

# Trust and Powerful Learning

By Ernie Kahane

**High trust leads to high learning, which leads to high performance.**

MOST COMPANIES view effective learning as formal training using courses and curricula. But what many don't realize is that an alternative view for effective learning is emerging. For many employees, effective learning doesn't take place unless there is an inherent trust between the organization and the learner.

The most powerful learning related to business results is dictated by whether employees view themselves as part of a team. This approach involves fundamental trust, which influences other learning that takes place within an organization and can potentially jeopardize a significant portion of the money spent on formal training.

In the United States, recent polls demonstrate that low levels of trust both in our institutions and amongst each other are rampant. In a 2001 Gallup poll, only 41 percent of Americans said most people could be trusted. In the same poll, nearly 80 percent

believe top executives will enrich themselves at the expense of their companies.

In a 2005 Gallup poll, only 16 percent of U.S. adults believed the honesty and ethical standards of business executives were high or very high. The World Economic Forum surveys trust globally, and in its 2006 report, it found that trust in many institutions dropped significantly in the last few years. In the United States and Canada, overall trust in global companies is negative.

## **Magic formula**

Many businesses would pay dearly for a magic formula that would ensure high employee commitment, participation with the highest level of intensity, and managers who are determined to bring out the best in their employees.

One such organization in the world of sports is the Duke University basketball team. Duke Coach Mike Krzyzewski, better

## MANAGING THE LEARNING FUNCTION

known as Coach K, has the most wins of any active coach in college basketball today. Through his more than 20 years at Duke, he led the team to eight NCAA Final Four tournament appearances and back-to-back national championships.

According to Coach K, in leadership, there is nothing more important than trust. To achieve success, trust must be a part of every team.

Coach K builds trust by developing relationships with each of his players and by guaranteeing each potential recruit that he will help them become a better player. All he asks is that each player show the same level of effort and dedication. That means playing every game like it is the national championship and treating every practice with complete focus and intensity.

By taking the time to develop trust between each player and among the coaches and managers, Coach K teaches his players to act effectively in crisis situations. Talking about his 2001 NCAA championship team, Coach K says that the team lived in a protective bubble with no jealousy, envy, and selfishness. He adds that he always sought to develop that level of trust, but it was the players who created the 'no jealousy zone.' If one player had a bad game, another picked up the slack.

### Trust and learning

If trust can serve as the bedrock of commitment and high performance, what is trust and how does it impact learning and organizations?

Trust implies that people will keep their promises, speak truthfully, keep their word, and act morally. Trust assumes that people share common values. Trust is fragile because it is always subject to betrayal. In organizations, trust involves the expectation that leaders will look out for the interests of clients, customers, and employees. It assumes a fiduciary responsibility that executives are technically competent and will serve others, not simply themselves.

When trust thrives in an organization, good things happen—people cooperate, share expertise, tell the truth, work harder, and listen to each other. Employ-

ees work hard for the organization because they see themselves as valued members of a team and as stakeholders.

Trust acts as a catalyst for learning and performance because learning requires leaving one's comfort zone to improve performance. Getting better demands patience while performing at a lower level as you learn the new skill. Going outside one's comfort zone is risky and could lead to mistakes. Support and trust are critical to help staff adjust to the learning curve.

Trust also promotes the sharing of expertise because one's success isn't dependent upon someone else's failure. Trust creates organizations where employees are teachers and learners. Of course, trust isn't the only factor driving extraordinary performance. For Coach K, practice and preparation, fairness, honesty, responsibility, courage, discipline, respect, and confidence are all critical components for success, but trust is the foundation.

Trust fails in organizations when employees perceive the company as failing to live up to standards of fairness, honesty, and responsibility. When employees sense that their organization is not treating them with respect or looking out for their best interests, they will not be committed to the organization's goals.

In environments where trust is lacking, people are fearful. Self-protection becomes their only source of motivation. Because real learning requires exposing a weakness, the learning process is compromised when employees can't safely take risks.

Where trust is nonexistent, employees are outwardly compliant but inwardly defiant. Formal learning courses become perceived as a form of compliance and control rather than empowerment. Attempts to change behavior are resisted and deemed as manipulation. Instead of being used as opportunities to learn, mistakes are viewed as potentially punishable offenses.

In environments like these, learning is perceived as a competitive activity, not a shared endeavor.

Lack of trust within an organization makes efforts to use e-learning and

informal modes of learning extremely difficult. Since rewards and punishments are the guiding incentives in a competitive corporate environment, learning that requires additional self-discipline, self-direction, and acceptance will be slighted.

### The importance of trust

If a lack of trust undermines an individual's commitment to organizational goals and sabotages meaningful learning, what can we do about it?

While most organizations are concerned about high performance in their organizations, few manage trust directly. Some companies and consultants believe that organizations are made up of free agents, not teams. Many businesses don't think trust is important.

However, by not managing trust as a corporate asset, companies risk not only innovation and learning but also execution. The ability to execute requires trust. Without high trust, you can't assume that in ordinary or crisis situations, people will work together as a team. In the age of on-demand business, where the needs of customers require real-time response, lack of trust can be a showstopper.

There are companies that specifically manage trust and gain unwavering commitment and high performance for doing so. Jeffrey Pfeffer, Thomas D. Dee II professor of organizational behavior in the graduate school of business at Stanford University, has written books that examine how select organizations place employees first and achieve extraordinary business results. He cites a study that shows high-performance management among 702 firms "resulted in an increase in shareholder wealth of \$41,000 per employee."

Pfeffer said in a March 27, 2006 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* that Southwest employees talked about their company as if it were family. When talking about their company, they used the pronoun "we."

### Trust audit

Trust needs to be an integral part of learning analysis, design, and implementation as you strive to meet strategic business objectives. You may not be able to create an organizational strategy to build trust, yet you can facilitate more

trust through your learning programs.

First, workplace learning professionals must conduct a trust audit of the audience and environment that supplements traditional performance consulting. A trust audit gauges the current level of trust and identifies a plan of action for learning programs that influences positioning, activities, learning media, and follow-up.

In environments without trust, where commitment and buy-in are almost nonexistent, workplace learning professionals need to address concerns and build trust. Learning won't take flight if there is no commitment, which requires dialogue. Since trust is about perceived care, competence, and integrity, these values need to be demonstrated through interaction and design choice. By respecting participants and fostering an environment where people can feel safe acknowledging what they do not know, an organization can go a long way toward achieving long range objectives.

Learning professionals should aim to build small communities of trust by demonstrating actions that promote trust and by addressing issues openly. Genuine participation, clear strategies, direct talk, fairness, and re-entry strategies can all create high-trust environments.

Trust should be recognized as a fundamental form of learning. High-trust cultures and the strength of the connections among people that make cooperation possible is what writers like Robert Putnam, author of *Making Democracy Work*, describe as "social capital," which he argues is not only critical for strong organizations but also for strong economies. High trust leads to high learning, which leads to high performance.

Not every organization can attain the success and degree of trust exemplified by Coach K's teams. However, we all can find ways to incorporate trust in our team and in our models of learning and instructional design. By helping to build high-trust organizations, we will all find the way to play the best possible game. **TD**

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