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Research Shows Five Ways To Gain Workers' Trust

By Kathy Gurchiek

The trust, or lack of trust, a worker has for his or her immediate boss affects a worker's decision to stay or leave, says a study of more than 7,000 executives, managers and employees. Trust is a significant driver of employee loyalty. Nearly one-third, or 32 percent, of an employee's decision to remain with the organization is based on the trust he or she has for his or her direct supervisor, says Leadership IQ, which conducted the online survey during the first two weeks of March 2007.

Surprisingly, the trust issue respondents ranked highest was feeling comfortable bringing work-related bad news or problems to their immediate supervisor and knowing that he or she would respond constructively. In addition, it was the most important of five predictors of employee loyalty, the survey found. Overall, the 7,209 survey respondents tended to be ages 41 to 60 with undergraduate or graduate degrees, working at the managerial or director level and earning annual incomes of \$50,000 to \$99,000.

Close to half (44 percent) don't trust or strongly distrust their top management to respond constructively to workplace problems. That's a "far more important issue than being honest and truthful," Leadership IQ CEO Mark Murphy observed from the survey findings.

The other four key predictors of trust, according to the findings:

- The person's belief that his or her direct boss is honest and truthful.
- The person's belief that the boss helps the worker grow and develop professionally.
- The person's belief that the boss makes smart decisions.
- The person's belief that the boss provides consistent direction.

'It's Fixable'

The good news is that learning to respond constructively to work problems is a skills issue. "The good news is ... that it's fixable," Mark Murphy said, noting that direct supervisors "have to stop blowing up and yelling and screaming every time they get any bad news." That merely sends the message that he or she doesn't want to hear work-related problems, but "just because you're not hearing the bad news doesn't mean it doesn't exist," he pointed out. "When you've been brought the bad news ... make sure you respond in a productive way, which basically means now is not the time to blame, now is the time to fix the problem.

"Fixing the problem doesn't mean you push everybody aside and say 'you're all morons, let me do it myself,' " Murphy said. "Sometimes [employees] just need to vent" or bounce ideas off of their supervisor, he added. Discouraging employees from sharing work-related problems could backfire, resulting in workers taking their concerns to someone at a higher level. "If your boss is getting bad news before you do, then you've really got a problem," Murphy said. Instead,

supervisors should make themselves more approachable.

“Wander around a little bit and ask them” if there are any problems with the projects they are working on, he suggested. Before you lose that big account, there is at least one account service representative who could have told you there’s a problem, he said, citing one example. Not only should supervisors not react negatively to bad news, they should also thank or reward the employee who has the courage to give you the bad news, he added.

Trust Takes a Holiday

Trust in the workplace is taking a beating, it seems. A **2006/2007 Watson Wyatt Worldwide survey** released January 2007 of 12,205 full-time U.S. workers across all job levels and major industries found about half, or 49 percent, of employees have trust and confidence in the job senior managers are doing. That’s down from 51 percent in 2006.

“This dip in ratings is concerning because employees’ attitudes about their senior leaders are a key factor in building engagement,” said Ilene Gochman, Watson Wyatt’s national practice director for organization effectiveness. The decline corresponds with a slight decline in other favorable ratings during that time period, Watson Wyatt found, including how senior management was rated in behaving consistently with the company’s core values and confidence in the company’s long-term success.

“People want to work for companies where they have confidence in the organization and trust what senior management is doing,” Gochman said in a press release. “Fostering that trust is especially important in today’s global market as it creates an environment in which employees understand that changes to the workplace may be necessary to remain competitive.”