Strong Like an Oak: 10 Ways to Grow Trust in Your Workplace

What does Old English have to do with our modern workplace? A lot, if you're talking about trust. According to its ancient origins, the word trust is related to the words strong, faithful, and true. And true is related to a tree. That's right, trust = tree. Makes sense, doesn't it? We don't bury an acorn and expect a tall oak the next day. It takes patience, persistence, and faithful watering to grow a tree that stands strong. The same goes for trust. It requires long-term commitment and plenty of figurative water. Here's how you can make it grow:

1. Choose "face to face" over "bits and bytes"
   If you tend to send e-mails to colleagues who are close by, give the keyboard a rest. Walk over and communicate in person. It takes more time but builds stronger bonds.

2. Be an open book
   Too often, people "share" information in strategic slivers. They think they're being clever, but those on the receiving end know what's happening - and invariably respond in kind. Refuse to play the game. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

3. When you mess up, fess up
   We all mess up every now and then, so cut yourself some slack. Just remember that how we respond to our screw-ups can have a bigger impact than the screw-up itself. Feel free to borrow from Yogi Berra, who set the standard for self-deprecating confession when he said, "I made a wrong mistake."

4. Strive for dialogue over noisy discussion
   The word discussion has Latin roots that link it to the words percussion and discord. If you bang the drum of your own perspective in meeting after meeting, stop. Replace it with dialogue, which is all about opening your ears, eyes, heart, and mind to the ideas of others.

5. Exert your emotional intelligence
   Who cares if it sounds touchy-feely? To build trust, you need to treat people like people -- and that requires plenty of EQ to go with your IQ. Work hard to read and understand others' emotions, and then use your insights to take wiser action.

6. Think in terms of the big "we"
   Many workplaces are sliced and diced into sections and silos. Be on guard for an us-against-them mindset that pits people against each other. Make a point of reaching out to other teams, work units, and departments. Ditch the "us and them" in favor of "we."

7. Be the best kind of spy and gossip
   Workplace stories can shape and solidify a culture -- for better or for worse. Make sure you're focusing on the best. Be a spy who seeks out examples of trust in action. Then turn into a gossip, sharing those examples every chance you get.

8. Fit your style to the situation
   If the proverbial lookout yells "iceberg," by all means, be a top-down leader. But flex your style as conditions change so you're always bringing out the best in people. You'll end up being a coordinator, a facilitator, and a coach -- sometimes all in the same day.

9. Be ready for those moments of truth
   There are times when you'll face a true test of trust. You'll need to take a leap of faith in a new colleague. Or you'll have to share confidential data with another department. Or you'll have to send someone else to visit a key customer. People will be watching with their trustometers in hand.

10. Think of trust as a verb
    Sure, trust is also a noun. But the best way to achieve it is by doing it. That means taking action now.

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