

Lawyers, teams and the speed of trust

By Emily Morrow

SOMEONE ASKED ME RECENTLY WHY I write articles and I responded “Because I like to write and am interested in the dissemination of good ideas, whether they are mine or someone else’s”.

Ideas about high trust teams particularly interest me because team functioning is central to the success of **any** venture involving more than one person. Hence this article.

I am a linear thinker and used to think: “Here I am at point A. What is the quickest way to get from here to point B?”

Although this was a seemingly efficient way to practise law, I now realise that sometimes one must “spend” some time to “save” even more time. My personal definition of efficiency has evolved.

Lawyers tell me they aspire to have an efficient team that does things right the first time, meets or exceeds client needs, has high morale, communicates well, has low turnover and so forth.

Despite these good intentions, time is money in the practice of law. It can be difficult to have the time to invest in and develop one’s team members. If that happens, trust levels within a team can deteriorate. When trust levels drop, team efficiency, effectiveness and productivity also suffer and revenue decreases. Lawyers who are too busy to invest time in their teams do so at their own peril.

Speed of trust

In his book *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen Covey posits that trust is not just a soft, social virtue but is, in fact, a hard-edged economic driver.

It’s a skill that individuals and groups can learn, perfect and incorporate into how they work together to become more profitable, collaborative and competitive. In other words, if lawyers work in high trust teams, not only will their lives be pleasanter, but their practices will be more efficient and more profitable.

When a team operates at the speed of trust, things get done more quickly and accurately, there is less “friction”, morale and

retention rates are higher and people have the information they need to do their jobs.

I often say that the only way I will now work with others is at the speed of trust. It’s just too inefficient, frustrating and downright unpleasant to work any other way. Once one has worked at the speed of trust, believe me, there is no going back.

What differentiates teams that work at the speed of trust?

Such teams are those in which **every** team member has consistently high trust professional relationships with every other team member. In other words, it starts one-on-one with each person and then generalises to the whole team. If even one relationship in the team is low trust, it will “infect” all of the other relationships and the team as a whole. It’s kind of like one rotten apple spoiling the whole basket.

Whether you are the team leader or a member of the team, it is your responsibility to have high trust professional relationships with everyone in your team.

Elements of High Trust Professional Relationships

Individual high trust professional relationships are based upon the following:

INTERACTION

The type of interaction that creates high trust professional relationships is that which occurs appropriately, frequently and is high quality. It must happen often enough that team members can rely on it.

The highest quality interactions are, of course, face-to-face, as these involve not only verbal content, but also facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and other nuances.

It’s not essential always to have face-to-face interactions, but it is essential that team members do so often enough that it sets the tone for telephone conversations, email correspondence and other remote communications.

The team needs to invest ongoing time and energy to build high trust professional relationships. The occasional team retreat, meeting or lengthy discussion may be admirable, but it alone will not suffice.

This becomes both very important and challenging for teams whose members are geographically distant from each other and who work together remotely. Leaders of such teams would be well advised to invest regularly in getting the team physically together when possible and utilising video conferencing frequently.

DISCLOSURE

An excellent way to erode trust is to fail to share critical information with someone else who is then surprised (often unpleasantly) to learn this information indirectly.

Even if team members have had a relatively high level of trust in the past, this will undermine it. Conversely, if team members and, in particular, the team leader, shares appropriate information with others and explains how the information impacts them, the team will be building high trust relationships.

This does not mean violating appropriate confidences, but it does mean giving people the information they will need to make informed decisions about themselves, their work and their role in the workplace.

FLEXIBILITY

Some team managers can be described as “my way or the highway kind of people”, which is not a flattering description.

Flexibility that contributes to high trust means acknowledging that things can be successfully accomplished in various ways and being open minded when one collaborates with other team members.

This does not mean compromising excellence or moving towards mediocrity, but it does involve recognising that high performance comes in many shapes and sizes.

High trust team members tailor their interactions with each other to accommodate varied interests, capabilities and perspectives and they do this seamlessly and naturally.

They listen to each other respectfully, consider others’ suggestions, critically evaluate various approaches and together decide how to proceed.

This is flexibility and it’s important whether one is drafting a document, negotiating a settlement, making management decisions,

interacting with a client or really anything else.

It's particularly important for the team leader to be flexible. Inflexible leaders stifle creativity, intelligence and responsibility and often produce low functioning, anxious team members. Although in the short run low flexibility leadership might seem efficient, in the long run, it's exceedingly inefficient and counter productive. Count on it.

CONSISTENCY OVER TIME

If you who have had a child and/or a pet, you will know it's critically important to be consistent in raising them.

If they are greeted with love and support on one occasion and then inexplicably experience anger and rejection later, they may develop low levels of trust with others.

Adults are much the same. It's important to be consistently consistent in your relationships with other people and to do so over time. Building trust is cumulative and iterative.

GOOD INTENTIONS

Interaction, disclosure, flexibility and consistency will not alone build a high trust professional relationship unless good intentions are part of the mix.

You must genuinely seek positive outcomes, want to support the success of others and be a good team player.

Merely paying lip service to good intentions is insufficient, especially if your actions are at odds with what you say. If that occurs, you will be perceived as a hypocrite. Hypocrisy and high trust are at opposite ends of the same spectrum.

Trust can be destroyed quickly and abruptly. Probably all of us have experienced this in a professional or personal context.

Conversely, building a high trust relationship usually occurs slowly and incrementally, based on multiple small and seemingly inconsequential interactions. When building high trust relationships, excellent communication, collaboration and "friction free" work experiences will, with practice and focus, increase over time.

Mary, the well-intentioned and motivated team builder

Mary is a senior partner in a successful law firm and is a practice group head of department. She is clearly smart, hard working and wants to have a high functioning team.

However, when I interviewed her team members, some concerning themes emerged.

Although Mary can be delightful and accessible on a personal basis, she sometimes presents as being quite brusque, if not sharp,

when interrupted in her work. Team members find this off putting and anxiety producing.

She is very focused on being highly efficient in doing her work and sometimes does not invest much time in providing information to team members. Although Mary enjoys her team members and sometimes circulates "motivational" congratulatory emails to the team, she invests relatively little time in developing one-on-one relationships with them, learning about their lives outside of work and can be perceived as somewhat remote and cryptic.

When I provided Mary with this feedback, she was quite surprised.

To her considerable credit, however, Mary turned to me and said: "My top priority is to build a high trust team. I want to do this for the right reasons; that is to make sure that the work experience for everyone in my team

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is as good as it can be. This is important, not just for financial reasons but because it is intrinsically right to do."

She asked how she could enhance the level of trust between herself and her team members and among her team members.

Mary wants to lead her team by example.

We discussed the "speed of trust" concept, as well as the above five elements of high trust professional relationships. I asked Mary to "rate" herself, on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being an excellent rating) on the five elements and she did so as follows:

- Interaction: Social context 8; work context, especially under stress, 2 or 3.
- Disclosure: Low stress context 6 or 7; high stress context 2 or 3.
- Flexibility: 4 or 5.
- Consistency over time: Consistently volatile in her moods 4.
- Good intentions: 9 or 10.

Clearly, there was a direct correlation between Mary's stress level and her ability to be interactive, disclosing and flexible. She needed to replace her consistent emotional

volatility with consistent lower emotional reactivity.

I then asked Mary to rate her motivation level to cultivate high trust professional relationships on the same 1 to 10 scale. She responded without hesitation "I'm at a 10 on that one".

Mary then identified specific ways to enhance her interactions with her team members. She correctly stated: "My team will respond to what I do, not what I say I am going to do".

She committed to:

- investing time getting to know each of her team members better personally and professionally;
- being regularly available to team members by setting "office hours" for them;
- scheduling a weekly team meeting in which she would solicit team interaction and actively listen; and
- monitoring her own stress level and identifying techniques to calm herself down.

Mary has done well with these initiatives and has moved on to other techniques to improve her leadership style.

Her team members have noticed and commented on this and the general level of functioning is improving. It is a work in progress and it is moving in the right direction.

Although at first Mary felt her efforts made her less efficient when doing her own work, she now realises that it was an excellent use of her time to enhance everyone's efficiency.

How would you rate yourself on the above elements of high trust professional relationship building?

If you perceive any deficiencies, think about what behaviours you will need to change, start making changes, and then watch carefully how others respond over time.

You will know when the team begins to work at the speed of trust; it will, simultaneously, be both quite subtle and extraordinarily obvious.

Emily Morrow was a lawyer and senior partner with a large firm in Vermont, where she built a premier trusts, estates and tax practice. Having lived and worked in Sydney and Vermont, Emily now resides in Auckland and provides tailored consulting services for lawyers, barristers, in-house counsel, law firms and barristers' chambers focusing on non-technical skills that correlate with professional success; business development, communication, delegation, self presentation, leadership, team building/management and the like. Emily can be reached at www.emilymorrow.com.