

THE RISKS OF TRUST

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He who does not trust enough
Will not be trusted.
Tao Te King (23)

Abstract

The key note speaker will discuss the issue of trust in leading a school – the risks and rewards involved – using as illustration cases in Brazil and in the US.

Good Afternoon,

Synonyms of trust are: Faith, belief, hope, conviction, expectation, reliance, dependence, care, protection, responsibility, guard. Have faith in, believe, rely on, depend on, confide in, count on, be sure about.

It is hard to think of a mission worth seeking in the education field where those elements aren't present all the time in people's relationships. But let me take you through some scenes:

Midwest School, Scene one:

Setting: a Middle school in a Midwest rural town in the US - Teachers are meeting to discuss school issues. The Principal and his assistant were invited. Teachers start listing the issues – with some defiance, some sarcasm, some cynicism. They write the first one on the board, the second one, the third one is written on the blackboard: “How to deal with discipline in the school building = caos”. Immediately the principal jumps and starts defending his approach and his administration, showing data indicating that SOME teachers in the building are not doing THEIR part. SOME teachers send kids to the office 10 times more than the average (he gets the statistics out of his pocket) – emotions run high and the meeting is cut short. The only people happy are those who had said that trying to work cooperatively with the administration would never work.

Midwest School, Scene two:

Setting: the same Middle school in a Midwest rural town in the US. The Teacher's Advisory Group is in session brushing up the workshop they are going to lead for the whole district the next day. The Principal knocks at the door, sits in the meeting for 15 minutes to be briefed on the last developments and to see how he can be of assistance. Everything seems fine; he thanks the group and goes on to other tasks.

In one year, this school went from scene one to scene two. They established a productive relationship between the teachers and the administration, working collaboratively to solve problems.

I was really intrigued with what happened there – so, having nothing better to do with my time, the perks of being a full time student, I interviewed one of the teachers, and then also the principal to find out what had happened there.

I found out that they had built a two ways street, a channel of communication and trust where the teachers could raise an issue, communicate to the school leader they were going to be working on it, and present a series of recommendations, which always included themselves as part of the implementation of the solutions they proposed. And that was quite a change. The meetings are focused on putting together the brains and experiences of teaching to better serve the students.

I said this was a two way street, in the sense that, the principal might be grappling with a new policy that needs to be implemented, and calls on the Advisory Committee to have their input on the best way to go about doing it. Together, they re-wrote the school handbook, lead Professional development sessions, made connections across the district to facilitate transitions, and, last I heard, are tackling issues to improve learning for all. The Principal actually said that he felt really relieved, because the teachers shared responsibility. They not only suggested possible ways to handle things, they also detailed their part in the implementation. It's not the Principal's solution anymore – it is the school's solution. The climate changed, people talk more to each other, even socialize more. Now the high school is looking at their experience to try something similar.

But trust is a tricky business: it means to let go of some protection, it means a certain abandonment. One widely accepted definition of trust is “one's willingness to participate in a relationship that involves being vulnerable to another person”¹

Now think about this, make yourself vulnerable to another person. It takes a lot of courage. What if you open up and trust the other and are disappointed? What if you turn your back and get stabbed? Let me take you to another scene:

One of the largest cities in Brazil, Scene 1:

The head of the Government Office for Education of one of the largest cities of Brazil looks at the ranking of schools, based on a statewide standardized test. She looks especially to the bottom of that list. She has to do something about those schools, some sort of measure to support them on their efforts to improve. Her heart is in the right place, of course, she cares for education. But also, the press had published that list and now angry parents were taking their kids elsewhere, the teachers complained of irregularities in the test, the principals were... well you see the picture. The Central Office decides to call on two Non Governmental Organizations and ask them to develop a project to support the underperforming schools. This is the challenge: the students of those schools have to improve enough to pass the test in math and language in one school year. The school year starts in two months.

One of the largest cities in Brazil, Scene 2:

¹ Chhuon, Gilkey, and altri (2008)

One of the largest cities in Brazil: 300 teachers and school leaders in a Professional Development setting – planning actions to improve reading and math scores in the lower achieving public schools. Teachers are excited to be designing experiments they will develop over a three month period. They were promised the support of their principal, as well as a visit of a professional that would come to their school every two weeks to help them overcome the barriers of implementing their plans. They felt supported, some for the first time in their careers, on their professional development, and the actions they were planning were going to have impact on the children’s academic and social life. They were learning themselves how to support their struggling students, feeling empowered to do something about it.

One of the largest cities in Brazil, Scene 3:

Room with 50 educators hired to support the schools in their efforts to improve student learning, focusing in math and language. The head of the NGO hired to develop the program announces that the Central Office just sent word that the program was cut, and that the educators must stop their visits immediately. Consternation from all parts – how could they do this to them? How could they do this to the schools?

So, yes, trust is a risk. And it would be foolish to trust an institution that has already betrayed your trust previously. The right thing then would be to never, ever trust them again. Never? I mean, do they really have a choice? What are the alternatives? Can the teachers decide never trust the Central Office again and therefore refuse to participate in even the most attractive program, in fear (or certainty) to be disappointed again? They certainly can. Until trust is built in the system, they will approach every opportunity with distrust. Some will learn the instability and moodiness of the institution and make the most of what it can bring – this might be under their power to do so. The question is, can trust have limits, can you “trust, but...”? Once trust is broken can it be repaired? If so, how do we go about it?

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who influenced so much education in many parts of the world once said that “The trust of the people in the leaders reflects the confidence of the leaders in the people.” So there comes another element of trust – it may start with a leap of faith, but you must build on it. There needs to be a sense of responsibility towards the object of your trust, something mutual. Indeed, it is possible to build trust in the system, from the central administration, to the classroom. There are steps involved (and I won’t go into details here) but they start with the Central Administration recognizing that there is a problem, and then invite people (school leaders, teachers, parents, community members, students) to be part of the process, and start building a shared language, some common understanding. Is it easy? no. Is it even likely to happen? I won’t answer that question! But it is possible, and it was done before. A review of the existing literature shows four elements of trust: consistency, compassion, communication, and competency. This gives us a path to follow – those are all things we can learn and develop.

In our first scene, I said that teachers and school leaders built a two ways street of communication and trust. Indeed, trust is a two-way street. The good news is that trust tends to build trust, it has a ripple effect. The school leadership trusts the teachers, the teachers trust their students, and so on. Indeed, studies show that the teachers’ trust in the principal is likely to be a predictor of the level of trust that teachers have with students, parents, and colleagues (Brewster

& Railsback, 2003). Paulo Freire², during more than thirty years, recommended that students should be an important part in making decisions about the curricula. For this to happen there needs to be trust as a starting point.

Research also shows that trusting relationships among teachers and principals contributes to build a positive school climate, productive communication, increases in student learning, teachers' collective sense of efficacy, and overall school effectiveness (Hoy & Sweetland, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Isn't this everything we yearn for?

To decide not to trust again is like a poet who decides not to love anymore because of a lost love once. When you trust, you may get disappointed, but also wonderful things can happen. I will leave you with another quote of Paulo Freire: "Education ... is nourished by love, humanity, hope, faith and trust."

When these words are put to the hard test of reality trust is perhaps both the cornerstone and the roof of the education building.

Thank you!

References:

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<http://eaq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/44/2/227>

² *Pedagogia da esperança*. Op. Cit. p.116