrate reliability and benevolence. When a principal is able to combine all five attributes of trust then they will be very successful in creating a high trust school.

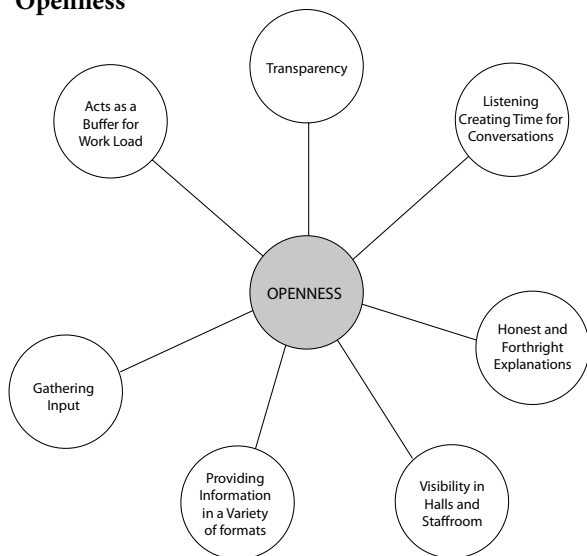
Benevolence



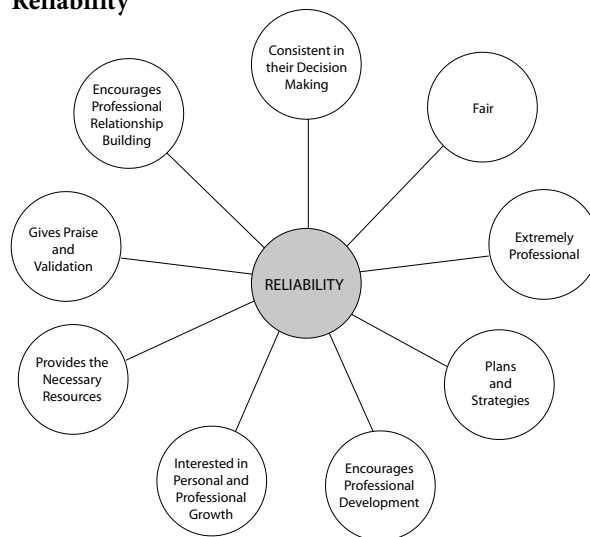
Integrity



Openness



Reliability



If we are not working to improve our schools everyday then we are not improving the quality of education and the quality of experience for our young people. With the multitude of challenges in education, our teachers and school administrators need to be flexible, creative, current, savvy, dynamic and competitive. This will not occur in schools with low trust. High levels of trust allow people to explore and be creative in the classroom and the schools. By continuing to develop our understanding of the importance of trust in the school environment, we are working to improve the quality of education for the young people of today and

tomorrow. More than ever schools need the bonding glue of strong leaders to hold everything together; leaders who know the intricacies and complexities of school life; leaders, who feel prepared, supported and equipped to take on the daily tasks and challenges that face their schools.

This article was based on the research and study completed for the writer's PhD study at OISE in Theory and Policy Studies Department. Dr. Ken Leithwood was Martine's advisor for this study.

Resources:

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