

# Principia

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Queensland Secondary Principals' Association

## *Trust - an important ingredient in schools and coaching?*

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In our schools, the myriad of relational interactions across multiple stakeholders, constitute what O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) describe as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). That is, systems within systems, diverse networks growing and adapting to change in the internal and external environments. This adaptation is unpredictable and interactional. How does the ingredient of 'Trust' work in these relational systems – our schools?

Trust is an important ingredient whenever people come together to accomplish and achieve goals. It's important between school - community, between teachers - leaders, between teacher-students and between staff members. There is also evidence of the importance of trust between co-workers and the impact this has on overall wellbeing (Helliwell and Wang, 2010). It seems trust is crucial to our relationships and achievements whether in teams or everyday interactions.

Trust is about relationships and to have a relationship, we must interact with those around us. Yet, defining trust can be tricky. We know when it's not there, but a lot of the time we're not even aware whether what we're saying or doing is building or diminishing trust (GCI, 2002).

It is interesting to note that leaders and team members often view trust differently. Often, leaders view trust in terms of consistency, "If I can count on them to get the job done, I can trust them." – a functional trust. Conversely, team members seem to view trust in terms of communication, "if the message I am receiving personally from my boss, values me and my contribution, I can trust them." – relational trust (O'Connor and Cavanagh, 2013).

When a leader accommodates the team perceptions of trust, people feel safe and are more likely to take risks. To do this well, you need to be genuinely interested in others and what they have to say (Horsager, 2012).

The landmark study of trust in Chicago schools by Bryk and Schneider (2002) found 'that a broad base of trust across school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans.' (Bryk & Schneider 2002, p. 5). They describe the determinants of Relational Trust as;

- Interpersonal respect
- Personal regard for others
- Role competence
- Personal integrity

Interpersonal respect is described as civility, a deep listening to others' concerns and inclusivity; personal regard for others as the extent of caring about staff; role competence as an expectation of the ability to do one's job well and supportive structures in place to address incompetence; and, personal integrity as putting the students' interest above own personal and political interests, walking the talk and communicating effectively.

Furthermore, their research found that schools with high trust had a three times higher chance of improving student outcomes than schools with low trust.

Harris, J, Caldwell, B & Longmuir, F (2013) in a literature review prepared for AITSL take this further referencing Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd (2009) on how high relational trust works in schools and the consequences of relational trust for teachers and students;

For teachers;

- Positive attitude to innovation and risk
- More outreach to parents
- Enhanced commitment
- Enhanced professional community

For students;

- Improving academic outcomes in high trust schools
- Higher likelihood of positive social outcomes

Trust is achieved through our interactions with one another and our relationships have a conversational component. An encouraging finding from O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) is that there is a 'ripple effect' from coaching conversations. Their findings show that the impact of coaching conversations 'ripples' through the relationships of a CAS. For example, when a leader is coached the people closest to the leader are impacted positively. Further to this the people around this group are positively effected and so it 'ripples' through the relationships. The intensity of the impact decreases based on the social network – or proximity to the leader – which is not surprising. What was interesting in this study is that communication from the leader to the team and communication from the team to the leader was more positive after coaching and subjective wellbeing improved and rippled through the relationships. (O'Connor and Cavanagh 2013).

Could coaching conversations in school be a way of building and increasing relational trust? Is this type of conversation, one to one, a systemic approach? From what we have outlined so far we would say yes to both. Coaching is an interactional approach designed to promote the reflection, awareness and responsibility of the person being coached. Taking responsibility leads to taking action. These actions in turn nudge or disturb the relationships in the CAS – the ripple effect.

Coaching is a leadership style that is developmental, interpersonal and customised. Leaders who can bring coaching skills and the associated conversational strategies into play can improve performance, support change, develop and foster independence, and reduce stress. Here are some ideas from the popular Leadership Coaching Guide by Growth Coaching International;

Applying a leadership coaching style is not complicated but it needs practice and persistence. Specifically, it involves:

- Listening Developing trust and relationships
- Listening Understanding organisational needs
- Listening Knowing the needs of individuals in your organisation
- Listening Helping individuals and teams to establish goals
- Listening Identifying gaps between goals and current reality
- Listening Asking questions to facilitate exploration of the options for addressing the gaps
- Listening Assisting people to move to responsible action
- Listening Giving honest feedback. Giving praise and yes, you guessed it
- Listening

(GCI, 2015)

There is no single formula for leadership. Different situations involving different people at different times require different leadership styles and techniques. Moreover, different leadership styles are required at different organisational levels, in different sectors, in different industries and different cultures. This captures the interactional nature of leadership in a CAS.

Moving more deliberately into the coaching space, trust is critical to the coaching relationship.

How do you develop relationships based on honesty and integrity?

How do you ensure your own trustworthiness?

**Here are 16 ways to go about building trust:**

- 1** Tell yourself this person is worth talking to.
- 2** Acknowledge the issue is important to them.
- 3** Always do what you say you'll do. Demonstrate consistency and reliability.
- 4** Be competent in your own role and make sure people know what to expect from you.
- 5** Tune into people's WIIFM radio station (i.e. 'What's In It For Me?'). Learn about what's important to them.
- 6** Listen at least twice as much as you speak. As Stephen Covey says, 'Seek first to understand then to be understood' (Covey 1989).
- 7** Schedule time to really get to know your people well. What are their interests and passions in life? When are they happiest? What annoys them most?
- 8** Respect the person's communication and organisation preferences.
- 9** Be sensitive to people's limits and vulnerabilities.
- 10** Challenge yourself to always restate the other person's point of view before presenting your own. Demonstrate to the person that you're genuinely listening to them and trying to understand their issue.
- 11** Keep a simple journal or list of the things that matter most to your people. Commit to reviewing it at regular intervals and take action accordingly.
- 12** Admit your mistakes and your limits. Be honest about what you can and can't do.
- 13** Thank, acknowledge and value others for what they do. Praise generously and often — do it sincerely and as appropriate. (See Chapter 6 on 'How can you acknowledge achievement and motivate others?')
- 14** When giving difficult feedback, do it sensitively and with respect.
- 15** Keep confidences.
- 16** Regularly seek open and honest feedback on your own performance and adjust your behaviour as required.

(Growth Coaching International, 2015)

So in summary, we believe that trust is not only important but actually a vital ingredient for schools, coaching and leaders wishing to adopt a coaching approach in their leadership. So in good coaching style a few questions we encourage you to consider in relation to trust:

- What am I currently doing to display being trustworthy in my role?
- What am I currently doing that may be damaging trust?
- What do I need to remember to do (more of) to help build trust at a 1:1 level and within the school community as a whole?

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