

# A Matter of Trust

By David H. Maister

A revised version of this article, written in 1998, was included in *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) by Maister, Green and Galford.

Whether dealing with clients, colleagues or associates, the success of working relationships depends crucially on how much trust exists. Yet levels of trust are often surprisingly low in all of these contexts.

## Trust Among Partners

In spite of firms' efforts to promote cross-boundary cooperation, many partners do not trust their colleagues in other departments, and they avoid bringing them into their client relationships. As (short-term) merit-based compensation systems have spread, and as firms have grown through mergers and lateral hires, partners in different departments or offices know each other only marginally and are less inclined to do favors for, or work well with, each other. They don't trust each other to "do the right thing."

There is less sharing going on, more hoarding of work and clients and less willingness to do things for the general well-being of the client or the firm. Partners are afraid to abandon their own self-interest in order to do things for the benefit of the firm as a whole because they do not trust that others will do the same.

Firm management is frequently mistrusted by partners. For example,

partnerships frequently discuss the benefits of investing in various nonbillable activities for the long-run health of the firm. Yet implementation is usually poor to nonexistent.

Again and again I hear partners say that while they see the wisdom of these activities, they do not trust the firm's management or compensation committee to treat them appropriately if they engage in such activities.

"They say they want us to do these things, but the rewards continue to flow in the same old directions. We don't believe what they say, only what they do."

Practice group leaders often choose to retain their full book of business (that is, serving clients) rather than spending some of their time coaching and helping other people in the practice group succeed.

When asked why they do this, one of the most common replies is, "But if I reduce my personal practice in order to have the time to manage, how will I reenter the practice when my time as leader finishes? I don't trust my partners to help me rebuild my practice or to protect my income when I go through the rebuilding phase."

If practice group leaders distrust their partners, the feeling is often reciprocated. When considering whether they would accept a coaching system whereby one partner would be

responsible for the success of the group and spend more time managing, the feelings of many partners are captured by the individual who said, "I'll accept coaching from someone I trust, but that's not every one of my partners. In fact, it's a very limited set. For many of my partners, I'll never believe that they are acting predominantly in the interests of the practice group as a whole, rather than for their own interests."

The cost of such lack of trust is high. It leads to diminished teamwork, ineffective management and underinvestment in those activities that benefit the firm. Clearly, a highly trusting society would accomplish more, both for the firm and the individuals within it.

### **Trust Among Junior Professionals**

The level of trust among junior professionals is also desperately low. In many firms, juniors used to believe that if they worked hard the firm would make sincere efforts to train them and help them develop. They believed that the firm cared about them and wanted them to succeed. Few juniors now trust partners to do this, and they think (accurately, in many cases) that the firm views them as fungible production machines.

Typical are comments such as these:

"It wouldn't take a huge effort to get the most out of us, but they treat us so badly [that] you just give up. I'd be prepared to make a bigger effort, but I can't see what it would get me. It's all take and no give. They regularly preach about their commitment to our development, but it's all lies."

"It truly is sink or swim here. There's no feedback, no training, minimal supervision and no help in building your career. Partners care about themselves and their income, with the client's interests a distant second. We don't even get on the list. They visibly don't care about us, so you can imagine how much we trust them."

Sadly, these quotes are not rare exceptions, but the norm in many professions. Many firms are aware of these attitudes, but few have done much to address the situations described. Apparently, the fact that their juniors almost uniformly distrust them is a situation that many otherwise excellent firms accept.

Does all this matter? It certainly does. A lack of trust creates problems in retention and turnover, and (since the word spreads quickly) it also affects recruiting. Low trust breeds lessened motivation and commitment, and this leads to lower productivity, efficiency and quality.

Notice that it does not necessarily lead to less production because the brute force of targeted billable hours can ensure compliance with the quota of sausages to be made. While short-term profits can be protected by micromanaging the amount of production, it is efficiency and quality that ensure long-term success.

### **Trust and Clients**

The need for trust in dealings with clients should be obvious. Consider your own purchases of professional services. Whether you are hiring someone to look after your legal affairs, your taxes, your child or your Porsche, the act of retaining a professional requires you to put your affairs in someone else's hands.

You are forced into an act of faith, and you can only hope that they will deal with you appropriately. You can research their background, check their technical skills and attempt to examine their past performance. In spite of all this, when it comes down to making the final decision on whom to hire you must ultimately decide to trust someone with your baby—which is never a comfortable thing to have to do.

What you and I (and all clients) want when retaining a professional is someone who will put the client's interests ahead of their own. We want someone who will care. We want someone we can trust to do the right thing by us. Getting hired is about earning and deserving that trust.

Yet signs that trust is declining among clients are everywhere. With ever-increasing frequency, clients conduct a microscopic examination of their professional provider's bills, challenging expenses, questioning how projects were staffed and how much time various tasks required. They force even long-term suppliers to compete for new work through beauty contests and other proposal activities, and they mandate increasingly detailed reporting from their firms so that they can monitor what is going on.

What a change this represents! There was a time when clients trusted professionals automatically, based solely on their honorable calling. Sound character and reputation were assumed, and business was conducted with confidence on a handshake. Great firms and institutions were born out of the natural expectation of trust.

That world has gone, but the need for trust has not gone away. What has taken

its place is the necessity to earn it (and re-earn it) throughout a professional's career.

### **How to Win Trust**

If trust is so important, how does one go about winning it? How do you get somebody to trust you? It is clear that this is not accomplished by asserting, "Trust me!" Nothing is more likely to get the listener to put up his or her defenses!

The key point is that trust must be *earned* and *deserved*. You must do something *for* the other person to give them the evidence on which they can base their decision to choose to trust you. You must be willing to *give* in order to *get*.

A perfect illustration was given when I had to find a lawyer to process a relative's will. The first few lawyers I talked to tried to win my business by telling me about when their firm was founded, how many offices they had and how much they would charge me. None of this inspired much confidence. Finally I encountered a lawyer who, during my initial phone call, asked how much I knew about what was involved in processing a will.

My reply was, "Nothing!" He then suggested that he would fax to me a comprehensive outline of the steps involved: what I needed to do immediately and what I should forget about for a while because it was not urgent. The fax also provided the phone numbers of all the governmental bodies I needed to notify, even though this had nothing to do with his legal work (or fees).

All of this (immensely helpful) information was provided freely, before I had retained him. Naturally, he got my business. He had earned my trust by being generous with his knowledge and proving that he was willing to earn my confidence.

Trust can be earned by the simplest of gestures. I have a dentist who frequently recommends that I permit him to perform various procedures on my teeth. Like many buyers, I'm never sure whether he is recommending additional procedures because I really need them or because he is just trying to increase his revenues (through cross-selling).

However, my view of him has been significantly affected by the fact that after every office visit he always calls me at home that evening to inquire whether I am in pain, whether I need a prescription and so on. I will confess to being very impressed by this. He is acting as if he cares. I don't know if he really does care or not (I do prefer real caring) but in a world where finding someone you can trust is becoming harder and harder, I'll even accept "as if" he cares. I usually accept his recommendations for additional work.

For me to trust you requires that I believe you will do what you say you will do—that your actions will match your words. This is a simple-sounding notion, but as noted above, partners often do not believe it of firm management, clients often do not believe it of partners and associates long ago gave up believing it of partners and firms.

How do you make employees think that you can be trusted? A perfect illustration is given by the professional who, together with his team, conducted an

assignment for a client that wasn't as good as it should have been (and everyone on the team knew it). It was competent rather than excellent. Rather than deliver the work to the client, the professional turned to his team and said: "Look, you'll all make mistakes in the future and so will I. But let's not send out something that is less than we are capable of. I'll absorb the losses on this project, but let's work on it until it really meets our standards."

Is this some kind of crazy, unbusinesslike behavior? Not at all. This single act energized the whole team and made them believe that this professional stood by his principles (his frequently espoused commitment to quality). Thereafter, they trusted him. They knew what principles he believed in, and they knew he would stick by his principles. He put his money where his mouth was.

He was more than repaid in the ensuing years by the profits generated through the juniors' energy, commitment and dedication to the quality for which he stood.

This simple story teaches some important lessons. People will trust you, be they client, colleague or employee, to the extent that they know what your principles (or deeply held values) are, and to the extent that they know you can be relied on to act in accordance with your principles. If people don't know what your values are, or worse, suspect that you have none beyond your own short-term self-interest, they will not trust you with their business, their loyalty or their cooperation.

Trust is about relationships. I will trust you if I believe that you're in this for the long haul, that you're not just trying to maximize your own short-term benefits

of our interactions. Trust is about reciprocity: You help me and I'll help you. But I need to know that I can rely on you to do your part and that our relationship is built on shared values and principles.

Alas, values and principles are scarce in today's world, and the consequent decline of trust is all too visible. That this should be so is truly a paradox, since the more you are trusted by your clients, colleagues and subordinates, the more you will get from them and the more you will thrive professionally and personally.

How much are you trusted by those you deal with?



David Maister is the author of *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) (coauthor), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002) (coauthor.)

Prior to launching his (solo but global) consulting practice in 1985, he served as a professor at the Harvard Business School.

**TEL:** 1-617-262-5968  
**E-MAIL:** [david@davidmaister.com](mailto:david@davidmaister.com)  
**WEBSITE:** [www.davidmaister.com](http://www.davidmaister.com)

You can automatically receive David's future articles via e-mail (at no cost) by registering on his web site ([www.davidmaister.com](http://www.davidmaister.com)).