think_piece

"What's trust gotta do, gotta do with it, what's trust gotta do with it?" (With thanks to Tina Turner), *Julian Powe* considers trust at a time when it is most needed

Well, quite a lot for public sector leaders at the moment to judge from our recent connections with them. We are encountering a wide range of situations in which we find public sector leaders facing the challenge of maintaining and sustaining trust, for example:

- A major public sector body recently looked at its pulse survey results a few months after announcing a significant reduction in staff numbers. Confidence in the capacity of the Board to lead the organisation through a significant period of change had plummeted.
- An international agency recently built a frame to improve its collaborative working, vital to its performance. At its core, the glue, was the need to build trust across functional boundaries
- As it orchestrates a significant transformation programme, one of the core values for a major delivery body is trust. They are exploring the practical ways to maintain trust levels during this period
- The sponsoring Department for a critical body is exerting considerable pressure in search of significant efficiency gains. Trust levels between the two parties are declining.
- The leadership team of one public sector organisation is being obliged to turn much more to each other, to pull on all the resources and capabilities within the team as it seeks to respond to major performance pressures. They are consciously working on their mutual interdependence and trust levels.
- Only yesterday, a Board member of a major Whitehall Department said to us, "The culture here is much too parent-child, and many of our people simply do not feel trusted".

It seems to us that there are two main reasons for this increased attention. Firstly, existing trust levels are coming, and will continue to come, under huge strain as performance and efficiency pressures rise and rise, bringing the existing employee deal under scrutiny. And secondly, there is growing recognition that trust is not just a nice to have, it is pivotal to performance in very demanding circumstances.

This note offers public sector leaders some thoughts on how they might maintain levels of trust during these very challenging times.

Here are four frames to help us before offering some tips for leaders.

1. Employee engagement.

Trust is at the core of employee engagement with all the benefits it brings for performance enhancement and improvement in the quality of relationships in organisations. Take a look at the Macleod Review and the four key areas for raising levels of employee engagement:

- Engaging around a strong strategic narrative, a powerful story about the future, amplifying the purpose and value of the organisation, striking both rational and emotional chords, and linking people and jobs to the organisation's overall vision and direction. We have enjoyed seeing several Permanent Secretaries, CEO's and their leadership teams do this very well recently, taking the discourse with their people away from an exclusive "We have to change".
- Ensuring there is a strong employee voice in the organisation, moving vertically, horizontally and externally. One major Department recently opened up a powerful face to face dialogue between the Board and their people after receiving feedback that staff were scared of frankly stating their views to their leaders.

- Developing managers who are better able to inspire, grow, know, involve and reward their people. It is high time that we really recognised that it is at this level that the most lasting impact on engagement can be made. One Department recently picked out a number of managers in pivotal roles and took them through a modular programme on Being a Confident Manager.
- Assuring organisational integrity such that espoused values are reflected in behavioural norms. One important delivery body recently recognised that its espoused value of collaboration was being wrecked on the rock of excessive top down leadership, and their leadership team took significant steps towards involving their senior people and front line managers in more constructive ways.

2. Trustworthiness.

The good news is that trust does not have to be an abstract subject. Its elements can be understood, taught and practised. Take a look at Charlie Green's work in his books Trusted Advisor and Trust-based Selling. He argues that the four building blocks of trust-worthiness are:

- Reliability, what we DO, our actions, our commitments. This is the one that takes the longest time to build up, but the shortest time to lose.
- Credibility, what we SAY, our voice, our words. This is not just about our content and the authority we bring, it is also about our delivery, our passion and confidence.
- Intimacy, our PRESENCE with people, our capacity to build relationships with people that are safe for them, based on discretion and empathy.
- Low self-orientation, in our FOCUS, ensuring that it is not our stuff and our point of view that pre-dominates. This is not about low assertiveness, it is simply arguing that we are more likely to be trust-worthy if our focus is on the needs and interests of others rather than our own.

We are finding this to be a powerful concoction for trust-worthy leadership; as a leader, we are honouring and carrying through our commitments, showing our point of view with evidence and passion, building a safe relationship and environment for our people, and caring above all about the success of our people and our organisation rather than our own. And we should remember from all the survey data that the top driver of engagement is senior leadership interest in the well-being of their people (ie low self-orientation).

And let us add in here Cialdini's research on the subject of influence. He discovered six "weapons of influence", none of which by the way have anything to do with the rational and logical. The six "weapons" are reciprocity, authority, consensus, consistency, scarcity and liking, with reciprocity top of the list. In other words, we are likely to return what we receive, as in the tendency to return a favour, and thereby accept influence. And it is the art of listening that is the most powerful; if I listen to you, you are more likely to listen to me. Remember the words of George Mitchell, a key broker in the Northern Ireland peace talks, when asked about the most important contribution he made – " I listened, I listened, I listened...and then I listened some more".

3. Leaders as humble enquirers.

Humility attracts trust. Charlie Green's emphasis on low self-orientation takes us to two recent schools of leadership thought.

Jim Collins found that professionally humble leadership underpinned the success of Good to Great companies; leadership that takes credit for little, giving it to others and taking the blame when things go wrong, and

demonstrating unbreakable commitment to what is most important for the business.

And Ed Schein's recent work on leadership has argued that the world is too complex and challenging for effective leaders to be other than humble enquirers. One public sector CEO we work with is highly adept at scanning the external environment, bringing insight and challenge into the organisation, and opening this up for discussion and debate.

Also, in his most recent book "Helping", Ed Schein defines high performance teams as "perpetual reciprocal helping". Are not repeated acts of generosity great ways to build trust? We are back to reciprocity. One leadership team we are working with is consciously addressing this by identifying and executing "What help can I offer you? And what help do I need from you?"

4. Safe uncertainty.

If life is uncertain now in the public sector, it is unlikely to become any less so in the next few years. When unsafe, such uncertainty gnaws away at trust, we become disoriented and powerless, tending to freeze, hit out at those leading us and become victims of what is happening to us. The trustworthy leader makes inevitable uncertainty as safe as possible for their people, not taking it away, but helping colleagues to get anchored, understanding what they can control and what they cannot, and adopting the optimistic flexible mindset needed to thrive in such circumstances. Here are some of the words used recently by a public sector CEO with his leadership team during a particularly demanding period of external and internal change; "These are difficult circumstances. And yet we have to retain our confidence both internally and externally. There is much we do not know and cannot know. We have to get better at accepting that we cannot understand everything. And there is much we are outstanding at and much we can control. We need to adopt an optimistic mindset, accepting what we do not know, focusing on what we can control and reminding

ourselves and our people what we are really good at." It was an outstanding moment of trust-building.

Some tips

So, drawing on these themes, here are five tips for public sector leaders as they seek to maintain and sustain trust levels in extremely demanding circumstances:

- Keep telling a strong story about the purpose and value of the organisation, its overall igniting purpose and its successes, not ducking the difficult news.
- Listen, really listen to your people. Show genuine interest in their well-being.
- Cultivate and demonstrate a spirit of optimism, despite all the pressures and difficult news.
- Give real attention to the development of strong relationships across the internal boundaries in the organisation.
- Build a strong sense of mutual helping in your own immediate leadership team and your broader leadership community.

This is our take on the issue of trust. We would be delighted to hear yours. Thank you.

Julian Powe

Director, Public Leadership Inquiry

March 2010

References:

David Macleod and Chris Brady; The Extra mile –
How to Engage Your People to Win; 2008; FT
Prentice Hall

David Macleod and Nita Clarke; Engaging for
Success, Enhancing Performance through Employee
Engagement; 2009: BIS

David Maister, Charles Green, Robert Galford; The
Trusted Advisor; 2000; Simon and Schuster

Charles Green; Trust-based Selling;2006; Mcgraw-
Hill

Jim Collins; Good to Great; 2001; Random House
Business Books

Ed Schein; Helping – How to Offer, Give and Receive
Help; 2009; Berrett-Koehler Publishers

.