THE TITLELESS LEADER

How to Get Things Done When You're Not in Charge

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OPERATING WITH TRUST

"I would rather be the man who bought the Brooklyn Bridge than the man who sold it."
—Will Rogers

The schemes emerged as soon as construction ended on the East River Bridge in 1883. George C. Parker received credit for initiating the "selling of the Brooklyn Bridge" scam, convincing those who fell for his polished pitch they could make a fortune charging tolls for bridge access. Parker claimed he "sold the Brooklyn Bridge twice a week for years." Eventually that approach landed him in prison for life.

A hundred and thirty years later, it's even harder to figure out what to believe and whom to trust. We live in a time where it's difficult to differentiate a real photograph from one created by computer wizardry, where falling for a phishing hoax poses financial risks, and the 21st-century equivalents of selling the Brooklyn Bridge fill headlines and e-mails. The increasing complexity of the world impedes our judgment of real or not real, scam or opportunity, trust or no trust.

These are just more reasons why operating with trust is the most important component of titleless leadership. But the key reason comes from a Towers Watson's *Global Workforce Study* which found, "the number-one trait workers want in their leaders is trustworthiness,"[1] adding the sobering statistic that only 12 percent of respondents said their leaders were.[2]

In small businesses, non-profits, not-for-profits, and multibillion-dollar enterprises, people want to work for, with, and around people they can trust. But what does that mean in the context of *your* work? How do you operate with trust in an era of distrust and growing cynicism? What is work trust anyway? And most importantly, how do you get it? That's what this chapter is about. It's light on theoretical; heavy on practical.

Where trust meets the road

Where would you rate yourself on the trust equation? Would you rather be the person who sold the Brooklyn Bridge or the one who bought it? That question is where the proverbial rubber meets the road, not just for this chapter's topic, but for the book's. Titleless leadership and natural followership *emerge from trust.*

So, if you happen to know a George C. Parker–type person, scheming to sell today's equivalent of the Brooklyn Bridge, dangling carrots or half-truths to deceive staff or clients, or taking shortcuts or devising schemes for personal gain, I'll be blunt: this isn't for you. People don't choose to follow people who want to manipulate them, deceive them, or lie to them. People don't give their ideas, discretionary efforts, enthusiasm, or best work to people they don't trust.

What you need to know about trust

Trust is a misunderstood word at work. And while it might be interesting to consider why, what work trust is and isn't, or what happens when it's broken, are topics for a different book.

In fact, there's a chapter on those issues in my book, *Hitting Your Stride,* called, "A Practice of Trust." That chapter is available as a download for you (see additional resources in Chapter 15).

When I refer to trust, I mean *authentic trust*, also called *relationship trust*. Bottom line? Authentic trust comes from authentic people, and those who effectively lead without title or authority are authentic people. More about that in *Part 2: From the Inside: How Does It Happen?* Grounded in self-awareness, well-intentioned and consistent behaviors, and commitments honored and fulfilled, their actions enable others to have confidence in them and the relationship.

Snippets about authentic trust

- ⌘ **Trust begins with trust.** Contrary to popular belief, you don't get trust because you earn it; you get it because you give it. Trust is a verb. It's an action. Giving trust is a choice or judgment you make when you put confidence in or rely on someone else. Trust begins by giving trust, just like love begins by loving, respect by respecting others, and communication by sharing information.

- ⌘ **Trust involves risk.** It's how, when, and to whom trust is given that determines a positive or negative outcome. That means assessing risks and benefits, along with conditionality. You might trust a computer tech to remove a virus, but not plan your wedding. Charles Feltman in *The Thin Book of Trust,* defines work trust as: "choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions."[3]

- ⌘ **Trust builds relationships.** Authentic trust happens *in* relationships. Authentic trust is built only when there's a commitment to the relationship. When

the relationship is more important than any single outcome, reciprocity is central to support and exchange, and mutual commitments are delivered without personal advantage or attempted manipulation or control, trust grows.

The other side: being trusted

By definition, trust as a relationship builder means there's two sides. Will people trust you, follow you, and be in a sustained work relationship with you? It's one thing for you to give trust, but what happens in return? Are you worthy of your coworker's trust?

In a University of Nebraska Management Department paper on authentic leadership, the authors' definition is worth noting: "[Authentic Leadership] is a process by which leaders are deeply aware of how they think and behave, of the context in which they operate, and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths."[4] That kind of self-awareness applies to titleless leaders as well.

Consider this self-reflective exercise, giving thought to your actions at work, and determine if what you see would be perceived as trust-building or trust-busting.

Trust-Building or Trust-Busting

On average, is the statement more true or false for you?

1. Others can count on me to meet deadlines.   T / F
2. If I get into trouble or can't solve an issue, I'll ask for help.   T / F
3. I think it's better to say "just trust me on this" than
   discuss it.   T / F
4. I check facts before passing along workplace stories.   T / F

5. Ignoring e-mails or messages has no bearing on my
    trustworthiness.   T / F
6. Most people I work with are trustworthy.   T / F
7. Once someone betrays my trust, that's it—it's over.   T / F
8. I need people to be accountable before I give
    them trust.   T / F
9. I look first for the reasons not to trust someone.   T / F
10. People would say I'm good to my word.   T / F

Self-Reflective Scoring: Give yourself one point for a true response on questions 1, 2, 4, 6, 10. Then add one point for a false response to 3, 5, 7, 8, 9. A score of eight or above reflects, more often than not, your behaviors and philosophies communicate a trust-building approach that will help you be perceived as worthy of someone else's trust at work.

Trust footings

Mobile workers. Flatter organizations. More work. Less people. Technology advances. Shared resources. Ad hoc teams. Matrix reporting. Result-based performance. Reduced budgets. Increased expectations. Fluid direction. Custom solutions. Global economy. These issues face us at work. But in two, three, or five years, there'll be different challenges and issues. Change, innovation, and growth orientation is the new normal.

Consider how important authentic trust is under these circumstances. Recognizing those who can be trusted, worked with, and followed is an essential skill for anyone's career. Getting results, building natural followership, and leading people who don't report to you will be the norm, too. As such, these skills and behaviors become even more important to master.

Operating with trust is the foundation of a titleless leader. But it's a little more complicated (you knew that, right!), than the words might imply. Let's take a look.

Trust Essentials for Titleless Leaders

⌘ **Performance Trust: the fulfillment of a claim, promise, or request.** Some label it integrity, some walk-the-talk; others openness and honesty, or accountability. I call it performance trust. It's the result of all these, but competence is the starting point. People want to follow those who do what they say they can do, do it well, and enable and engage others' strengths along the way.

⌘ **Self-Trust: the reliance on self, confidence in self and actions.** Self-trust means trusting your intentions, motives, and integrity. It's meeting expectations and keeping your word. It involves self-esteem and self-confidence. It's hard to trust others if you don't trust yourself. Lack of self-trust can be at the center of distrusting others. You're unlikely to be viewed by others as trustworthy, if you don't view yourself that way. But self-trust goes beyond that. Solomon and Flores in *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*, define self-trust as "the ability to trust one's self to trust wisely and authentically."[5]

⌘ **Relationship Trust: the way of operating grounded in authentic trust.** I agree with Booker T. Washington who said, "Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and to let him know you trust him." But I would add, few things help relationship building more than authentic trust. Those who get results keep relationships central. Relationship trust is not an absolute, but operates in shades of gray, keeping in perspective what matters *for* the relationship. It leaves open the possibility that broken

trust could be rebuilt. Trust is not glue that holds a re-lationship together, but a way of operating. Relation-ship trust is started, built, and evolves through your well-intentioned and ongoing actions.

The how: operating with trust

The formula is simple. If you want to operate with trust and create a trusting work environment, pay attention to yourself, and to your intentions, actions, commitments, and behaviors. Of course, that's common sense for any part of life. Trust is not blind or unconditional, and it's not without risk. But it is an es-sential choice for titleless leaders.

However, sometimes we're blind to the impact our actions have, or we operate under stress with impaired self-awareness, unintentionally diminishing trust in the process. I experienced that recently as a conference speaker. I arrived early to get a better understanding of the audience before my presentation. Waiting outside the auditorium for the morning's general ses-sion to begin, I watched the event coordinator arrive for what appeared to be a planned inspection.

Hotel waitstaff stood behind the food tables as he walked the breakfast setup. No good morning, hello, or how are you to the crew who would deliver service on behalf of his client. No thank you acknowledgement for creating an inviting space for the several thousand soon-to-arrive guests. In fact, he attempt-ed no personal connection at all. His first words were, "I hate it," pointing to a flower arrangement. "Move it," he said. After barking orders of what to change "immediately," he was gone.

You can imagine how enthusiastic and engaged everyone was by the first guests' arrival. I'm not suggesting insincere praise or faux-friendliness, which is as transparent as bubble wrap and as trust-diminishing as a lie. But what the event coordinator

failed to understand was his personal impact on the group's performance and motivation.

Whatever relationship he might have had with staff was diminished or reinforced that day. His approach did nothing to help people bring the best of who they are to their work, to their guests, or to build repeat business. It also did nothing to evolve a trusting relationship, or ignite natural followers.

According to a Harvard Business School article, employee "dissatisfaction is at a 23-year all-time low," with unhappiness rates as high as 82 percent.[6] Maybe that event coordinator is among them. One thing is certain: the staff he interacts with is part of that statistic.

It doesn't have to be like that. Individuals who effectively lead, with or without title, understand people work for people, not for companies. They help others do their best work by creating pockets of trust where people can shine. And these trust-pockets are where you'll find the remaining 18 percent of employees—the satisfied, committed, fully engaged ones.

You can create your own pocket of trust at work. There are three keys to building relationship trust. Operating with trust is a skill and like most skills, it takes a bit of time, practice, and focus to develop.

KEY #1: Give trust first

Think of giving trust like turning on a dimmer switch. You start with a little light, and gradually turn the light brighter to fit your needs. If you turn it up too bright, you can turn it down and adjust the level.

Giving trust is like that. Rather than an on-off light switch operating as the equivalent of "I trust you or I don't trust you," authentic trust evolves incrementally over time. Central to increasing the trust level is accountability from the other person in the relationship. Here's how it works:

- ⌘ **Start on low.** Early in a new work relationship, you might say, "Run it by me first." If that happens, move forward, giving more trust as it makes sense according to impact risk, project needs, experience, and communication levels.
- ⌘ **Move to medium.** Things are operating well. Accountability is clearly demonstrated by the other person, so you adjust the trust level, something like, "Keep me posted on what you're doing." If you're receiving status reports, meetings, or updates you're comfortable with, you add more trust.
- ⌘ **Higher and higher.** Adjust the trust level upward as the results and relationship prosper. Eventually, extremely high trust relationships operate with something such as, "Let me know if you get into trouble or need my help." Even at very high trust levels, communication updates remain essential for keeping each other current and connected on issues.
- ⌘ **Lower and lower.** Sometimes turning back the dimmer switch and reducing trust is needed. This may happen because the accountability of the person has slipped, but more often it occurs when project requirements or delivery has changed. Then, it can be important to regroup and refocus a closer involvement for a time. Relationships built on trust understand

that trust levels can fluctuate. It's not a personal issue, but a business issue that typically drives the fluctuation; for example, reorganizations, accelerated deadlines, redirection, or new initiatives.

But giving trust first is not just an individual or team process where a dimmer switch approach fosters a strong and effective work relationship. Giving trust first is a way of thinking and operating. It's a big team mindset. Here's an example of how titleless leaders can build trust currency and increase followers using something I call an African Heads-up:

It didn't take long, while on safari in Botswana, to recognize animal calls heralding a predator roaming the area. The shrieks of baboons, the trumpeting of elephants, the screams of francolins, and the cries of impalas were picked up by adjacent animals and sent out for as long as the threat remained.

In that predatory/prey world, survival depends on heeding and passing on warning calls. It's nature's heads-up. While you're not in danger of being eaten, work harm still lurks, and a heads-up can reduce the frequency of encountering it and confirm that you have coworkers you can trust to save you stress, mistakes, and wrong turns.

While most pass on warnings to same-team teammates, they infrequently cross imaginary boundaries. Accounting, IT, marketing, customer support all may be affected by information you know, but silo parameters hamper communicating to them. Too many think of personal survival and small departmental herds, instead of organizational survival and large-group thriving.

But those who get results without title are big team players. They think beyond self. Operating with trust, they help others succeed. They sound the heads-up, passing along warnings when they get them. They believe only if the organization does well will people thrive. That simple heads-up gesture sets them apart and builds trust in their intentions. Titleless leaders give as many heads-up as they can. As poet and author, Maya Angelou, so aptly put it, "Nobody, but nobody, can make it out here alone."

KEY #2: Effectively communicate

The rules have changed. Hoarding information, withholding pertinent facts and perspectives, or hiding or misleading others is old thinking about how to gain influence and success. People who think like that also believe followers automatically come with a title. The bigger your title, the more followers, right? Not anymore.

In this era when intellectual property is the competitive edge for most organizations, information must be shared. But what information can or should be shared? With whom? How often? How much? The following tips offer practical ways to build trust by what you communicate and how you communicate it. They're intended as a sampling of concepts affecting communication and trust building.

Communication tips for elevating trust

➥ **Check the facts before sending, telling, or sharing.** As former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts." When information shared is consistently credible, factual, and useful, you build trust. Just like urban legends of lies and distortions floating around the internet, they're at work,

too. People who don't pass along rumors, half-truths, and speculations, but verify facts first, are those others trust.

➡ **Eliminate an automatic reply-all response.** You've gotten them, sent them, and hated them. You know those e-mails escalating out of proportion to the issue, where someone starts cc'ing a boss, and everyone else does, too. People add the bosses' boss and the bosses' bosses' boss and everyone in between. This communication style screams distrust. Stop the escalation by picking up the phone, walking down the hall, initiating a web meeting, or addressing the e-mail to only those who should be included. Eliminating a cover-your-your-know-what communication style builds trust.

➡ **Think on-going conduit.** Trust-building communication is a continuous process. People who communicate only when they need something or when it's in their best interest, limit trust. Those who regularly operate as a conduit of information increase trust. That doesn't mean you pass on everything. There's a balance between protecting confidential or proprietary interests and sharing needed knowledge. When you have information others need to effectively do their best work, as a conduit, your role is to share it. What you communicate at work is different from what you might text, Tweet, or post. Information that adds to overload or isn't pertinent to others diminishes, not enhances, your trust currency. But not knowing *critical* information is a trust-buster.

➥ **Expand your vocabulary:** *I don't know. I made a mistake. I was wrong.* People trust people who are accountable, who take ownership for their actions, and are willing to say they don't know, made a mistake, or were wrong. Trying to justify an inaccurate position, cover up a mistake, fake knowledge, or act as if it didn't happen leads nowhere. People follow people who, when they don't know, find out; when they make a mistake, fix it, learn from it, and share that learning to help others avoid it.

➥ **Expect and give honest answers.** Communication that elevates trust is a dialogue built on integrity, forthrightness, and honesty. It's more trust-enhancing to honestly tell a staff member or coworker, "I can't share that information right now" than to tell a half-truth or a lie. Trust comes from being authentic, which requires a genuine communication approach. But that doesn't mean you need to, or should, share the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Your good judgment is required *at all times* at work.

➥ **Own your message.** It's difficult to deliver messages of shortcomings, unpopular policy, or organizational or status changes. But how you handle difficult communications is, itself, a message. Don't delegate delivery. And a caution about word choice. Words matter. When you're accountable for your words, messages, and pass-along communications, and don't hide behind e-mail, text messages, or voicemail, but handle the difficult messages face-to-face or voice-to-voice live, your actions convey

the bigger message of respect, care, and compassion. While people may like not the message, they can respect the messenger. That builds trust.

➥ **Acknowledge harbored emotions. Your body is speaking.** According to Dr. Carol Kinsey Goman, author of *The Nonverbal Advantage* "93% of the messages people receive from us have nothing to do with what we actually say."[7] What are you feeling that your body is saying? There's nothing wrong with acknowledging you just came from an intense meeting, so the person you're talking to understands that what they're sensing from you is not about them. It's difficult to build trust if you pretend you're not angry, frustrated, or concerned. Your body language transmits harbored emotions—pay attention to what it communicates.

➥ **Listen with undivided attention. Put the phone, tablet, gadget away.** We're so busy communicating, we fail to communicate. We think because we said, sent, or posted something, it was understood. We confuse communicating with understanding and silence with listening. Real listening requires attention and a quiet mind. There are few behaviors more powerful in building trust than receiving someone's focused and undivided attention on what you're saying. Demonstrate with your actions that you value the person, and that what they say matters. Cultivate deep listening, ask clarifying questions, initiate dialogue, and seek understanding.

People with good information make better decisions. People with no information make un-informed decisions. Effective communication is a skill that enables others and builds trusting relationships.

KEY #3: Show up

Showing up means operating from your authentic self—the best of who you are at the core level. The best you includes characteristics such as: kindness, compassion, love, tolerance, trust, and integrity. It includes your uniqueness: gifts, abilities, knowledge, and inner awareness.

People who show up authentically are magnets for trust. Authentic people don't surprise you, manipulate you, or deliberately mislead you. They're not hypocritical. Nor are they trying to be someone they're not. They're genuine, credible, good-to-their word people who are self-like.

However, the word *authentic* is frequently confused with the word *transparent*. There's often a transparency with authentic people, but that doesn't mean authentic people are always transparent, nor should they be. Operating from a best-self place is different from transparently telling everyone how lousy you feel, what's wrong with you and your life at this moment, or sharing everyday thoughts, emotions, and ups and downs.

Living your life out loud in this age of technology is a choice you make with what you post, Tweet, upload to YouTube, or communicate to others, but doing so doesn't mean you're authentic. Being authentic involves a deeper connection to your best-you core.

Bob Burg, coauthor of *The Go-Giver*, makes the distinction in a blog post, "Don't Confuse Authenticity with Transparency," stating: "One, let's not confuse authenticity with being a slave to

our present feelings. And two, let's utilize our authentic selves in order to propel us to our next level; not keep us where we are."[8]

Getting results from others involves showing up. When you bring the best of who you are (at the core level) to your work, others follow your lead, contribute trust, and authentically show up as well.

People follow people who put their trust in them and help them shine. Do that, and the influence and the results you get at work will surprise you. Do that consistently, and you've mastered an essential element of being a titleless leader. Ralph Waldo Emerson put it well, "Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great."