Activating Trustworthiness

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An organization of managers and employees that are trustworthy — in other words honest, competent, authentic, responsible, self-driven and caring — will itself take on those same characteristics.

It is these characteristics, or the lack of them, that largely define internal cultures and even external brands. Yet as important and strategic as organizational trustworthiness is, it is based on nothing more than these characteristics being manifested by the individuals and managers employed in the organization.

If you are part of an organization, or more importantly, a manager in an organization, that doesn't manifest trustworthiness, what can you do? How do you transform an environment that operates under strict management controls, close supervision and internal distrust to one where people are self-driven, self-managed and working together for the good of the company and each other?

If you're a manager or an owner, the obvious answer is: It starts with you. Employees follow your lead. You must demonstrate the values and characteristics you want your employees to adopt. But that alone is insufficient. There are three necessary organizational principles that, together with your own trustworthy behavior, will activate and maintain employees' desire to be trustworthy:

• Communication: Employees need to be well-informed about the organization in which they work. They need to know about matters such as the health of the organization and the direction of the organization. They also need to be heard and feel understood. They need to feel they are part of the "inner circle," that group of privileged employees who are "in the know," which should be all employees.

• Involvement: Employees need to be involved in influencing the direction of the organization. In order for employees to truly feel like a part of the organization, they need to feel their ideas and actions are valued. If they are consulted in matters such as improving customer satisfaction or reducing costs, they feel respected. They want a chance to contribute to the organization above and beyond the normal day-to-day requirements of their job.

• Security: Employees need work environments that are safe, physically and emotionally. They need to know the organization is really concerned about their safety and security. Employees need to know that if they perform their work with the right effort and the right attitude, they will be treated fairly. Their work environment needs to be a place free of sarcasm, harassment and frustration.

Collectively, these three principles activate an employee's sense of belonging. They make an employee want to cooperate. They help satisfy an employee's critical need to be valued, respected and understood.

In return, employees value and respect the organization for which they work. They want to help it, and others in it, succeed. They have an inner desire to do what's right for the organization and take on organizational values that are exhibited by the organization's leaders.

Exhibit your own trustworthy behavior and maintain focus on these three principles, and you will be well on your way to building organizational trustworthiness.