TRUST BEGINS AT THE TOP

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As a senior vice president with a global high-tech company, Roger had become increasingly worried about his team's performance. In addition to missing team and individual goals, members seemed to be less and less open and almost every discussion seemed to erupt into unhealthy conflict. While easy to put the blame on the team and its members, he began to wonder what he might be doing to create this situation.

So there Roger sat, staring out at his team, feeling a mixture of nerves and confidence. He was nervous because he was about to engage in something he had never done before: a conversation with team members about his leadership. He was confident because he was prepared – he reviewed an interview-generated list of his perceived leadership assets and liabilities, drafted a list of open-ended questions to jumpstart the discussion and was prepared to listen without getting defensive.

Then it begins. Roger reads one of his leadership assets ("can be decisive") or one of the liabilities ("can be moody, not sure which Roger is going to show up"). He asks the group to provide more specific behaviors - examples along with the impact - then listens and restates. The process continues until the list is sufficiently addressed. Roger ends up with a clear picture of what he should continue doing and where he needs to adjust his behavior or approach.

WHY DO THIS?

At one level, the reason is quite apparent. If a leader starts with the belief that everyone has "blind spots" with respect to their behavior and its impact on others, it follows that getting a handle on those behaviors dramatically increases the chance of improving leadership effectiveness. (Of course this assumes that the leader follows up on

the discussion by making the needed changes.)

On another level, there is much more going on here. As Patrick Lencioni spells out through fictional dialogue in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, "Trust is the foundation of real teamwork. Great teams do not hold back with one another. They are unafraid to air their dirty laundry. They admit their mistakes, their weaknesses and concerns."

In my experience, even leaders and groups who agree with that premise fall woefully short of taking the actions needed to get over the hump of low trust. Why? Because it is the very lack of trust keeping people from opening up in the first place. People need to have trust in each other to open up - but without opening up - it is hard to build trust.

SO, WHAT TO DO?

There is a sure-fire answer: someone has to start, and that someone is the leader. But how to start is the key. Talking about it, reading about it, intellectualizing about it, hearing a lecture about it can be helpful, but those tactics are never sufficient alone. The leader must, in some way, demonstrate what trust looks like, feels like, and must help a group experience what it leads to. And the best way to do that and begin the trust-building process is for a leader to request feedback in a safe, face-to-face setting, listen actively to people as they respond, commit to needed change and then do it.

Then, at the same session, if the leader's feedback is part of a larger team-building retreat, or later, as part of the follow up, all other members can be asked to participate in a similar form of structured feedback. In this scenario, what might have put the team into a catatonic state instead is received with more accountability ("Gosh, Roger did it, I guess I need to also"), less fear ("Boy, that discussion with Roger went a whole lot better than I ever imagined") and even a sense of desire ("Yes, if I am doing something that is getting in the way of this team being the best, I would like to know what it is").

Books, workshops, and team-building activities certainly have their place. They create awareness, provide frameworks from which to operate and can be quite fun. Unfortunately, none goes far enough in helping leaders and team members address the "undiscussable" issues hidden beneath the surface. Strong leaders have the courage to be vulnerable, to be open to feedback and to get outside help in addressing the tougher issues affecting team performance, including his or her own leadership practices. Such openness begins the trust-building process and fosters the team climate needed to ask - and then expect - others to "walk through that same door."