How to create trusting environments

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Trust creates a better environment and better results, says Amrit Sandhar.

If asked how they would describe their company underline culture, the first response many people might not give is 'trusting' or 'trusted'. Whilst we might work in nice environments, where the people we immediately work with are lovely, the organisational culture created by leaders can often be described in a very different way.

The Edelman Trust Barometer 2019 shows trust in organisations has improved, currently at 58% (trust in my employer for information). Whilst this improvement is good news, there is still some way to go to unlock the productivity tied up across organisations, and leaders and managers play a pivotal role.

Let's use the example of flexible working to explore how improved trust can benefit an organisation. We've seen many organisations rolling out flexible working policies, only for them not to be implemented well.

This is often due to an internal conflict faced by many leaders and managers; on one hand it's a great benefit to shout about to employees, but on the other hand, how does a leader manage their team if they cannot see them, cannot see how productive they are being, and cannot guarantee they are not all sitting in their pyjamas watching daytime tv, getting very little done?

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There are two aspects we need to address here: the first is developing meaningful conversations improving clarity of goals and expectations, the second is developing meaningful relationships that improve trust between people.

When these two things happen, we have a trusting environment, where people can work in the best way they see fit, delivering the work expected, without the need for constant 'policing'.

The challenge for many leaders isn't as simple as recruiting people they can trust, although this is always important. We need to help leaders and managers to change their mindsets of what being productive at work looks like, and this goes back to meaningful conversations and meaningful relationships.

In many organisations the HR teams often express their frustration that regular conversations (whether formal 1-2-1s or informal catch-ups) aren't happening often enough.

L&D teams often resort to upskilling leaders on how to have these meaningful conversations, but the challenge that frequently gets missed is how to help leaders and managers understand the value of these conversations. When people are tasked to do something such as having regular check-ins with their team, it becomes exactly that – a task.

But what benefits do teams really gain from these regular check-ins? As well as reinforcing and cementing relationships through showing care and concern for the individual, they are a way of agreeing milestones of what needs to be done by when, and the value this will add.

This level of clarity means people can get on with doing what they do, in the way they do it, without the monitoring that can take so much valuable time and effort. This also means employees can work where they work best, and more importantly *when* they work best (knowing what we know from research in Chronobiology), provided the agreed milestones are achieved, in the time agreed.

In some organisations, sitting around reading and researching might be seen as being unproductive, let alone meeting up with someone over a coffee (outside of your break times). But going for a coffee and catching up with someone could add more value than we realise.

We know from the great work by Paul Zak who researched the neuroscience of trust, that taking time to get to know someone can give us a sense of security about them. This releases oxytocin, creating the foundations for a trusting relationship.

In order to forge meaningful relationships, it's about finding those 'hooks', that connect us. We all share similarities to each other in some way, whether it's our lifestyle, upbringing, education or career – we're all at some level, the same as each other.

Creating a culture where it's ok to take time to spend chatting with colleagues at work, allows people to really connect with each other, to find the commonalities, to forge these meaningful relationships.

We probably all remember the Results Only Work Environments (ROWE) approach from a number of years ago, the concept developed by Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson in their 2008 book 'Why Work Sucks and How To Fix It'.

The focus of this concept was to allow freedom and flexibility to achieve results, for work that was clearly defined and measurable. If meaningful conversations are not happening (because we're far too busy for that), relationships aren't being given a chance to form, and clear milestones not being agreed. Is it any wonder then, that benefits such as flexible working haven't been embraced fully?

Trust is the foundation that will improve the world of work. We need trusting relationships where people take time out to get to know each other; where we trust people that we have recruited, will bring skills and experiences to make the organisation even better.

Combine this with insights from chronobiology about when our brains work best in a 24-hour cycle, and you begin to see the value of trusting employees to undertake the work in the best way they can.

Trust is a skill that can be taught, through helping leaders and managers understand the importance of relationships, of having meaningful conversations and the need for clarity. Supporting leaders and managers to transition their mindset to create these trusting environments, can result in truly transform organisations, impacting upon every aspect of work.

About the author

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