Can People Trust You?

Influence Begins with Trust

Why Earning the Trust of Others Is Key to Becoming a Great Boss

Excerpted from

Being the Boss:
The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader

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9:33 a.m.  Jason’s phone rings. It’s an irate Brenda Baldwin, director of online support, widely considered number two in the educational technology department. She’s in charge of Reynolds Ed’s company Web site.

“You guys are letting us down,” she says in a voice heavy with accusation.

“What’s the problem?” Jason manages to ask in spite of his surprise. Another problem. More anxiety. Jason has met Baldwin but he’s never worked with her. She has a reputation for being tough to deal with, someone who always tries to keep others on the defensive.

“All the marketing and promotion material you’re supposed to have ready for the Web site, right? We’re doing a major revision, including the addition of Project Emerge, and the deadline was yesterday close of business. You better have a good talk with your marketing wizard. This is the third deadline she’s missed. Get your stuff in if you expect to have some room on the site. From what I hear, you guys expect everyone else to accommodate your schedule.”

“I’ll find out what’s going on, Brenda,” Jason promises, as Baldwin hangs up without saying anything more.
Great, Jason thinks. Baldwin comes across as a jerk, but the Web site is critical. It’s a key way interested schools will be able to get information about all aspects of Project Emerge and its courses.

Jason’s thoughts turn to Laraba Sule, his marketing manager, and the problem she’s created. Why couldn’t she meet the deadline? I’m still trying to understand why the program to sign up schools seems in trouble, and I don’t know yet how good she really is. She’s never mentioned something is due and she wouldn’t have it on time. Is she part of the problem? Can she be trusted?

9:39 a.m. Jason picks up the phone and tells Laraba a problem has come up and she needs to come see him right away.

9:41 a.m. Ray Sanchez, Jason’s boss, calls with a question, and while they’re talking, Laraba appears in the office door, looking nervous. Jason waves her to a chair. She sits and waits anxiously while Jason finishes answering Sanchez’s question.

Suppose you were the one sitting in that chair across the desk. What’s it like to work for you? How do people experience you, especially in a tense situation like this? How do you make people feel about themselves when they deal with you? Do they know they’ll be treated fairly, supportively, and with respect? Or do they know you never check your emotions and blurt out whatever you happen to be feeling? If you do, beware. It matters to those you manage. The quality of work they do, the care and commitment they devote, their willingness to expend extra effort, all depend in significant part on the kind of person you are. It’s the question we first raised at the beginning of part I: are you the kind of person who can influence others to produce good results even in the face of adversity?

In the last two chapters, we discovered that neither formal authority nor friendship is sufficient. You need other means of influence, all of which begin with trust.

Trust is the basis for all forms of influence other than coercion. It’s a necessary element in effective relationships in all cultures.
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It’s critical to the effective functioning of today’s more fluid, fast-moving organizations with their emphasis on collaboration. So the “kind of person” question can be boiled down to the essence of who you are as a manager:

Can people trust you?

Whether it’s called trust, respect, reputation, or credibility, it all comes down to whether people believe they can *count on you to do the right thing.*

Almost certainly, you consider yourself trustworthy, but has it ever occurred to you that people may not trust you as a manager? Are your people confident you’ll do the right thing as their boss? The answer will determine whether they accept your authority and leadership and give the work their utmost care and commitment. Nothing will be more fundamental to your success and your progress than your ability to generate trust. Trust in you as a boss is the foundation of your influence as a manager.

Be clear about what trust is and is not. It’s not about being liked. It’s not about being “nice.” In fact, it’s based on two beliefs:

- People’s belief in your *competence* as a manager
- People’s belief in your *character* as a person

In the remainder of this chapter, we’ll explore these two elements.

**Competence: The First Element of Trust**

Do your people believe you’re competent as a manager?

Competence means you know *what* to do and *how* to get it done. It means you have some expertise as a boss. Confidence in your competence will grow as you demonstrate that you know the “what” and “how” of managing, especially as you develop a track record of managerial accomplishment.

Few managers doubt the importance of competence, but too many view it too narrowly. They focus on technical know-how, knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the business, when they should
take a broader view. We think of managerial competence as having three elements: technical competence, operational competence, and political competence.

**Technical Competence**

Technical competence is about knowing what to do. For a boss, it means both knowing the business and understanding what managers do, the 3 Imperatives.

Technical expertise doesn’t mean you must be the expert, the ultimate authority, in everything your group does. You cannot be that, and too many managers waste their time striving to fill that role. But you must know enough about the work and how it’s done to guide others and, most of all, to make intelligent decisions and judgment calls. Accepting that you cannot be the technical expert is especially difficult for producing managers, who often consider that a key part of their role.²

If you don’t know how your business works and you’re not sure what managers do, how can anyone trust you to do the right thing as their boss?

**Operational Competence**

Technical competence is about what you know. Operational competence is about knowing how to apply it. Knowing and doing are different. You need to know how and when to apply technical knowledge in your business. It’s the same with managing: Knowing you need a plan doesn’t mean you know how to produce an effective one. Knowing one of your people is struggling and that it’s your job to provide support doesn’t mean you know how to help. Operational competence is knowing how to put your knowledge into practice effectively.

**Political Competence**

The group you manage is part of a larger organization, and you need to know how to function effectively in that context. That means you must know how organizations, yours in particular, work and how to get productive work done in them. Political competence is about knowing who does what and how to influence
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them. As one direct report said of his manager, there’s “nothing worse than working for a powerless boss”—that is, a boss who couldn’t get anything done in the organization.

Do you possess the technical, operational, and political competence you need?

**Character: The Second Element of Trust**

Do your people consider you a manager with character?

Character is about believing in and following a set of values. It's about possessing an internal compass. While competence is about *knowing* the right thing to do and how to get it done, character is about your *intention* to do the right thing. People want to know what you *will* do, and the only way they can predict that is by knowing your values and motives.

That’s why people analyze the statements you make and the actions you take for clues about your intentions. They want to understand how you think and feel, what’s important to you. That shouldn’t surprise you. Almost certainly, you did it with every boss you ever had and do it even now. Still, it can be unsettling. As one manager told us shortly after taking a new managerial position: “I knew I was a good guy, and I kind of expected people to accept me immediately for what I was. But folks were wary, and you really had to earn it.”

We define *trust* as people’s belief that you will do the right thing. But *the right thing* isn’t always obvious, and people will vary in their definition of it. Indeed, to a large extent, defining *the right thing* and coping with the associated trade-offs will be the subject of constant negotiation between you and everyone you work with. However, some “right things” are so universal that they apply to all managers in virtually all situations. We include here the ones that seem most important.

As we identify them, we’ll ask you a series of questions to help you assess people’s perceptions of your character. The questions will encourage you to think long and hard about yourself and your actions.
Manage Yourself

We pose the questions in terms of what others think of you. What matters most is not what you think but what others think of you. They’re the ones you must influence.

Character: People Believe You Value the Work

How much would you trust a boss who thought the work you all did was just a way to earn a living and had little value otherwise? What if this boss didn’t care about quality or about those who used what you made? Would you trust him to make good decisions? What if he valued himself and his own success more than the work, if he considered the work only a means to his personal ends?

Where do you stand against this aspect of character?

Would people say you think the work of the group matters? If your group and its work disappeared today, would the world be different in some substantial way tomorrow? Without a fundamental belief in the value of what you do, you will struggle to gain people’s trust. Why would anyone believe in the intentions of a boss who belittles the value of the work she and her people do?

Would people say you work hard? People respect a good work ethic and tend to trust a manager who invests great personal effort—does homework, comes prepared, and takes the work seriously. If you work hard as a manager, it means you value the group and its work and want it to succeed.

Do people think you walk the talk? In your own actions, do you practice the work values and standards you espouse and expect of others? Are you consistent in what you believe, say, and do? This is integrity. Do you demonstrate in your own work the commitment you want from others? Are you willing yourself to make the sacrifices you expect of your people? Being a manager doesn’t give you the right to make exceptions for yourself.

Would people say you worry more about your people and the work than you worry about yourself? The people who work for you can tell whether you truly care about what they do. They know whether you’re focused on your personal success and value them only as they contribute to it. What you think and feel about “I” versus “we” will be crystal clear over time. If it’s “I,” don’t expect
them to devote any more time and effort than necessary to keep their jobs or ensure their individual success.

As you go home at the end of the day, do your thoughts dwell on what you achieved or on what your group accomplished? What gives you the most satisfaction: your own performance or the performance of your people as a group? As one manager we know said of her people after she finally began to let go of her need for personal recognition: “When they made a good cold call or closed a deal, I was as excited as if I had done it myself.”

Most managers understand the need to make this shift, but they can’t give up focusing on their own achievement. Their prior success as individual stars blocks them from making a fundamental change in where and how they derive a sense of accomplishment.

Must you give up your own desire for personal success? Not at all. You would have to be a saint to do that. But it does mean you must grow beyond your own ambition to focus more on the success of your group and organization. The paradox here is that your personal success now requires that you find satisfaction in the success of those who work for you.

Character: People Believe You Value Them as People
We once interviewed a manager in a large steel company who had posted a sign in his office that read, “It’s hard to soar like an eagle when you’re surrounded by turkeys.” When we asked about it, he said, “It’s a joke.” How would you feel if your boss put up that sign and then said it was a joke?

Do people believe you genuinely care about them? All relationships have some emotional component, including, not least, the boss–subordinate relationship. Do you truly want your people, as a group and as individuals, to succeed? Do you believe in the inherent value of others, beyond their role at work? Are you concerned for them as people and not just as workers? If one of your people suffered a personal calamity, would you genuinely care? Do your actions and words reflect your concern? You cannot hide these kinds of feelings. If you don’t care, how can you expect anyone to care about you or the work you manage?
Would people say you consider their interests when making difficult decisions? Exercising ethical judgment becomes critical here because you cannot always satisfy people’s personal desires and needs. When you must disappoint some individuals to accomplish a greater good, it can seem to signal a lack of caring—unless you clearly recognize their interests, weigh them seriously in your decision making, and provide empathy and emotional support for their disappointment.

Do people believe you strive to preserve every person’s dignity and self-respect, no matter the circumstances? Are you generous? Do you praise in public and criticize in private? Are your day-to-day interactions considerate and respectful? When you terminate someone for poor performance, do you let him go in a way that allows him to depart with dignity and self-respect? It may seem irrelevant, but it’s a useful indicator: do you say “please” and “thank you” to the receptionist and the mailroom clerk? We know an executive recruiter who nixed a candidate because he was rude and disdainful to a waitress.

Would people say you try to see the world from their point of view? This is empathy, the ability to understand how someone else sees a situation and why she reacts as she does. It doesn’t mean you must agree with or accept her point of view, but you should be able to understand it. A critical distinction: empathy isn’t about putting yourself in someone else’s position. It means seeing through their eyes based on their experience, needs, and values.

Do people believe you accept their personal differences without judgment? This is increasingly important as the workforce becomes more diverse. How do you react when someone differs drastically from you in background, experience, dress, speech, attitude, and style? Many managers realize only slowly that their people can’t be managed like copies of themselves. Only when they recognize and respect each individual’s uniqueness can they begin to manage effectively.

Do people consider you fair in the way you treat them? Fairness doesn’t mean you treat everyone exactly alike. Individuals differ. “To treat people fairly is to treat them differently,” said one manager
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when she discovered the tough, challenging approach that inspired one of her people only discouraged others. The key question is this: would all your people say they receive from you what they want and need for their work? Above all, do they perceive your treatment of them individually to be fair and without favorites?

Do people think you listen well? You may think you do, but here's what it means to truly listen. When you're talking to someone, are you willing to change your mind? If not, you're telling and selling, not listening. Don’t think of listening as a passive activity. Active listening means you engage with someone, ask questions, and proactively explore what they’re saying. It means not only that you say the words that express interest but that you communicate active interest in nonverbal ways too: body language, tone of voice, demeanor, and manner. (Indeed, such nonverbal cues need to be present in all these areas.)

Would people say you trust them enough to delegate? Trust works both ways. To get it, you must give it, as it’s earned and deserved. Delegation, the granting of some authority and decision-making power to direct reports, is both a fundamental act of management and a mark of genuine trust.

Character: People Believe You’re Emotionally Steady and Dependable at Work

Call it emotional maturity, intelligence, or dependability, it's the ability to deal effectively with your own and others' feelings at work.

You may prefer to think of work as rational and unemotional. But, in fact, the workplace is an arena where feelings of all kinds are felt, expressed, and acted out. A moment’s reflection about your own experience will surely confirm this, both in the emotions you’ve seen on display and in your own feelings at work.

Handling emotion can be a challenge. Under the right circumstances, anyone can be hijacked by their own or others’ emotions at work—irritation, anger, frustration, fear, pride, jealousy, unreasonable competitiveness, and even positive feelings taken to an
extreme, like excessive gratitude. All of them can lead you to say or do things that you regret and that reduce your effectiveness.

The solution is not to ignore or suppress feelings. What’s required is the ability to recognize your own and other’s emotions but not be controlled by them. This is what’s called emotional maturity or emotional competence, and management will reveal how much you have.

Would people say you handle your own feelings well at work? Your reactions must always be constructive, forward looking, and in the best interests of the group. Your people are constantly watching for cues about how to feel and act. One manager told us he’d discovered that “you can’t be pessimistic on the job. The amount of your enthusiasm translates directly into how your people feel and how much effort they put into the job.” Or as another concluded, “Be like a duck—on the surface calm and serene and underneath paddle like hell.”

Do people consider you discreet? As a manager, you often receive sensitive and personal information from your people. Can they count on you to keep it private and use it with tact and prudence? Do you hold yourself above gossip within your group?

Do people think you handle their mistakes constructively? Direct reports are particularly sensitive to the way the boss handles errors. No one expects to be excused for catastrophic or repeated blunders. But on occasion everyone falls on his face. People want to know whether the boss will berate and punish them or help them stand up, correct the error, and learn how to avoid missteps in the future.

Would people say you seek out what they think and are open to fair criticism? Do you encourage and allow people to be candid with you? Are you able to hear what others say without becoming upset, angry, or defensive even when their words seem critical, painful, or even unfair?

Would people say you’re able to acknowledge your own errors, ignorance, or shortcomings? Some managers compound their problems by not seeking help or not revealing what they don’t know. They’re trapped by their fear that people will consider them weak or ignorant. Do you ever say these words at work to your people?
“I’m sorry.”
“I made a mistake.”
“I was wrong.”
“I don’t know.”
“Would you help me?”
“Could you explain this to me. I’m not sure I get it.”
“What do you think?”
“What would you do?”

These are important words. They can produce learning, better options and solutions, and they can help repair a strained relationship or restore damaged trust. There’s nothing about being a boss that should prevent you from using them when they apply. People know when you are wrong or have made a mistake or need help. They’re reassured when you know it too, and they respect your willingness to say so.

We know a new manager who took over a trading desk in a global investment bank where he oversaw a group of experienced traders. Like many other new managers, he first used a directive approach, giving detailed instructions for adopting or closing specific positions or trying different trading strategies. The traders resented his commands and demanded to know his rationale, even though many acknowledged privately his talent for timing trades. Tension grew between them. He did recognize his lack of knowledge about foreign markets, however, and one day he asked a trader a simple question about pricing. The trader spent several minutes explaining and even suggested they talk again at the end of the day. It provided an important insight for the manager, who said he learned to stop talking all the time and begin listening. Once he made that change, he said, he began to learn about the work, and people questioned his calls less. In short, people began to trust him.

We recognize that there’s a fine line here. On one side of it, people respect your honesty and willingness to be candid about your
own shortcomings. On the other side, however, too much expression of weakness, error, and uncertainty will diminish rather than foster people’s trust in you. In every situation, you must find that line and stay on the positive side—yet another example of the judgment management requires.

**Would people say you’re able and willing to recognize and deal with their emotions?** Managing the feelings of others doesn’t mean you must simply put up with others’ feelings. What’s required is more than that: you must actively recognize their emotions and take them seriously, even if you disagree or consider them misplaced, and even when they’re directed at you and feel personal. Sometimes simple acknowledgement of a person’s feelings and allowing him to talk are enough. Of course, you need not condone behavior that exceeds the bounds of respect, civility, and decency.

Recognizing others feelings doesn’t mean you should take them personally. Do you internalize every expression of anger and frustration aimed at you? Do you take personally the deference you receive as boss and let it go to your head? Without doubt, much of it—both the negative and the positive—is aimed at you as boss, at the role you play, and not at you personally.

**Would people say you’re able to step back and keep control of emotional situations?** You need the ability to step back figuratively or even literally and look at a situation objectively. Taking a deep breath, getting a cup of coffee, counting to ten, or some other simple device can help. Loss of self-control may lead to a sudden, ill-considered response or tilt a decision in the wrong direction and do harm that cannot be easily undone.

As we said in chapter 2, a particularly good way to do this is by distinguishing between self and role. This is not easy, especially for smart managers accustomed to relying on first impressions and quick interpretations. But it can help you step back, slow down your thinking, do some diagnosis, avoid defensive interpretations, respond thoughtfully, and prevent yourself from being hijacked by someone else’s emotions. What makes this difficult is that emotional attacks often feel personal. Sometimes they’ll even be phrased in personal terms.
Everyone suffers frustrations, setbacks, and failure at times. Your journey will be full of them. The question is, How do you respond? Do you keep going? Do you find a way to keep making progress?

We once heard a senior manager at a successful company describe it this way: “To succeed as a manager here, you have to have a strong ego. Not a big ego, not someone who’s ‘me, me, me’ all the time. We don’t like that. That person won’t last one day here. But you have to have toughness, a strong sense of who you are and what you’re about. When you get whacked, you keep coming back. You can do that because you’re focused on the work and what you and your team have to do.”

Think of it as a good kind of self-confidence. A healthy sense of self—a strong but not big ego—is the foundation for virtually all other elements of character: for valuing others and treating them with respect; for empathy; for the ability to hear criticism, learn, and change; and for emotional maturity. Most of all, it’s the basis for dealing with the world as it is, including others’ opinions of you as a manager. Often, a big ego puffs itself up because it feels weak and uncertain. In contrast, a strong ego is resilient because it’s focused on something outside itself, such as the work and its ultimate purpose. A big ego seldom cares about anything but itself.

You need a strong ego to maintain people’s trust. As we said, there’s more to trust than the values and behaviors we’ve described. Indeed, every vital relationship in a changing world requires constant negotiation of the right thing—what people expect of you. Your people and you will engage in constant give-and-take about expectations and how they apply in specific situations. A strong ego will let you undertake these ongoing negotiations in an open and honest way and help you hear the negative feelings they sometimes reveal about you and what you do.

With all the questions in this chapter, we’ve pushed you hard to look at yourself and the kind of person you are as a manager—especially from the viewpoint of your people. How do they experience you?
To be trusted, you must reveal yourself in order to demonstrate your competence and character. To create trust requires that you take pains to be explicit about what you value as a manager, how you work, what you want from others, and, not least, who you are.

We hope you’ve given some thought to the many questions and from them gained some appreciation of where you stand against the standards of trust—competence and character—required by management. The evidence is clear: these things matter.

We admit there were many questions—more, perhaps, than you wanted or could deal with all at once. Yet they weren’t simply a hodgepodge of unrelated traits. All of them taken together can be boiled down to something fairly simple: they describe the characteristics of a decent person, someone who connects with others in a steady, clear, forthright, and honest way. It comes down to little more, or less, than that.

Did you fall short? Almost certainly you did, if you were fully honest. We all do. We’re all human, not saints. We’re all flawed. We all have strengths and weaknesses as people.

The best we can do is strive constantly to close the gap between who we are and who we need to be if we’re to be effective bosses. None of us will ever be without fault, and so we need ways to compensate for our shortcomings, always seeing them clearly, understanding which are important enough to derail us, and always seeking to become the kind of person who can influence others to produce good work.

Getting the right relationship with your people is the foundation of all else on your journey. It alone will not produce success, but without it, success will be elusive. Management begins with who you are and how people perceive you. Don’t focus your relationships around either authority or friendship. Build them on trust in your competence and character.
Chapter 4


THE ANSWERS YOU NEED, 
WHEN YOU NEED THEM

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