Trust is a Currency

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This month's article was inspired by the February 1, 2025, Construction Leaders Podcast with guest Jonathan Cinelli. Jonathan is host of the People First Podcast, has a background as an electrician and project professional, and now teaches human-centric leadership.

The construction industry is traditionally hierarchical, with a strong chain of command and distinct divisions between owners, general contractors, trade partners, and laborers. This fragmentation can create silos and distrust among everyone. But it's possible to change all that. By changing your view of trust from an abstract ideal to trust as a tangible asset, trust can become a "currency" you can bank and draw from when needed. Stated another way, don't think of trust as a moral choice but as a strategic advantage.

Asked to explain how to "bank" trust, Cinelli offered some guiding principles:

Be real: Own up to your mistakes or vulnerabilities by saying things like, "I'm tired right now and don't feel I'll respond well. Can we have this conversation tomorrow?" Or "This is the first time I've done X, so I'm open to suggestions."

Be curious: Don't jump to conclusions or solutions. Ask for more information and listen with empathy using phrases such as, "What's really going on? How did we get to this point? What do we need to do to pivot through it?" and empathetic statements such as, "I can see why you're frustrated," or "That sounds challenging."

Be a people champion: Pay attention to the people you lead and how you can learn from them or best help them, rather than assuming you know what's best or what's needed. A new way of doing things isn't necessarily the "wrong way."

Building trust requires consistent investment. You and your company leaders must demonstrate integrity, keep promises, and be transparent when making decisions. Think of your organization and stakeholders (owners, trade partners, etc.) as "one team" and act in accordance with what's best for the team.

Here's an example of how to build trust in an organization:

A mid-sized DOT contractor struggled with communication and finger-pointing between project managers, trade partners, and site supervisors. Delays were frequent, and employee turnover was high, which resulted in real financial impacts. The leadership team realized that a lack of collaboration,

relationships, and trust was at the core of these issues.

To address this, they implemented a "Trust as Currency" initiative:

Their "be real" steps: Project managers began holding weekly "safety and honesty huddles" where team members could openly discuss concerns - whether it was about deadlines, material shortages, or jobsite conditions. Supervisors led by example, admitting mistakes they had made when they were new - learning and encouraging others to be open and honest.

Their "be curious" in action: Instead of looking to blame others or fix issues themselves, managers started using open-ended questions like, "What are the challenges?" and "What can we do to avoid this happening again in the future?" This shift reduced defensiveness and increased collaborative problem-solving. (Notice the "we" language.)

Their "people champion" approach: Company leadership launched a mentorship program where seasoned foremen changed their mindset from "telling people what to do," to "helping people learn what needs to be done, and why." This resulted in stronger relationships between the foremen and their teams.

This was not a fast process; changing behavior and building trust are not things done overnight. But by staying committed to their weekly huddles, using open-ended questions, and using a "we" approach the company realized significant results:

» Project completion times improved by 15% due to better communication.

» Employee turnover dropped by over 20% within a year.

» Onsite safety improved, including one team that went over 365 days with no accidents.

When employees trust their leaders, they work harder, communicate openly, and take initiative. When customers trust a company, they remain loyal, advocate for the brand, and refer others.

My two main takeaways from Cinelli's interview:

» Fostering trust, connection, and collaboration through active listening and curiosity can help shift organizational culture and improve business outcomes.

» Effective leaders must be self-aware, communicate transparently, and create an environment where employees feel empowered to contribute and grow. ✐

About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, The Training Doctor, she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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