Getting You to Trust Them

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Trusting people is not easy for any of us, but it may be particularly difficult for administrators.

It entails a degree of letting go that may feel uncomfortable for people used to being in charge. It also requires a fair amount of courage, since you never really know what other people are going to do — and in this case, what they do might very well reflect negatively on you.

Last month, in "Getting Them to Trust You," I wrote about four specific steps that academic administrators can take to earn the trust of faculty members: Tell the truth, keep confidences, follow through, and have their backs. Those are all important, but in the end it comes down to this: If you really want people to trust you, you have to trust them first — and demonstrate that consistently by your actions.

I've spent enough of my career in toxic environments — characterized by cynicism, backbiting, passive-aggressive obstruction, and even open revolt — to know that trust is essential for any program, department, or college to achieve its full potential.

Faculty members who enjoy their supervisor's trust feel liberated to pursue creative professional agendas, often achieving even beyond their own expectations. As trust filters down, it creates a more pleasant work environment, an atmosphere of collegiality and mutual support where all can thrive. That doesn't mean there won't be problems. It just means that, when a problem arises, people cope with it calmly and consensually rather than with bitter, factional finger-pointing.

Assuming you are the type of academic leader who wants to jump on the trust bandwagon, here is how to proceed.

Resist your inner control-freak. You may not think you have control issues, and perhaps you're right. But in my experience, most administrators do — to some extent. The desire to exert control over your environment is often one of the things that leads you to administration in the first place.

Last year, my colleague Marcia Ditmyer and I developed an assessment tool based on my 2010 essay "The Four Quadrants of Administrative Effectiveness." (Marcia is an administrator at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, by day, a psychometrician by night.) Basically, the Four Quadrants Assessment allows people to plot themselves on a graph in terms of how much control they like to have and how much responsibility they're willing to take. We administered it for the first time in February, to about 120 participants at a large national conference for academic leaders.

The most surprising discovery for the majority of those folks: They are much more inclined to be controlling than they ever imagined.

The desire to control things — and people — is perhaps natural for engaged leaders, but it's inimical to trust. Bright, talented, independent-minded, highly educated professionals don't appreciate a "hovering" or "micromanaging" boss. They rightly view such behavior on your part as stemming from an essential lack of trust: If you feel the need to tell them what to do all the time, you must not trust them to do things right on their own.

Control-freakery will never lead to a healthy climate of trust.

Relinquish the reins. Letting go is easier said than done, but there are concrete steps you can take to loosen your grip. One effective strategy is to set up structures that make decision-making a group effort. That way, certain decisions are simply taken out of your hands, your urge to control notwithstanding. A simple example is a departmental textbook committee. The chair doesn't pick the books — that decision is up to committee members, with input from the faculty as a whole.

Theoretically, the committee chair has no more or less say than anyone else. I'm frequently amazed, however, at the tendency of some chairs to insert themselves into this seemingly collegial, consensual process — either by pressuring people on the committee or handpicking members in order to get a desired result. I've also known leaders to override the committee's recommendations when things didn't turn out the way they wanted — and I'm not just talking about textbooks.

If any of that describes you, please stop. You're doing untold damage to your unit and its faculty. Acknowledge, humbly, that your colleagues are just as capable of choosing a textbook (or whatever) as you are, even if you don't personally agree with their choice. Then back off and let them do their jobs.

A couple of caveats:

- First, for a committee structure to be as fair and equitable as possible, it must be inclusive. Anyone who has a stake in the decision should have a seat at the table, either directly or through representation. That includes nontenured faculty members, adjuncts, and even graduate students.
- Second, inevitably, there will be times when the final decision falls to you, as leader. In those cases, solicit as much advice as possible, without breaking any confidences, and then make the best decision possible for all concerned. When you *can* allow others to participate in the decision-making process, you certainly should. Be on the lookout for opportunities to show faith in your colleagues' judgment.

Policies, shmolicies. My least favorite type of leader is the one who consistently falls back on the policy manual when what's really required is some good old-fashioned judgment. Even worse are the leaders who, with no written rule to fall back on, simply make up their own policy — sometimes on the spot.

Early in my career, I was at a department meeting when the chair read us the riot act. She had been wandering the halls and noticed some faculty members were not sitting in their offices during posted office hours. That was unacceptable, she insisted.

"But what if we have to go to the bathroom?," one of my colleagues rather timidly asked. Then, replied the chair, you

should find a colleague who is not holding office hours and ask them to sit in your office while you go to the restroom.

The abject silliness of that dictate should be self-evident. We didn't need anyone second-guessing our decision to go to the bathroom, and feeling like we weren't trusted made us resentful and distrustful of our chair. (By the way, don't be the kind of chair who roams the halls looking to see who is their offices.)

Of course there are legitimate policies that must be followed. And there are times when, as a leader, a policy manual can be your best friend, letting you off the hook for a decision that wasn't yours to begin with. But in my experience, policies are rarely one-size-fits-all. True leadership requires difficult judgment calls. Which brings me to my last point:

Deflect praise, accept blame. Perhaps the best way to show your trust in — and regard for — faculty members is to ensure that they get the appropriate credit for their accomplishments. That might mean nominating them for awards or fellowships, but it is often as simple as deflecting the praise that naturally comes your way, as leader, when your department or college conspicuously succeeds.

Because that's generally how it works: When the group performs well, and people notice, most of the credit immediately goes to the administrator. Good leaders understand that such credit is never solely, and seldom even primarily, theirs. Instead, it belongs to the faculty and staff members who worked so hard to bring about those happy results. And good leaders are extremely vocal about saying so, to anyone who will listen — from their own superiors to the press.

On the other end of the spectrum, when things go south, the leader often bears the brunt of the criticism, whether or not he or she is personally responsible. Good leaders, initially at least, shoulder the blame without making excusing or pointing fingers. Later, perhaps, in the privacy of their offices, you can have some very intense conversations with those who are actually to blame. But as a leader, your default response should be to take the hit.

Building trust requires accepting responsibility, even when it doesn't seem fair. It means letting go of your desire to control things and sometimes turning over the decision-making process to others.

None of that is easy for the kind of leader who is deeply engaged and invested, but it is necessary. And in the long run, it lead to a more functional, productive workplace — not to mention one where people actually like their jobs.