

Repairing Broken Trust

Trust is defined as our belief and willingness to act upon another person's words, actions, and decisions (Lewicki and Wiethoff, 2000; Wilson, 2021).

When trust is broken between individuals, teams, and organizations, there is the ability to repair and rebuild trust, sometimes making that trust stronger. Take the following steps to:



Acknowledge

Any time a breach of trust occurs, it is vital to acknowledge that it happened. When we betray the trust of someone (whether intentional or unintentional), it is vital for us to let the person who feels betrayed know that we acknowledge their hurt.



Apologize

Take a moment to apologize for betraying the trust of the individual, team, or organization. Do not make excuses, be kind and compassionate. Even more important, remember that we do not get to tell others how to feel about a betrayal—hurt—that has happened to them.



Discuss

When some time has passed (and it can be very quick), talk about what happened. Many times a breach of trust is unintentional. The person whose trust is broken may feel very hurt, but we may not know that we did anything wrong. It is important in the repair process to discuss what happened so that both parties can rebuild and strengthen our trust between each other.



Build or Rebuild

Together, it is important build trust through our actions, not just our words. In our personal lives, this can take shape in many forms and approaches. In our organizations, we rebuild through two types of contracts: psychological and procedural.

Psychological contracts are unwritten agreements in how we will behave and treat each other in the work environment. Everything from respect for our skills, flexibility in roles, decision-making, empowerment, etc. During the discussion phase, this is where we start to set new expectations for how we will treat each other.

Procedural contracts are our policies, processes, job aids, forms, etc. Processes are not just the “how” of the organization, they are the “who does what and when.” An agreement, a contract. When rebuilding trust from this perspective, get those policies and processes updated so that everyone can do their work efficiently, effectively, and adapt as needed...and be trusted to get the job done with the highest quality and on time before handing off to others.



Let Go

At some point, both parties need to move forward. If you are sincere in your efforts with the previous steps, trust can be repaired and sometimes, be even stronger than before. Sometimes, however, a betrayal of trust can be so hurtful the betrayed cannot forgive. If this happens, forgive yourself and move forward.



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