Leading With Trust:

How to Build Strong School Teams

By: Susan Stephenson
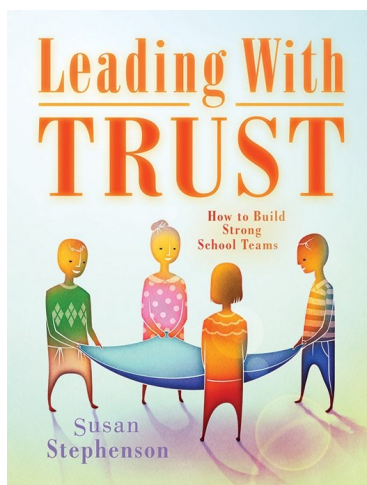
SUMMARY

Susan Stephenson identifies trust as the most important characteristic or element needed for school improvement and effectiveness. By making this connection she has written this book in a workbook format for leaders to not only understand the theory and research behind this connection but also to provide practical strategies for building a school climate of trust. Her focus is to provide strategies that build capacity for developing personal, interpersonal and organisational trust.

She has structured this book into six chapters that move leaders through the stages of identifying the current level of trust in their organisation to developing strategies for high-trust cultures. The chapters alternate between discussing the literature on the topics and providing practical strategies for leaders to follow and implement.

1. Confronting Distrust
2. Strategies to Deal with Distrust
3. Building Trust
4. Strategies to Develop Trust
5. Creating High-Trust Cultures
6. Strategies for High-Trust Cultures

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Stephenson has a background as a classroom teacher in Ontario, Canada. She has held numerous leadership roles in her career. She has won two awards for distinction in professional learning during her career. She has published numerous articles and resource books. She now travels across Canada and the United States to speak to corporate and educational organisations on the topics of teamwork, leadership, morale, humour and trust.

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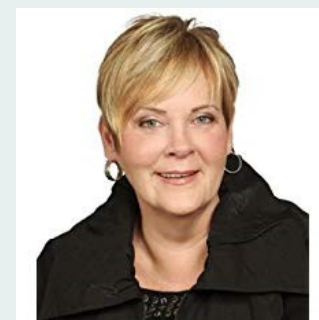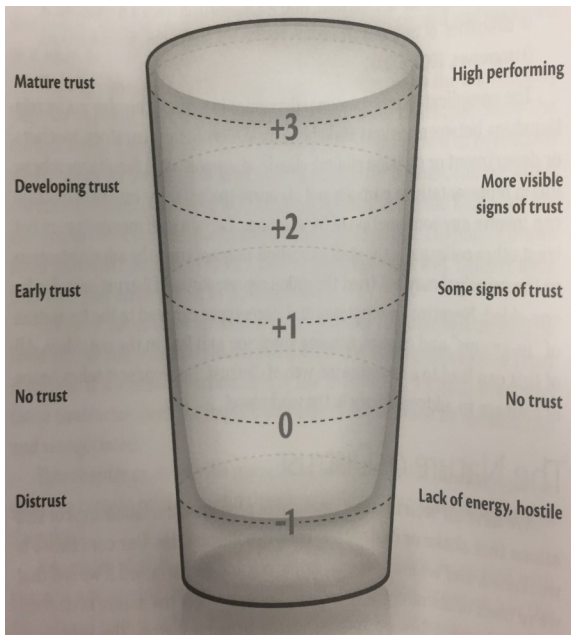
CONFRONTING DISTRUST

When discussing trust in schools it is important to understand that lateral trust among colleagues is as important as vertical trust in leaders. School cultures have increased focus on collaboration and teamwork. The core value of effective collaboration is rooted in participants trust in each other. Without trust, true collaboration cannot be achieved. Schools must then be able to assess the level of trust or distrust and be prepared to do something about potential distrust before effective learning communities can be formed.

The Trust Glass diagram on the left identifies the stages of trust and can be helpful for groups within an organisation to assess where they are on the scale.

A certain level of distrust is healthy in an organisation as it prevents excessive group cohesion that ignores sound decision making. Skeptics are an important in maintaining balance within an organisation.

"Trust is fragile. If it's been breached, and to the extent that it's been breached those contracts must be reexamined and renegotiated"

DISTINCTIONS

**Trust** = confidence in integrity and abilities

Distrust = suspicion of integrity and abilities

Cynics = close-minded and disillusioned, less inclined to be influenced

Skeptics = disbelievers but show willingness to be convinced if persuaded

BARRIERS TO TRUST IN SCHOOL

1. **Fear**—rooted in personal insecurities and caused by change, historical experiences, unsafe environments and leaders or colleagues who intimidate, harass, bully or maintain adversarial relationships. This can manifest into a fear of speaking up and cause anger, anxiety, negativity, cynicism, weakened motivation and depleted productivity.

2. **Betrayal**— causes teachers to isolate themselves from conflict and interaction with others thus taking away opportunities for learning and constructive disagreement. Betrayal can be seen as a continuum from major to minor with distinction between intentional and unintentional betrayal. Gossip and public betrayal are the most significant and devastating types of betrayal.

3. **Frequent changes in leadership**— can create cynical followers who simply decide to wait our all of their leaders.

4. **Poor staff development**— staff development that is begun without consultation of staff can cause them to become angry, defiant and even sabotage the efforts of others
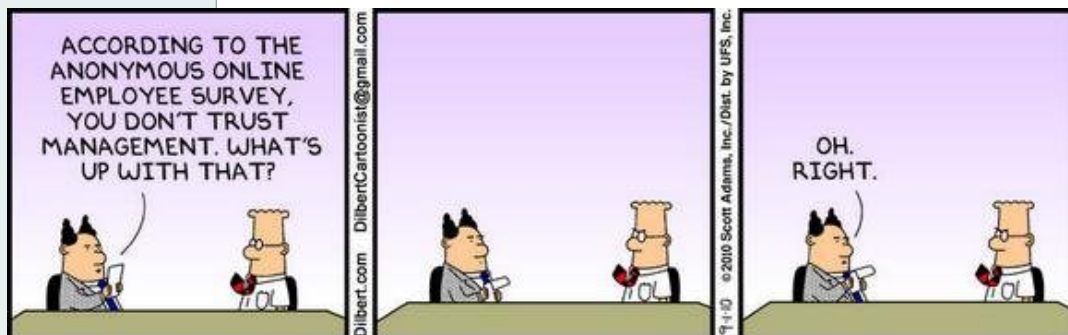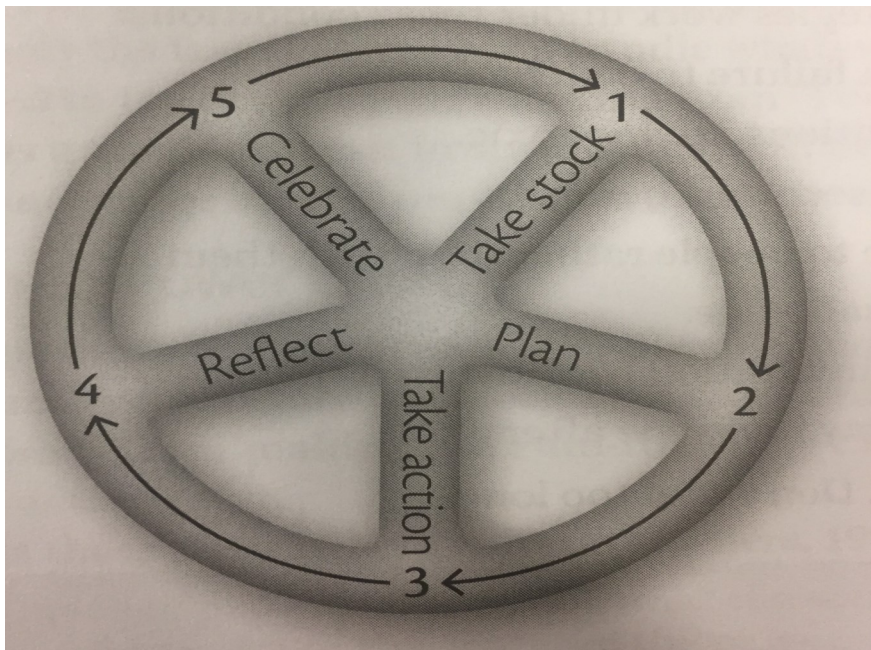
THE WHEEL OF CHANGE

This wheel represents a continuous growth process of change and can be used when addressing distrust in an organisation.

1. Take stock—talk about the current situation

2. Plan—work towards consensus from the group by planning next steps. Be aware to not over plan.

3. Take action— move process forward and build towards success

4. Reflect—did the action you take create a positive outcome? Consolidate your learning

5. Celebrate—trying something new. Start process again with next steps.

DEALING WITH DISTRUST

Personal capacity strategies allow people to reflect on the role they may have had in creating a distrustful environment. Susan suggests two strategies, along with activities to practice.

1. Face your fears—helps people articulate the cause of their personal fears and looks at shifting mentality from "I can't do this" to "I can handle it." Once you have identified your fears you must then decide if they are manageable enough for you to move to the next step or if you need to seek professional help.

2. Ask for feedback—this step involves getting some reliable feedback about yourself from self-reflection and from the staff. The goal is to gain clarity on the reality of your situation, confirm your assumptions and verify your intuition.

This feedback will allow you to identify your strengths and areas you need to improve. Encourage specific feedback and suggestions of what you do well and what could be done better.

Interpersonal capacity strategies allow for small or large groups to engage in lower-risk activities that acknowledge the distrust and invite people to work together to plan how to rebuild trust collaboratively. Nine strategies have been proposed.

1. Start with student learning—unite staff on the common goal and commitment of educating students

2. Build relationships one conversation at a time—provide opportunities for people to just be with each other and talk. Revive social activities, listen, learn, and then do something tangible, counsel new and weak teachers, share leadership and be trustworthy.

3. Involve a facilitation team—to assist and help with the trust building process

4. Invite feedback on staff trust—gain an understanding of the level trust among staff

5. Give permission to have some fun—build trust through camaraderie

6. Agree on norms of acceptable conduct—behaviours everyone agrees to follow. Used to clarify expectations.

7. Share personal stories—getting to know people better helps to built trust because trust is about vulnerability

8. Put the real issues "on the table" - core issues need to be surfaced in order to be discussed and resolved. Groups can: go offsite, open up, start with hopes & concerns, introduce "on the table or under the table" and write specific problem statements

9. Move from issues to action—consolidate issues and agree on specific, tangible actions for moving forward. Remember: avoid agreeing too quickly, complete the action plan, consider using outside help, decide to stay or leave if seem to be getting nowhere.

BUILDING TRUST: THE RESEARCH

Stages of Trust Development

Trust can be seen to develop in three sequential stages. **Stage one:** is when early trust is formed and developed. People at this stage are constantly evaluating what can be obtained from the relationship with what needs to be given in order to maintain the relationship. **Stage two: developing trust**, also know as knowledge based trust, occurs when people begin to trust other people based on past interactions and a sense of predictability in the other person. **Stage three: high-performing trust,** develops when a high level of empathy is created and people understand each other so well that they think, feel and respond like each other.
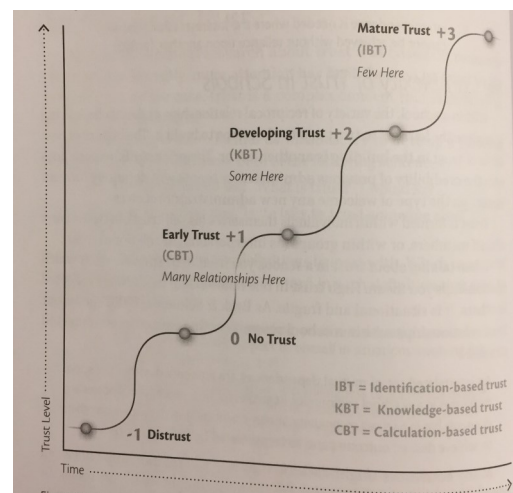
Adapted from Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie (2006)

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS: CREDIBILITY IS KEY

Trusting relationships rely on credibility which can be broken down into two distinct sides; **character** and **competence**. Character is who we are as people and can include our morals and values. Character is defined by actions and is revealed by how we deal with pressures and temptations. Competence is what we can do; our capabilities. This is developed through experience, training, knowledge, willingness to learn, technical abilities, efficiency, interdependence and a positive track record for producing results.

Character and competence are equally important in earning the trust of others and for building and maintaining trusting relationships.

"Just as a doctor who has a warm bedside manner but cannot perform a medical procedure expertly will not inspire trust, educators need both character and competence to earn the trust of others"

QUALITIES OF TRUSTING SCHOOLS

1. **Shared leadership** earns trust by empowering staff. There needs to be delegation of significant tasks and a clear process established that outlines what decisions will be collaborative and which ones need to be trusted to one or few people.

2. **Change and improvement** are part of learning and must come with consultation and involvement. People need knowledge of the change and the required implementation skills to build trust.

3. **Teamwork** is essential in educational organisations in creating more productive work. Learning the necessary teamwork skills is critical for success when moving from isolation to teamwork.

4. **Resistance and conflict** are inevitable and stem from a variety of valid places. Resistance and conflict need to be expected and dealt with in a serious manner

5. **Collaborative** action planning centered on: shared vision, mission, assessment of current status, short-term and long-term actions, and constant reflection measuring success.

6. H**igh-quality staff development** must be a focus and reality. Staff members need to have their own growth plan linked to the overall vision of the school. More learning opportunities must be planned with input and collaboration from staff.

STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP TRUST

The strategies outlined in this section build on the foundation of early trust and continue to develop capacity for personal and interpersonal trust. Conversations, that is, talking and listening for understanding are of upmost importance to the overall success of these strategies. People must be given the opportunity to discuss issues and barriers in a safe environment.

Personal capacity strategies:

1. Focus on your own happiness—staying positive, sense of humour, having fun

2. Continue your feedback search—feedback tools (Trust Glass, Johari Window, etc.), talk with critical friends, self-assess

3. Trust yourself—positive affirmations, confidence in your abilities

4. Walk your talk– DWYSYWD = do what you say you will do

"The single most important way to build trust is to be trustworthy!"

Interpersonal Capacity Strategies:

These strategies address two domains of people, the heart and the head, or the affective and cognitive domains. The affective domain is important because it ensures people are valued and treated with respect. Change can create many emotions in people and these emotions need to be recognized and nurtured. The cognitive domain seeks to create an environment where staff are open and willing to engage in the deeper questions they struggle with and work with new models or strategies they have contemplated implementing in their practice.

1. Share stories and start conversations—conversation skills, story telling

2. Encourage dialogue about change—change, conflict and resistance

3. Lighten up and play more—how fun is it to work here? Funny videos, celebrate achievements, games

4. Create the future through action planning—action planning roadmap (review past, shared-vision, mission/values/beliefs, current situation, gap analysis, action plan, evaluate process)

5. Collaborate through teams– focus on staff & student learning, inclusive teams, build capacity (norms, identity, listen for understanding, etc.)

6. Make decisions together—strategies that help groups narrow options with goal of consensus (everyone can support the decision)

STAGES OF GROWTH

1. Denial

2. Rationalization

3. Questioning

4. Acceptance

5. Growth

The personal capacity strategies look at moving people through these stages of growth. The goal is to have individuals to experience a balance of "Aha!" and "Oh Shit!" insights. These insights lead to building personal capacity.

Mitchell & Sackney (2000)

HIGH-TRUST CULTURES

High-trusting relationships and organizational cultures have proven to be very challenging and difficult to achieve. In fact, very few make it to this high level. Yet, this should be the goal for all schools. High-trust schools demonstrate the following characteristics:

- People and relationships are of highest importance
- High morals and a focus on student learning
- People are open and information is welcome
- Inclusion and buy-in from all staff towards shared vision
- Lateral and flexible structure for empowerment to solve problems
- Innovative and creative
- Growth mindset that celebrate mistakes as capacity builders and part of learning
- Confront conflict head-on and deal with source

CONDITIONS OF HIGH-TRUST SCHOOLS

When attempting to build a school of high-performing trust, leaders must keep a few key points in mind. Firstly, people and relationships must come first. Employees must be able to be themselves at work. Building authentic and genuine camaraderie by encouraging fun at work is a key factor in all high-trust relationships. Once these strong relationships of trust have been developed, procedures, success and productivity will follow and take care of themselves.

Collaboration and working in teams is another key to successful high-trust schools. Developing strong and effective teamwork skills must be a focus to ensure everyone can be successful in administrative teams, facilitation teams and work teams. Having high quality professional learning as the norm, making sure all meetings are productive and confirming that the organisational structure in set up and supports team learning are ways leaders can help with developing these team-first skills.

THE CHINESE BAMBOO TREE STORY

The Chinese plant the seed; they water and fertilize it, but the first year nothing happens. The second year they water and fertilize it, and still nothing happens. The third and fourth years they water and fertilize it,

and nothing happens. The fifth year they water and fertilize it, and sometime during the course of the fifth year, in a period of approximately six weeks, the Chinese bamboo tree grows roughly ninety feet.

The question is, did it grow ninety feet in six weeks or did it grow ninety feet in five years? The obvious answer is that it grew ninety feet in five years, because if they had not applied the water and fertilizer each year there would have been no Chinese bamboo tree. (Ziglar, 1985).

How can trust development be compared to that of the Chinese bamboo tree?

STRATEGIES FOR HIGH-TRUST CULTURES

It is important to remember that strategies and activities that have been used and seen as effective for taking groups out of distrust and developing early trust will still be useful and effective in building towards high-trust. Specific high-trust strategies included aim to have groups let go of the past and embrace new beginnings when facing change. Stephenson uses Fuller's 1972 trim tab theory to help illustrate these ideas. A trim tab is used on rudders of ships. Ships are steered at the back using a rudder. Essentially, the trim tab is what moves the rudder, which then moves the ship. Fuller states that individuals can be a trim tab. "Society thinks it's going right by you, that it's left you altogether. But if you're doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go." Small actions can go along way and in fact move the whole school. It is the goal to "**find the point at which minimal change will have maximum impact on the learning of staff and students.**"
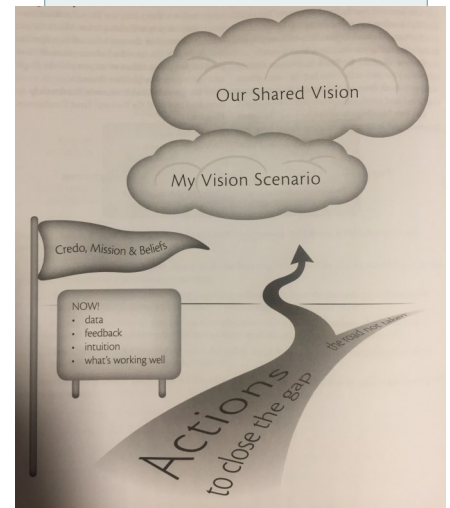
*"The road ahead won't be easy. It never is when people are asked to live at the edge or even outside of their comfort zone, but you **can** do it. You will need courage. When you find the courage to take risks, you'll find freedom from your fears"*

Questions to Consider

1. Have you every experienced any barriers to trust?
2. Has cynicism ever affected the trust levels in your relationships?
3. Can you think of a time when distrust was a good thing?
4. Do you think educators try to be polite and avoid conflict more than other professions?
5. Do you think that personal strategies are more or less important than interpersonal ones?
6. When group norms are established how can you make sure they stick?
7. Are you a high truster or a low truster by nature?
8. Is character or competence more important when thinking about credibility?
9. Can you think of examples when conflict was seen as a positive during trust-building?
10. Can you have high-trust for a person you don't necessarily like?
11. Can you think of examples of when you are personally learning to deal with conflict?
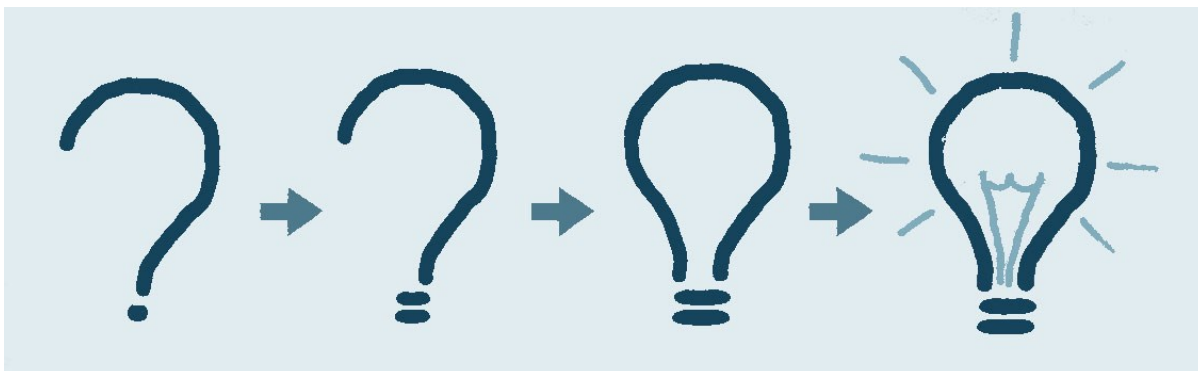
CRITCAL REVIEW

Leading with Trust is a useful and thoughtful book for all school leaders. Susan Stephenson perfectly mixes theory and practical application for understanding and developing trust in schools. I found myself constantly marking pages and copying strategies and activities to use in my practice. The 74 practical strategies are excellent for leaders who are looking for specific activities to put trust theory into action. These strategies are easy to follow and provide variety to suit many needs.

Stephenson's use of graphics, diagrams and models are also an appealing feature of this book. These help the reader fully understand the ideas presented. She also uses many analogies in her writing which help strengthen her ideas. Some of these models and analogies are her own and some are adapted from other renowned authors in the field. This speaks to her ability to seamlessly include research and literature from other authors to reinforce and support her ideas.
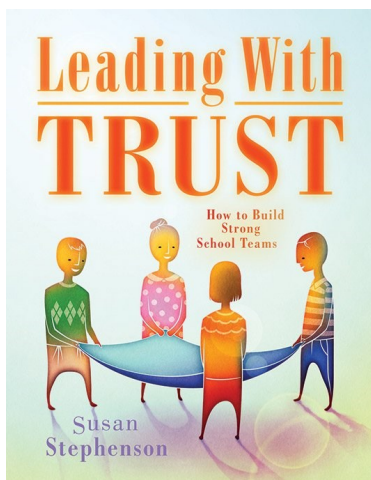
I would definitely recommend this book for school leaders who are interested in the area of trust and trust development in schools.

LEADING WITH TRUST:

HOW TO BUILD STRONG SCHOOL TEAMS

SUSAN STEPHENSON

Stephenson, S. (2009). *Leading with trust: How to build strong school teams*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

"At long last, a book that makes a compelling case for the significance of trust in educational institutions. Sue Stephenson writes with a profound understanding of the school culture and the many barriers to success that are encountered . . . Using, not just reading, this book will transform your school for the better."

-William Habermehl
Superintendent of schools, California