

CommuniTea: Building Trust and Engagement

Led by Tiffany Summerville, Chief People Officer

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1st group discussion: What does trust mean to you?

Know it when you see it

Trust is a two-way street: you trust someone, you know that they trust you

If you feel trusted you feel you can do things without worrying - trust to be independent in a workplace (manager trusts you, you trust manager; you are trusted to complete tasks, you trust that you can ask questions and will be allowed to do your work in your way)

Trust is related to honesty, following through on commitments and on your word

Is trust instinctive? Does it have to be built?

Start in the middle with a first impression, then trust can go up or down depending on how things go

Trust is a little different depending on the relationship: trusting someone with your life vs trusting them to complete an office task

There is trust qua trust, and also the perception of whether trust is reciprocal: trusting someone, and also having a sense of whether they trust you back.

Fearlessness, confidentiality, support, truth

Fearlessness means that no one is going to harm me, emotionally or physically, on purpose. Trust means not intentionally hurting others.

Doing what you say you were going to do

Not lying, and telling the whole truth

Transparency, clarity, authenticity, and honesty

Trust can be a feeling of safety, and an understanding that confidentiality in a conversation will be preserved which generates a sense of openness

Having a safe space, feeling comfortable speaking openly

Following through on your word

Being able to count on someone

Trusting that someone has your best interests at heart

Safety, reliance, security, respect

Open and honest communication

Being proactive in honesty

When people respond to emails

Trust is something earned and that can be lost - a commodity, of sorts. People earn your trust based on what you value in them.

Part of trust is knowing what to expect from people (email response times differ; if you know what to expect from a person, ie fast response vs slow response depending on past experience with a person, you can communicate better)

Is trust in the workplace different from trust in personal life?

Yes: the relationships are different, the dynamics are different

In some ways, no: people who go to sea blur the line between personal and professional, so there has to be other kinds of trust there. Trust that someone will wake you up for a shift, clean the shared head, or watch out for you when you're working on deck is not a typical office-workplace thing

Small town trust: outside work, many of us also are friends in life because we're the only people here year-round. Kids grow up together when people are here for decades. It's hard to separate the workplace from the personal in a place like Falmouth.

Specific workplace trust: some of us do kinds of work that have hazards different from what you might encounter in a desk job at times. You need to have trust that your colleagues will save your life if you need it, which can blur things in a way that is not necessarily standard for workplaces.

Even though this is a professional environment, we do deal with heavy and personal things at times - grief, harassment - and a lot of trust is involved in those conversations.

WHOI is made up of people. What makes a bond of trust is the same here as anywhere, since it's an interpersonal thing.

Tiffany talking about some things

Per surveys, most people trust their peers and colleagues (but not all); only about a third trust their orgs/employers (surprise)

Trust is good for people and for work.

Building trust: it is earned, can be lost

You have to be willing to earn trust, by keeping promises and communicating.

Honesty, transparency, consistency, and modeling trustworthy behavior are important.

Trust gaps and trust breakers

Trust is often lacking in an upward direction in organizations, but leaders seem to trust downwards (again, per surveys). Communication lacking?

Avoiding confrontation erodes trust (callback to Alicia Booker's CommuniTea)

Lack of feedback erodes trust

Ineffective communication and ambiguity erode trust

Lack of interaction between people erodes trust

Hybrid work is not as conducive to building trust in some ways - limited interaction between people (leaders and/or peers)

Trust can be broken when you hear how a person talks about other people - even if they're great with you, gives the feeling that they may also be talking behind your back. Related: trust in an organization can be broken when you see how the org treats other people, even if it treats you well personally

At WHOI, a lot of things feel abstract - can't say "this person did this"

Example: AVAST was intended to be for blue collar work, at the 11th hour it was switched to be a science facility. Makes it hard to trust WHOI when the word just comes down from on high. Not an individual, but the organization as a whole.

In this case, trust was broken by lack of feedback/receptiveness to feedback, lack of communication, not keeping your word, lack of transparency.

Humans tend to want to know why things happen/decisions are made. If no reason is given, that erodes trust; a reason being given, even if you're not getting what you want, at least means you understand the situation better.

Ineffective communication and limited interactions are related and build on each other

2nd group discussion: for one trust-breaker, discuss 3 actionable recommendations to close the gap and build trust

Intentions matter. Sometimes trust is broken when one side is a bad actor, but other times (often?) neither side is actively trying to be bad, they just fall short of trust gap(s). Solution: communicate, communicate, communicate. Notice when you are on one side of a trust gap (avoiding conflict, not communicating) and make an effort to bridge the gap. Note that this works best when a trusting relationship is already established - easier to build back than to build up.

Communication won't necessarily get what you want or tell you what you want to hear. Need to go into these conversations with the recognition that you still may not get exactly what you want.

Trust inertia! When trust is lacking to begin with, trust breakers tend to build on one another.

Having set disciplinary and accountability standards, and equitable application of those to everyone

AMAs with Peter are a good venue for transparency

Ineffective communication -> assumptions

Use your words, use them carefully

Ask for why decisions were made - ask clarifying questions in the moment, and/or afterward

Remember that you don't know everyone's life experience

Lack of access to leaders -> get your boots on the ground, walk around and get to know the people you're working with. This has been challenging since the start of covid but it is super important.

Why has it been challenging? Remote work is fairly common these days, and there's a diverse constituency of people at WHOI. It's actually fairly difficult to meet people from all groups at WHOI because (a) people are spread out, (b) not everyone is in every day, (c) people go to the field. Also, a lot of turnover in the last 5 years means trust needs to be re-earned.

Do we feel comfortable just asking to get on peoples' calendars to talk to them?

Yes/yes if we know them already/maybe. Tiffany's advice: if you feel comfortable with initiating engagement, go for it! Suggest to leaders that they should be meeting and talking to people!

Assumptions, when expectations aren't met -> be honest, ask for explanation, work to face the problem together. Us vs problem, not you vs me. Communicate expectations and move on from it. You can't control what other people take from it, but can look to the future together.

Communication -> Include people in the decisions that directly affect them. When there's a communication gap people tend to fill it with a negative, so try to keep things continuous and share progress.

Often there is communication with no associated action, which is also ineffective and feels performative. Prioritize answers and follow-up; provide space and time like open office hours for people who don't feel as comfortable initializing conversations; financially support these actions and allow people to actually participate in conversations (ie billable hours for attending meetings etc? Or else many people will have to work late in order to go to a town hall. Similarly, support the people who hold office hours).

Shout out to people ops! They are willing to help and in some folks' experience HR has changed since the times when there was perhaps less trust

Ask for feedback and accept it sincerely - don't ask when the decision has already been made. Provide timely follow-ups.

Final thoughts

Think about what you can do to build trust! Do it!

Tiffany and People Ops are here to help. Anyone is welcome to reach out and talk! Tiffany gave out her personal cell phone number, the epitome of trust. She sits in Nobska house when she's on campus.