



REBUILDING TRUST WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

BY DENNIS S. REINA AND MICHELLE L. REINA

Edith was conducting an outplacement seminar designed to offer support to people who had just lost their jobs. Shortly before the session was to begin, she stepped into the hallway for some water when a manager approached her. “Edith,” he asked, “can you hold up the session for 10 minutes? I have two employees who need to be in your workshop today but haven’t been informed yet.”

Sometimes the mechanics of managing change overshadow relationships and compromise people’s dignity, respect, and trust. The manager in this vignette was insensitive to the needs of his employees. He was going to rush into informing them that they were losing their jobs and then send them immediately into a workshop about résumé writing.

Organizational change doesn’t have to happen this way. The betrayal people often experience is a result not of change itself but of how it is managed. Employees want to be a *part* of the process, not *apart from* the process. They want to hear the truth and have an opportunity to ask questions and become informed. How leaders manage change affects whether trust will be built or broken and desired outcomes achieved. Fortunately, most leaders are conscientious, trying to do the right thing in the face of all odds. How do they preserve or rebuild trust within their organizations, given the changing business landscape?

Change as Loss

People may experience change as a loss—the loss of relationships with those laid off or the dissolution of the “family” company environment that once existed. They may resent that they are doing more work for the same pay with fewer benefits. Often the organization is no longer the same place employees “signed on for.”

In a world where everything is changing rapidly, many people who previously looked to their workplace as a source of stability now regard it as out of control. It frightens them.

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On the other hand, the people initiating the changes often gain from them. If I am the one gaining, it can be hard for me to see how the other person loses. Many leaders are uncomfortable watching people experience the pain of change and are uncomfortable experiencing their own pain. They often consider this to be touchy-feely stuff, not the stuff of “real business.” During times of change, leaders tend to retreat to the “hard side” of business for many reasons: It is where they are most comfortable, where their role is more tangibly defined, where they are skilled, and where they are the safest. But in their retreat to the safe side, they fail to honor themselves, their relationships, and the real needs of the people they serve. Their search for safety results in a betrayal of themselves, their role, and those they serve.

Such betrayal damages individuals, relationships, and performance. It robs people of their ability to believe in themselves and diminishes their capacity to contribute wholeheartedly to the organization. When people feel betrayed, they pull back. Morale declines, as does productivity.

Effective leaders acknowledge

their employees’ feelings of fear and loss and work to restore their confidence. Otherwise, the betrayal continues, and people’s trust in their leaders and their organization further plummets. Survivors go into a state of resignation: They take fewer risks, blame others, go through the motions, and are not as productive as they once were. If employees have been burned before, they are less willing to give their all and come through when needed. If leaders do not deal with feelings of betrayal, they will unwittingly destroy two of the very qualities they need to be competitive: their employees’ trust and their performance.

Healing from Betrayal

Healing from betrayal—whether intentional or not—begins when we observe and acknowledge that betrayal has occurred and that we understand its impact on others. As a leader, you can take certain actions that can have a positive impact on people, as outlined below. These seven steps will help you and others remain aware of the behaviors essential to healing and provide a common language and perspective that engages people in rebuilding trust (see “Seven Steps for Healing” from *The Reina Trust & Betrayal Model*[®]).

Step 1: Observe and Acknowledge What Has Happened

“Mr. Smith needs to effectively address the ‘pay package’ issue at the organizational level. If benefits or merit pay are going to be negatively affected, he needs to manage the message through an effective and timely information program. I think he underestimates the level of awareness and impact this change will have on employees.”

- **Acknowledge the Negative Impact of Change.** Aware leaders realize that employees are whole human beings with feelings. They know that people who do not feel supported in dealing with their feelings and concerns are less able to heal from their experience of betrayal. As a first step, these leaders acknowledge the potential downside of the change process.

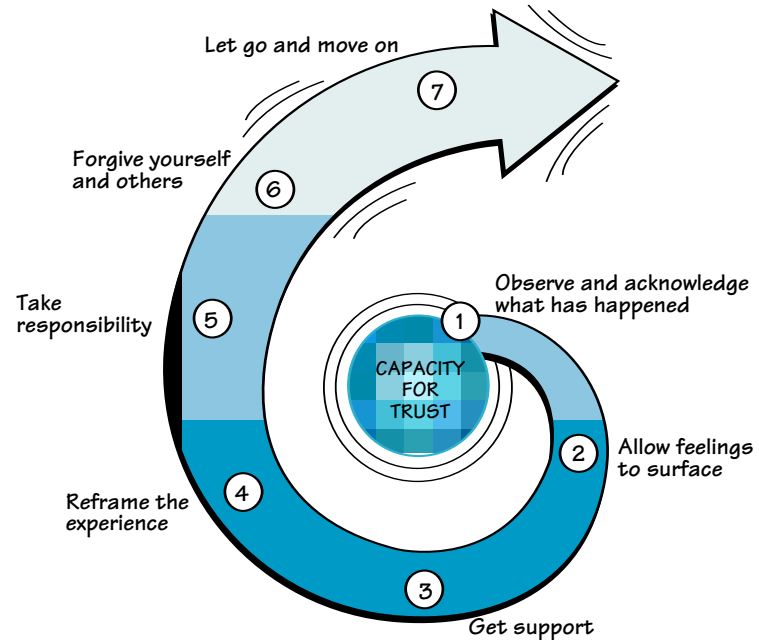
- **Start with Awareness.** One of the greatest mistakes leaders make in challenging times is to assume that, once a major change has taken place, trust will return on its own. This view is both unrealistic and irresponsible. Similar to healing at the individual level, the next step to healing at the organizational level is awareness that trust has been eroded.

- **Assess the Health of Your Organization.** Leaders can learn a lot by observing and assessing the climate within the organization. Notice what your people are experiencing and acknowledge it. Pay attention to what is building and breaking trust. Find out what is important to people. Listen to what they are saying at the water cooler, in the break rooms, and on the shop floor. When witnessing anger, don't just notice it; listen to it. Quite often, anger represents deeper feelings of hurt and disappointment. Remember, people in pain need to be listened to. They need someone they can trust to turn to for support and understanding. They need help to understand their own experience.

- **Acknowledge Feelings.** Effective leaders consciously acknowledge their employees' feelings of frustration, disappointment, and betrayal. It is only after acknowledging the feelings of betrayal that leaders are able to respond to them. Leaders must work very hard not to get defensive or try to justify or rationalize what happened. They must remember that people are entitled to their feelings. It is the role of a leader to listen, observe, and acknowledge.

Step 2: Allow Feelings to Surface

"I don't always feel heard—that I can address my concerns directly with certain



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managers and be taken seriously. It is important to me that I am able to do so. There are occasions when my supervisor has to address issues with a particular manager on my behalf, because I wasn't deemed 'important' enough by him to talk to. This attitude discourages me and other employees from addressing serious concerns in the future."

- **Give People Permission to Express Their Concerns, Issues, and Feelings in a Constructive Manner.** Create safe forums, staffed by skilled facilitators, that support the expression of fear, anger, and frustration. Giving your employees a constructive way to discuss their feelings and experiences helps them let go of the negativity they are holding, freeing up that energy for rebuilding relationships and returning their focus to performance.

- **Help People Verbalize.** Help employees give voice to their pain—pain they are afraid or unable to

share. When you give your attention to understanding your employees, you let them know that you respect their pain. This is difficult work for leaders, but it is important and necessary for facilitating healing and navigating change. Your employees don't care how much you know until they know how much you care—about them and their well-being. People in pain need to have their feelings heard. They need to know that you are able to relate to what they are saying and feeling. When you do not acknowledge your employees' emotions, they feel unheard, resentful, and distrusting toward you. Another layer of betrayal occurs.

Step 3: Give Employees Support

"Our leader took the time to hear our story. She really listened and asked us questions. It helped to tell her how we felt. She heard how frightened we were about what was happening around us. It feels good to know that she understands

our needs. When she shared her views, I was able to see things in a much different way. I am beginning to have hope for the future.”

- **Recognize Your Employees’ Transitional Needs.** People have needs that must be met before they can adapt to change. They have informational needs regarding the new direction the organization is taking and the strategies it proposes to get there. They have relationship needs associated with belonging and their role in the new organization. And they need their skills and abilities to be valued. When leaders expect people to embrace change without having these fundamental needs addressed, people feel betrayed.

- **Back Your Employees.** Your leadership position allows you to be your employees’ advocate. Represent their interests, defend them from unwarranted criticism, and lobby for resources critical to their jobs. By backing your people, you are building contractual trust and meeting the implicit expectations people have of leaders. Furthermore, you demonstrate that you can be trusted to fulfill future commitments and that people can count on you to do what you say you will do.

Step 4: Reframe the Experience

“Our president, Mr. Allen, took the time to visit every field office in our region to explain the business reasons for GNP Industries’ downsizing the eastern division. This helped us put the change into perspective. It lessened the communication gap between the headquarters and the field branches. His actions let us employees know that he cared. We believed he was going to do everything he could to lessen the impact the changes were having on our jobs, our families, and our lives. We understood the direction the company was taking and knew our leader would continue to tell us the truth.”

- **Put the Experience into a Larger Context.** Helping your employees work through their emotions makes it possible for them to begin to heal.

This movement gives you an opportunity to rebuild trust and helps employees reframe their experience by discussing the bigger picture: the business reasons for change. Honestly acknowledge the changes the organization went through and why. In doing so, you must continue to acknowledge what people have experienced. Only then will employees be in a position to accept the new direction in which the organization is headed and to see their role in it.

- **Engage in Inquiry.** The questions that people ask will guide their journey. Responding to their questions honestly will provide employees with understanding, awareness, truth, and renewed hope for a trusting relationship with you and the organization.

Something quite powerful occurs when we tell the impeccable truth—with no exceptions, no justifications, no rationalizations.

- **Help Employees Realize There Are Choices.** Experiencing betrayal leaves employees feeling very vulnerable and at the mercy of the forces of change. They may need help seeing that they have choices regarding how they react to their circumstances. The more people are aware that they can choose their actions, the more they are able to take responsibility for those actions. Employees may need help in examining their assumptions, breaking out of their self-limiting beliefs, and exploring options and possibilities.

- **Embrace Mistakes.** Some of the behaviors discussed that aid in healing may be new for you, and you may not trust your competence in exercising them. It may take some practice to develop these skills and become comfortable using them. During this time, you may make some mistakes. That does not automatically make you a failure. Embrace these mistakes as opportunities for learning, thereby turning them to your own benefit.

After all, they provide valuable feedback regarding what works and what does not.

Just as leaders must be sensitive to employees’ needs, employees need to be sensitive to leaders’ needs. This may mean having some patience and understanding that the leader is grappling with change as well. Therefore, if a leader makes a mistake, it is not necessarily evidence that the leader can’t be trusted. It is evidence that the leader is stretching, growing, and learning. When someone is practicing new ways of relating, people need to be supportive and understanding of his or her learning.

To gain support and understanding, you might find it helpful to share with people that you are learning new skills. Sharing this aspect of yourself demonstrates your trust in them and further extends the invitation to rebuild your relationship with them.

It is possible that you as the leader feel betrayed as well. It is as important that your feelings of betrayal be acknowledged and that you get support to help people see that.

Step 5: Take Responsibility

“Leaders need to take responsibility for how change was implemented. The restructurings took people by surprise and left departments with minimal coverage to do the work. Questions were not answered and needs not addressed. It’s difficult to imagine the distress this has caused. Employees were in great distress and felt quite isolated.”

- **Take Responsibility for Your Role in the Process.** It is not helpful to try to spin the truth or cover mistakes. It does not serve you or the relationship. Something quite powerful occurs when we tell the impeccable truth—with no exceptions, no justifications, no rationalizations. Telling the truth is the fundamental basis for trust in workplace relationships. It demonstrates one’s trustworthiness. We take responsibility when we acknowledge our mistakes. Three

simple words, I am sorry, reflect taking responsibility and go a long way to rebuilding trust.

- **Help Others Take Responsibility for Their Part.** When people are in pain, they tend to blame leaders and behave in ways that contribute to betrayal. We support others in taking responsibility when we help them see their role in creating the climate of betrayal.

Employees may not have control over change, but they do have control over how they choose to respond. Even though people may feel betrayed, those feelings do not make betraying in return acceptable.

- **Make Amends and Return with Dividends.** It is the leader's role to break the chain of betrayal and reverse the spiral of distrust. Because actions speak louder than words, it is important that you take the first step in mending fences with your employees. Remember that rebuilding trust does not simply mean giving back what was taken away. It means returning something in better shape than it was originally in. You must not only replace but also make things better. If this is not possible, be honest about the realities of the situation and what you can do to make amends.

- **Manage Expectations.** To safeguard you and your employees against future betrayals, keenly manage expectations. Employees want to know what is expected of them and what they can expect in return. Emphasize the need to negotiate with them when their expectations cannot be fulfilled. Doing so strengthens contractual trust between you and your employees.

- **Keep Your Promises.** Managing promises is important in relationships. Trust is the result of promises kept. Don't make promises that you know you can't keep; doing so just sets up you and everyone with whom you have a relationship for a downfall. When you realize that you cannot keep promises, renegotiate them; don't break them.

Be careful of what you promise and what you appear to promise.

When you are attempting to rebuild trust, it is essential that you not try to justify past actions and that you address the perceptions of those who feel betrayed. According to Frank Navran in *Truth and Trust: The First Two Victims of Downsizing*, "It is enough for an employee to have believed that a promise was broken for trust to be violated."

Step 6: Forgive

"Many employees feel that they have been intentionally misinformed and lied to. They do not trust management. It will take time for forgiveness to happen. We need to bring in support to help us understand the surrounding circumstances and allow us to say what needs to be said, to 'get this off our chests.' This will help us shift from blaming management to focusing on problem-solving the issues, so we can begin to forgive."

- **Recognize That Forgiveness Is Freedom.** Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves. It is about freeing ourselves and others from the anger, bitterness, and resentment that can deplete our individual and collective energy and spirit and interfere with relationships and performance. When we help people forgive others, we help them free themselves. With forgiveness, they heal for their future by changing their attitude about the past. We help them see new possibilities.

For most people, forgiveness takes time, and it happens a little at a time. Over time, employees may be willing to forgive, but you cannot expect them to forget. You can help them heal from the pain they felt, but you cannot erase the events of the past. Occasionally, employees may still be a bit angry after they forgive. It is natural that they may experience lingering feelings of anger for the perceived wrongs they experienced.

Occasionally, you as a leader may need to forgive yourself. You did the best you could, and for whatever reason, it still wasn't enough. Beating yourself up mentally and emotionally is worthless and self-defeating. Acknowledge for yourself what needs

to be said or done to put your mind and this issue to rest. Then just do it! Be compassionate and cut yourself some slack during the healing process!

- **Shift from Blaming to Focusing on Needs.** Because forgiveness is a personal matter, it is difficult for people to forgive a system. However, leaders can work to cultivate a more personal and trusting climate where healing and forgiveness can take place. They can begin to do this by helping people shift from blaming the organization or its leaders to focusing on their personal needs as they relate to the business.

It is important to address persistent resentment and blame in an organization, as they are toxic to the individuals involved and to the whole system. They undermine trust, morale, productivity, creativity, and innovation. People continue to blame when they perceive that those who are responsible have failed to take responsibility. At the same time, they feel that they do not have to take action and are therefore not responsible.

It is essential for leaders to help people shift from a blaming mode to a problem-solving focus. What do employees need to resolve the issues, concerns, fears, and pain they are feeling? What conversations need to take place? What still needs to be said? What needs to happen for healing to occur? What will make a difference right now?

Step 7: Let Go and Move On

"Our leader brought in outside skilled facilitators to provide the needed support through the transition. During the small-group discussions, they were neutral and made sure we were all heard. They held a tough line, helping us see our leader's point of view. The facilitators really drove home the responsibility we all shared. We had painful but powerful discussions. What a relief it was when we were able to forgive ourselves, because we were no angels. But things really shifted when we also forgave our leader. Wow—we have moved on and are all on board with our organization's new direction."

- **Accept What's So.** Leaders can help people accept what has happened. Acceptance is not condoning what was done but experiencing the reality of what happened without denying, disowning, or resenting it. It is facing the truth without blame. It is helping employees separate themselves from their preoccupation with the past and helping them invest their emotional energies in the present and in creating a different future.

- **Realize That You Won't Always Accomplish Your Goal.** Although you may not always accomplish your goal, it is important that you make a good-faith effort and that your intentions are honorable. It is quite acceptable for leaders to disagree with their employees or not support a particular cause. Effective leaders do so with honesty and integrity.

- **Take the Time and Make the Commitment.** Building trust takes time and commitment. When trust is lost, it is regained only by a sincere dedication to the key behaviors and practices that earned it in the first place. The road back is not easy. However, by listening, telling the truth, keeping your promises, and backing your employees, you will play an instrumental role in assisting your employees and organization to heal from betrayal, rebuild trust, and renew relationships.

- **Give Support!** Providing support is a sign of your dedication to the healing and rebuilding process. The number one mistake leaders make is expecting people to immediately move from step 1 (observing and acknowledging what has happened) to step 7 (letting go and moving on) without doing the necessary work of the other steps. We aren't built to work this way. People in pain cannot simply move on. They need to fully go through the healing process. When people are willing and able to do the work, it will lead to renewal!

Your commitment to practicing these seven steps, and engaging your people in the same, will lead to transformation. Imagine the possibilities! ■

Dennis S. Reina, Ph.D., and Michelle L. Reina, Ph.D., are the authors of *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization* 2nd ed (Berrett-Koehler, 2006), from which this article was adapted with the authors' permission. They are also cofounders of The Reina

Trust Building Institute and each hold doctorates in human and organizational systems from Fielding Graduate University. Together and independently, they are sought-after consultants, keynote speakers, and executive coaches. Contact them at www.trustinworkplace.com

NEXT STEPS

Reflecting on Your Experience

Individually reflect on the following questions and be prepared to discuss your insights and observations with your teammates.

1. Think of a major change that reduced the trust within an organization or even caused a sense of betrayal. What did leaders do that contributed to the betrayal?
2. After the betrayal occurred, what steps, if any, did the leadership take to promote healing? What would you recommend leaders do to help themselves and their employees let go of the past and move forward?
3. During a major organizational change, what would you recommend leaders do to address the needs of employees? What would you recommend for managing the new expectations that are being created during this change process?
4. How could leaders reframe change in terms of a larger context that would make sense to employees?

Identifying Behaviors That Build or Break Trust

Use this template to identify which behaviors support or build trust and which behaviors detract from and break trust within the organization.

1. Draw a large T on a piece of flipchart paper, and label the top center "Trust Within Our Organization." Then label the left and right columns "Builds Trust" and "Breaks Trust," respectively.
2. Have the team identify the specific behaviors that build and break trust within the organization and list them in the appropriate column.
3. Rank and prioritize the behaviors under each column. Select the three behaviors that break trust the most.
4. Strategize ways to resolve these three troublesome behaviors.

Trust Within Our Organization	
BUILDS TRUST	BREAKS TRUST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep agreements • Openly share information • Acknowledge others' skills • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miss deadlines • Cover up mistakes • Micromanage people • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____

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