

COACHING BUILDS TRUST, SAVES TIME AND CREATES LEADERS

Rosie Steeves, PhD

Trust is an important element of leadership. However, research indicates that a lack of trust is far more prevalent than organizations would care to admit. A recent survey suggests that almost 50 per cent of employees feel a lack of trust in the workplace. Even within high-performing organizations, where it is taboo to say it out loud, we often hear "quiet" stories about insufficient trust.

Many executives recognize and speak about trust, but rarely have a clear understanding of how to enhance it. We typically hear comments such as "my employees have to earn my trust," which is more often interpreted as "don't make a mistake." For employees, this approach offers little guidance and can have negative effects.

At **MDS Metro**, the largest provider of diagnostic laboratory and testing information services in British Columbia, trust is explicitly recognized as an essential part of leadership. **Nigel Banks**, vice-president of human resources, speaks to the role of trust in overcoming the challenges of the business, such as being innovative in a regulated industry and developing positive relationships in a unionized environment.

MDS Metro builds trust by focusing on relationships. This, in turn, is done through a focus on leaders coaching their employees. Indeed, coaching is one of the most effective ways we know to develop trusting relationships in the workplace. Effective trust-building behaviours include communicating openly and honestly, showing confidence in others, keeping promises and commitments, listening to and valuing the opinions of others and co-operating and looking for ways to help others. Coaching can provide a platform from which these behaviours can be developed and demonstrated.

On the other hand, improper coaching can inhibit trust. We have witnessed in some organizations so-called coaching conversations, where the manager simply talks to their employee or has the employee play a strange game of 20 questions to guess what the manager is thinking.

Nevertheless, competent coaching is the key to leaders developing leaders in organizations. "Turning the lights on" for a direct report and trusting them to do the work rather than continually giving technical advice is an extremely powerful way to build effective relationships.

"When I think back to the best manager I ever had, he never had to tell me that an idea of mine would not work," Banks added. By asking questions and examining consequences, employees can get there themselves, arriving with their self-esteem and dignity intact. Coaching skills allow managers to help people figure out for themselves how they can do their jobs better and make a greater contribution. The coaching conversation offers an opportunity for managers to demonstrate confidence in their direct reports, while at the same time allowing direct reports to share their thoughts. All of these are critical trustbuilding behaviours.

But we cannot expect leaders to learn how to coach on their own. Organizations must invest in developing the coaching skills of their leaders. At MDS Metro, all managers first participate in a leadership development program that offers a powerful focus on coaching. Each successive program provides an even greater emphasis on coaching. The one big drawback here is time. It takes longer to lead people through the thought process that will allow them to come to their own conclusions than it does to just tell them what to do.

But by helping employees reach their own conclusions, we are not only giving them the skills they need to address future issues, but also building trust and strengthening relationships. This saves time down the road.

So if coaching works so well, why doesn't everyone do it?

Embedded in the traditional, heroic model of leadership, there is a lot of pressure on individuals to have the answer, to be decisive.

The shift to accepting that managers do not have the best solution ultimately requires a shift in our understanding of leadership.

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