

TRUST AS THE FOUNDATION FOR LEADERSHIP AND HOW LEADERS CAN CULTIVATE TRUST

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*Trust stands as the foundation from which
all leadership capabilities stem.*

The essence of leadership is defined and interpreted in many ways. It can be tilted or turned in a specific position to look like something to someone but appear differently to another. One may define a true leader as someone who is honest or humble; another may define a leader to be authoritative and bold. One aspect many definitions have in common is viewing a leader as a person who captures the trust of those being led; being trusted as a leader will determine if people follow you or ignore you. Merriam Webster's dictionary defines trust as "reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something" ("Trust," n.d.). The core of this article argues that trust stands as the primary moral foundation for everything leadership is built upon, and without it, leadership becomes voided, unsustainable, and dangerous.

A counter argument that disagrees with this thesis is in the written work of Niccolo Machiavelli's, *The Prince* (1532/1968). Many of Machiavelli's theories in relation to leadership are seen in modern times as lacking a moral compass. He argues that dishonesty and corruption are effective tools which should be normalized in leadership capacities. He suggested immorality will propel individuals to great heights of influence and it is better to be widely feared than widely loved. He was quoted saying, "The promise given was a necessity of the past: the word broken is a necessity of the present" (Machiavelli, [ca. 1532] as cited in Wood, 1899, p. 449). Machiavelli believed it is

permissible to make promises to get an intended effect and then break them after the effect has come to fruition. Manipulation and deception denigrates trust and integrity. One of the most important factors in leadership is trust, and using Machiavelli's method chips away at the true influence you have over those you lead. Refuting his method is as simple as looking through the lens of history and seeing which approach has a more positive, lasting outcome.

To add further depth to the thesis, this essay will review brief examples of what happens when trust is at the foundation of leadership and what happens when Machiavelli's method is at the foundation. An example of a leader recognizing trust as the foundation of leadership is found in how George Washington captured the loyalty of the colonials because of the integrity and transparency of his character. These gave him the ability to lead America in its revolution, resulting in the birth of a new nation. This is seen when Washington said, "It is an old adage that honesty is the best policy—this applies to public as well as private life—to States as well as individuals" (1785, para. 3). A Machiavellian example can be seen in how Adolf Hitler captured the loyalty of the German people through deception and cunning, which enabled him to lead their country to an awfully horrifying place. His character lacked integrity as summarized here, "Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it" ("Adolf Hitler Quotes," n.d.). A more recent Machiavellian example is found in the impeachment of Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff. The *New York Times* stated, "The Senate voted 61 to 20 to convict Ms. Rousseff on charges of manipulating the federal budget in an effort to conceal the nation's mounting economic problems" (Romero, 2016). When the Brazilian people found out what was done, they lost their trust in her, and she lost power. The unsustainability that comes from deception eventually topples any relationship or promise a leader has made.

All three of these examples display the results of what happens when trust is the foundation or, in contrast, when Machiavellian methods are the foundation. If Hitler centered his leadership on trust and integrity instead of lies and immoral hatred toward groups of people, maybe the Second World War would have been averted. Because Hitler's leadership was based on Machiavellian methods, his Third Reich ended and so did his power. If the colonials, who were oppressed and burdened with strict obedience to the king of England, didn't trust the Declaration of Independence which says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" then we wouldn't have the America we have today. However, people trusted that document and more importantly, they had faith in their leaders. George Washington built a foundation of trust with those whom he led; it was at his center, which gave him abilities to lead

and influence our form of government around standards of truth and liberty. Brazil's president adhered to the Machiavellian method of lying in politics which contributed to Brazil's current state of a fractured economy. She was impeached, having lost trust, and with it her power. This likely occurred because her foundation of leadership was not bolstered by trust but by deception.

These examples give further weight and confirmation to the thesis. Each instance illustrates the lasting outcome of what happens when trust is the foundation of leadership and refutes the claims of Machiavelli's theories. With trust as the foundation, leadership lasts and is sustained. With the Machiavellian method, leadership is unsustainable, and dangerous, as seen with Adolf Hitler and Dilma Rouseff. Machiavelli's theories will certainly aid in gaining raw power, but will likely not last and leave a wake of destruction in its path due to lack of trust. The following points will be outlined in more depth: How a leader can develop trust among those they lead, and an analysis of the impact a trustworthy leader can have on society.

HOW CAN A LEADER DEVELOP TRUST AMONG THOSE THEY LEAD?

Personal Interest and Compassion

Harms, Bai, and Han's (2016) academic study, "How Leader and Follower Attachment Styles are Mediated by Trust," narrowed their findings to this statement regarding their research: "Results were suggestive that leaders who are willing and able to provide social and emotional support to followers are particularly important ... because the presence of such leaders may prevent the formation of distrust and the resulting negative outcomes" (p. 1872). When a leader genuinely has your personal welfare and interest at heart, the likelihood that you would be willing to follow them dramatically increases as opposed to a leader who is evidently not caring and supportive or simply not involved. This evidence may seem like common knowledge to most, but many leaders neglect this simple yet valuable tactic in gaining the trust of those for whom they are stewards.

Many difficulties can stand in the way of truly developing trust between a leader and follower; one of them being a barrier of titles. Eliminating the barrier and equalizing the field to an even level will likely result in positive outcomes for leaders seeking trust. In the study of psychological communication and relationships, this is referred to as a power-distance relationship and examines relationships between subordinates and superiors. Brett Rutledge, an acclaimed expert on executive communication, has defined this relationship by stating, "Power distance refers to the way in which power is distributed and the extent to which the less powerful accept that power is distributed unequally" (Rutledge, 2011, para. 1). Cultures with high power-distances usually teach children

from a young age that equality is nonexistent and authority is a fact of life; various roles deserve respect and others deserve no respect. Those in low power distance cultures are more easily persuaded by the idea of treating everyone on a level playing field.

There are certainly advantages and disadvantages to both high- and low-power distance relationships, but on the subject of a leader cultivating trust it would seem most effective for the leader to equalize the power distance so both the leader and the follower are on the same level. The term 'down to earth' is referenced in this context because it involves bringing one individual down to another's level, enhancing the possibility of earning that person's trust and loyalty as most people find it easier to trust others who can associate on the same level.

Persuasion

The ability to captivate and catch the attention of a human being is entertainment; the ability to influence them is persuasion. What is it that makes a person persuasive? Many would answer that it is in the way they talk or their physical appearance. A stronger argument may be that a person's character or credibility is what makes them most persuasive. Let's portray an example of this: An attractive man or woman asks you to invest in a company, but you know the company he or she wants you to invest in just had a class-action lawsuit filed against them. The second scenario is of an unattractive, poorly pitched investment plan for a company, but you know their stocks are rising and the company has great potential. Who would you choose? The answer is obvious. The majority would typically be more persuaded to invest in a company they knew was ethical and fair as opposed to a company that has corrupt leaders and is under investigation. In regard to the one who is trying to get you to invest, it would not be the person's appearance or how well the pitch was presented that would sway your choice. The perceived character of the company would be the determining factor. This example illustrates that persuasion does encompass initial features like attractiveness and charisma, but is outweighed by the integrity of a person's or group's character.

Another example showing character and credibility is the revered revolutionary of India, Mahatma Gandhi. It could be said that he was simple in speech and his physical appearance did not capture attention, but his actions and the integrity of his character caused the masses to follow him. His persuasive abilities were ingrained in the fibers of his character; something the eye cannot see.

Being a persuasive leader aids in gaining trust, but it is the integrity of the leader, not outward charisma, that will ultimately be the force of persuasion. To validate this

argument, many disciplines that study persuasion define it in three primary elements that originated from Aristotle: the first is *logos* (logic), the second is *ethos* (ethic), and the third is *pathos* (emotion). Notice none of these three elements encompass anything about whether a person is charming or attractive. Aristotle himself said, “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible” (n.d., p. 2155). Many leaders have alluring attributes, charismatic voices, and attractive smiles, but if they lack integrity and character, their initial charisma alone will not be the driving force for influence.

Honesty and Transparency

A leader can make large gains in trust by being honest and transparent. The nationally recognized *Forbes* business magazine emphasized three things that occur when a leader becomes transparent. First, problems are solved faster; second, relationships grow authentically; and third, people begin to promote trust in their leader. When a leader is transparent about a problem, it means everyone else can see it, which prompts collaboration on how to solve it. An authentic relationship is one built on the principles of honest feedback; it is something genuine, and nothing is hidden. The final outcome of transparency is the promotion of trust in the leader. This occurs when those you lead learn to trust you as a person first and then feel able to trust you as their leader (Llopis, 2012).

The initial question these three points answered was how does a leader gain trust? A leader gains trust by showing interest, practicing persuasion, and demonstrating honesty and transparency. By reviewing academic research and professional sources, it is evident that when these three points are implemented, trust will begin to cultivate among those a person leads. Leaders and followers play different roles, but they create a harmoniously orchestrated relationship where both parties can trust and depend upon one another.

THE IMPACT OF A TRUSTWORTHY LEADER

In the introductory statements of this article, brief examples of George Washington, the creation of the Third Reich, and the impeachment of Brazil’s president were referenced. These examples help to demonstrate the lasting effect of what happens when trust is the foundation or when Machiavellian methods are the foundation of leadership. Unfortunately, many leaders who follow a Machiavellian theory abuse and manipulate the trust they have earned. These actions eventually result in a crumbling infrastructure. When a leader has a proven record of integrity and honesty, it creates a lasting positive impact after they are gone. It fosters a culture based on values of what that figure stood for. Honesty and truthfulness in a leader will help societies, corporations,

and governments thrive more than they would if the alternative was used. A leader who is honest often seems to view themselves as a servant first and leader second. By practicing this framework their followers can develop loyalty toward them. A moral culture in countries or societies can be greatly influenced by the leader who stands at the head. The ethical fiber of a group or society will be strengthened and fortified if leaders adhere to trustworthiness.

CONCLUSION

A respected educator, Stephen Covey, said, “Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principle that holds all relationships” (Kruse, 2012, quote 4). Trust stands as the primary foundation for which all leadership ability is built upon. Relationships flourish with it or without it. Nations, societies, corporations, and organizations can rise or fall based on the trust a leader shares with their followers. Without trust, a leader’s capability to lead efficiently and effectively is crippled. Knowing a leader is trustworthy means their reliability is dependable and respected. If this is evidenced, then followers will put their trust in that reliability. Trust plays its insurmountable role in life and in leadership; it can create nations, or it’s lack thereof can end them. Many of life’s most treasured relationships are bound by the promise of trust. When trust is recognized as a foundational principle of relationships, then it is natural to see how it follows the same structure within leadership.

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