

Betrayal - The Ultimate Trust-Buster

"We have to distrust each other. It's our only defense against betrayal."

-Tennessee Williams

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines betrayal as: to lead astray (especially seduce); to fail or desert, especially in time of need; and to disclose in violation of confidence.

Just about everyone has experienced betrayal in their lives, usually beginning in childhood or adolescence at the hands of a parent or primary caregiver, relative, friend, teacher, clergy person, or stranger. Later in adulthood, betrayal may arise in relation to a partner or spouse, boss or manager, colleague or co-worker, neighbor, or even your local or on-line retailer or customer-service rep.

Betrayal happens when folks don't keep their commitments or promises. And when people renege on their commitments and promises, we learn that trust does not result in safety, love, recognition, approval or security, but rather, just the opposite, in harm, threat, or danger.

Rather than trust or being trusting, many of us have learned to be non-trusting. Being non-trusting protects us from being hurt, lied to or deceived; non-trusting allows us to feel safe and secure. While many would prefer to be trusting, they often can't bring themselves to do so. They can't or they won't.

So, in life in the business world, a lack of trust feels that who or what is being experienced is dangerous, threatening, bad, possibly harmful or something to be avoided.

Trust can only exist to the extent that fear is absent so the deal is to be curious about, and explore the fear that's underneath the lack of trust. If one chooses not to deal with their inner fear, then trust cannot be enabled. It's important to explore one's blockages to trust. It's important to ask ourselves what stories we are telling ourselves, and others, that rationalize or justify our mistrust. It's important to explore where we first learned to mistrust and why we obsess about finding situations where we can prove our story about not trusting another rather than to take the risk and actually be trusting.

So, what happens at work when a colleague takes credit for my work, when I hear a co-worker talk about me behind my back, when my manager comes in late and leaves early, when a C-level individual brings down a huge bonus after a financially troubled year, when mass layoffs or firings take place at 5:00 on Friday, when the boss promotes a friend to a position for which she's less than qualified? Trust erodes and we become angry, resentful, enraged, hateful and resistant.

However, we can respond to matters of betrayal in another way.

Dr. Dennis Reina, who founded The Reina Trust Building Institute says betrayals are a breach of trust - or the perception of a breach of trust. While you can't prevent betrayal among co-workers and colleagues, you do have a choice about how to respond and what to do when it happens. We can remain hurt, bitter and resentful. We can blame and abdicate responsibility or we can choose to live our values, take responsibility and work through it."

The Center for Creative Leadership offers Dr. Reinas seven-step process for working through betrayal:

Step 1: Observe and acknowledge what has happened. Healing starts with awareness. Pay attention. Listen and learn what happened before and what's going on now. What are people's experiences and perceptions? What are their concerns, fears and anxieties? What behaviors are building trust or compounding the betrayal? It is important to acknowledge not only that which caused trust to be broken, but the impact on those affected. The fact that you've come to terms with a problem or a decision doesn't mean that others have.

Step 2: Allow feelings to surface. People have feelings around business decisions. When people are in pain (and betrayal does cause pain), they need to be heard. If you don't allow people to express their emotions around betrayal, those feelings don't automatically go away - they will go underground. When it comes to feelings most leaders say they don't want to go there. But ignoring emotion is like ignoring a dead cat on the table - it's not going away unless somebody deals with it.

Step 3: Give employees support. Moving out of steps one and two requires support from others. When betrayal is acutely felt, people may feel vulnerable, helpless or victimized. Support - in the form of information, relationships, new perspectives, coaching and encouragement - is important to provide. Sometimes, just talking with a trusted friend, colleague or co-worker is good therapy; other times it helps to seek counseling or other outside resources.

Step 4: Reframe the experience. After a betrayal, people often feel vulnerable and contract their focus. They have a hard time seeing a bigger picture. Ask questions that open up new ways to think about the situation: What were the extenuating circumstances? What role did I play? How can I change my response? What choices or options do I have now? What can I learn about myself and others from this experience?

Step 5: Take responsibility. Yes, betrayal happened. Yes, trust was broken. Now what? The next step is to ask, What role did I play in this situation? What can I do now? What is in my control and what isn't? Start to take responsibility and ask, What can I do to make a difference?

Step 6: Forgive. Forgiveness isn't about letting others off the hook; it's about freeing yourself of anger, bitterness and resentment. Somebody else betrayed you once. But you betray yourself a thousand times over when you don't forgive. Forgiveness is about shifting from blame to problem solving. Ask, What needs to be said or done to put this issue to rest?

Step 7: Let go and move on. Accept what is. Acceptance is not about condoning what happened, but accepting it without blame. This point will come. It takes work, time and commitment - the bigger the betrayal, the bigger the impact and the greater the challenge. Yet letting go is doable and necessary.

Moving on is a process, not a one-time event. Moving on may not be easy. "Once you have a way to talk about and deal with betrayal, you'll find that recovering from those blows becomes easier," says Reina. "The small betrayal can be simply dealt with rather than allowed to escalate. The tough betrayals will still be tough, but you'll have a better way to work through them and move on."

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Have you even been or felt betrayed? What was that like? Have you been able to move on? To explore and express your emotions? To forgive? If not, why not?
- Have you ever betrayed another at work, at home or at play? What was that like for you?
- Have you ever disclosed information that you received in confidence?
- Have you ever intentionally deceived or misguided someone? How did you rationalize or justify your action? What was that like?
- Have you ever betrayed someone's trust or had your trust betrayed? What was that like?

- Have you ever reneged on your commitments or promises? Has someone ever reneged on their commitment or promise to you? What was that like?
- What is trusting others like for you? Does trust come easy, or not so easy? Why?
- Do you feel others find you to be a trusting person? Do others confide easily in you? Or not so much?
- If you've ever betrayed someone, did you own/take responsibility for your actions?
- What have you learned about yourself from your experiences around betrayal?
- What was your experience around betrayal like when you were growing up?

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