
LEADING TRENDS

Caretaking the Trust Garden



Schools are fragile emotional ecosystems where small disturbances ripple outward to have outsized impact. Part of the fragility comes from the fact that every student is there as a result of a conscious, deliberate decision on the part of parents to choose that particular school. The choice, once made, cannot really be undone—the opportunity cost of doing third grade at one school is to not do it at another. Since there is no way parents can know in advance which path is “best,” almost everything from enrollment to parent satisfaction to annual giving to Net Promoter Scores depend on one of the

225 S. Meramec, Suite 1024
Saint Louis, Missouri 63121
USA

+1.314.725.8889

projects@ta-stl.com

most fragile of emotions: trust.

Without trust there can be no benefit of the doubt or presumption of benevolent intent when something goes wrong. Interpreted through the lens of low trust, even an inevitable bad day at school can indicate that the parent made the wrong choice and is thereby to blame for an adverse impact on the child's life.

To complicate matters further, little about the modern world supports trust in institutions or events. Plenty of evidence, and even more opinion, cascades from seemingly every newscast and blog. Blame Trump, Putin, Brexit or the Catholic Church if you like, but the reality for school leaders is that they are the chief caretakers to a garden of trust being overrun with numerous species of invasive weeds.

Diagnosing Low Trust

There is a wealth of indices of low trust in organizations and on teams, but perhaps the most telling cultural indicator is when people—parents, faculty and even administrators and students—rarely take things at face value; rather, they perpetually seem to be searching for what is really going on behind the scenes. We have worked with schools where paranoia and suspiciousness seemed to be a contagious disease. Elliot Jacques, a psychoanalytically-oriented consultant, coined the term “paranoiagenic” to describe the propensity of some leaders to induce paranoia in stakeholders. We

“Without trust there can be no benefit of the doubt or presumption of benevolent intent when something goes wrong. Interpreted through the lens of low trust, even an inevitable bad day at school can indicate that the parent made the wrong choice and is thereby to blame for an adverse impact on the child's life.”

would be tempted to label this delusional except that we keep hearing stories about trust-busting and, well, paranoiagenic events:

A board chair that promised an open and transparent head search process only to hastily close the search and name a new head without holding on-campus visits;

A school where demolition of a landmark structure was stopped by vociferous alumni protests during the school year, only to have the building hastily torn down days after the beginning of summer break;

A board that summarily fired the head over the winter holidays because of a personality conflict between her and two members, and then said nothing about it after staff and families returned;

An attempted coup by a renegade faction of parents seeing to gather enough board seats to fire a disliked sports coach; and

Rampant rumors, with more than a little evidence in support, of palace intrigue between the three division heads and the assistant head of school.

Leading When Trust is Low

As the comedian George Carlin famously said, “paranoia is just good thinking if they really are out to get you,” and much behavior from leadership in organizations (not just in private schools) is paranoiagenic in nature. Combine this with the high anxiety state of parents and one has the potential for incendiary stuff. So, what does one do to lead in a low trust environment? Or, more to the point, what does one do when one inherits a situation where low trust is the logical response?

A quick Google search reveals more articles about eroding trust than building trust. One reason for the imbalance is that it is far, far easier to destroy trust than to recreate it. The old dictum that it takes seconds to obliterate trust but years to rebuild is accurate given both field experience and much research. So, the first thing leaders need to understand and accept is how hard rebuilding trust really is—even if you are brand new and worked thousands of miles away when something duplicitous or in bad-faith happened, rebuilding trust is going to take years of hard work. The next is to know that leaders who were around when trust was broken may not be the people to do the rebuilding—even if they were merely bystanders to the trust-busting itself. [Hey, we never said that leadership would be fair.] Merely having been present in leadership is likely contamination enough.

Once you appreciate the scale of the project ahead and have honestly assessed whether you are the right person to lead the trust rebuilding then you can dive in to the work. Start by acknowledging the trust breach and recognizing out loud that people feel burned by past events. Never, ever say the words “you can trust me.” Ever since Richard Nixon’s infamous “I am not a crook” statement, people seem conditioned to believe just the opposite. Saying that you are trustworthy is considered prima facie evidence of perfidy. Best just to quietly act trustworthy and over time people will come to consider you thus.

In fact, quietly acting trustworthy is exactly the prescription for rebuilding trust. It may not work with everyone—and that is to be expected—but it has a decent chance of success with most people. No one will forget what happened, but they will come to see you as cut from different cloth. After a time. After a lot of time.

By Marc T. Frankel, Ph.D., & Judith L. Schechtman, M.S.W., Senior Consultants and Partners
Triangle Associates, St. Louis, Missouri USA

How We Help Schools

Triangle Associates solves governance problems, keeps boards on track, guides strategy formulation, and develops senior leaders for private, independent schools around the world. See our [web site](#) for more information and a partial list of clients.

Governance
Strategy
Leadership

Stay in Touch with Triangle

Our popular Leading Trends newsletter is published quarterly, and [back issues](#) are readily accessible on our website. We hope you will [sign up](#) to receive this free newsletter. You can also follow [our blog](#) through an RSS feed by clicking the "Subscribe" button at the top of the page on our site. We update our [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) feeds on a regular basis, as well.

Thanks, and feel free to [contact us](#). We hope to work with you soon.