



Building Trust

Ever hear yourself uttering these words, “So why don’t you trust me?” Or has anyone ever said to you, “You have to first earn my trust”? The phrase, “once bitten, twice shy,” seems to illustrate the cautiousness that people exhibit when this word surfaces in a conversation. We each have probably had several experiences of the fragility of trust and how it often can be broken. So what is trust really about?

Trust is a prime characteristic of Gracious Space and one of the basic requirements for creating and maintaining healthy relationships. Without the presence of trust there is an unwillingness to engage. So what does it mean and what does it take for us to trust and, in turn, be trusted? One way that trust can be defined and measured is in terms of benevolence and competence. Benevolence is the degree to which I have your best interest at heart and you have my best interest at heart. Competence is the degree to which you and I are skilled and knowledgeable in specific areas. Both of these components need to be present for trust to show up in a relationship. A story from a Seattle-based rock-climber clearly illustrates this point.

“While in northern Scotland, I agreed to climb some local sea-cliffs with a person I had just met in the community. He was friendly and easy-going and assured me that he had climbed before in that area. I looked forward to an enjoyable outing.

I was leading the climb and we were both roped in. As I prepared to secure another anchor point before climbing the next pitch, the narrow sandstone ledge that I was holding on to broke away and I fell. Normally the person below would take the weight of the fall and minimize the distance traveled by holding on to the rope. However, for some unknown reason, my newfound friend panicked as he saw me falling towards him and let go of the rope – causing me to fall onto the beach below. I was very fortunate that day and escaped with only two cracked ribs and some bruises.

So even though my partner was a ‘good’ person and had my best interest at heart, he had clearly demonstrated a lack of competence. He was like the ‘inept ally’ who means well but cannot deliver the goods. In rock-climbing there is very little margin for error and you literally have each other’s life in your hands. I therefore made absolutely sure that my next climbing partner was both benevolent and highly competent. The incident at the sea-cliffs was a practical lesson about the meaning of trust!”

Trust is a vital ingredient in the psychological soil of group life and its presence creates those conditions that allow us to feel safe in each other’s company – inviting us to lower our defenses so that we can wholeheartedly enter that vulnerable space in which learning and growth takes place. Having trust in each other creates a positive field in which concerns can be aired without fear of rejection, dreams can be shared and respected and the seeds of possibilities can be nourished and brought to fruition.

When any group is formed to carry out a task or to explore a specific issue that concerns them all and the members do not yet really know each other, there is an immediate need to establish a degree of trust. So how do we go about this? Discovering commonalities and honoring the



Building Trust, pg. 2

diversity within the group is a very powerful way of initiating this process. The following is an example of one group activity that can be employed to help build trust.

1. Create a circle of chairs (or sit in a circle on the floor) and then invite each person in the group to write a brief answer to the following three questions on a sheet of paper.
“What do you really care about?”
“What do you have passion for and wish to see changed in the community right now?”
“What are you actually doing about this?”
2. Invite each person to take two minutes to share with the whole group what they have written and then have them place their sheet in the center of the circle. Encourage the group to suspend judgment as they listen.
3. Go around the circle again and invite each person to state the core value (or values) that live at the heart of those things that they most care about. The group will then engage in a dialogue and an inquiry to uncover and acknowledge the common values in the room. Once the values have been declared and acknowledged, take time in the group to recognize that each person chooses to live out these values and take action on what they care about in different ways. So although the answers to the earlier question, *“What are you actually doing about this?”* may vary and even appear to contradict each other in some cases, having a common set of values in the room encourages and honors individuality and a diversity of expression.

- Submitted by Michael Lindfield for the Center for Ethical Leadership