



# Building a Culture of Trust

## An Imperative for Effective School Leadership

Leading an academic institution through a crisis is stressful. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed extraordinary demands on leaders of educational institutions. However, research has shown that education leaders who consistently place emphasis on a culture of trust find it much easier to garner the trust of their teams during crises.<sup>1</sup> Institutions with high levels of trust have more productive workforces, better employee morale, and

lower employee turnover.<sup>2</sup> However, when trust is broken, there is toxicity in the workplace, stressed workers who operate in silos, low collaboration, and a steady decline in morale and productivity.<sup>3</sup>

Simply put, if faculty and staff don't trust the leaders of their institutions, neither group will achieve their full potential.<sup>4</sup> Trust is therefore "the glue which binds the leader to her/his followers and provides the capacity for organizational and leadership success."<sup>5</sup> Cognizant of the critical role that trust plays in school leadership, I will discuss the steps that edu-

cational leaders can employ in building a culture of trust, which will assist them in successfully leading their institutions, even during times of crisis.

### Best Practices for Building a Culture of Trust

To build a culture of trust, leaders of academic institutions at all levels need to include some key principles in their leadership toolkit. The following best practices will help to foster a culture of trust between academic in-

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stitutional leaders and their faculty and staff members.

### **Lead With Integrity**

To build a culture of trust, school leaders must lead with integrity. Noting the intricate link that exists between integrity and trust, leadership expert John C. Maxwell explains that “You don’t build trust by talking about it. You build it by achieving results, always with integrity and in a manner that shows real personal regard for the people with whom you work. When a leader’s character is strong, people trust him [or her], and they trust in his [or her] ability to release their potential. That not only gives followers hope for the future, but it also promotes a strong belief in themselves and their organization.”<sup>6</sup> Educational leaders who personify integrity are intentional in ensuring consistent congruence between their words and actions. They model sound moral and ethical principles regardless of the situation and do not have divided loyalties. For school leaders to have the authority to lead, they need more than a title on their office door. Only when they habitually demonstrate integrity—honesty, trustworthiness, and reliability—are school leaders perceived by those they lead as authentic, credible, and trustworthy.

Ongoing leadership research has produced two important assessment tools that school administrators can use to measure their integrity as leaders. One such tool is the Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLIS) developed by Craig and Gustafson, which measures the extent to which a leader behaves ethically.<sup>7</sup> Another is the Behavioral Integrity Scale (BIS) created by Simons, Friedman, Liu, and McLean-Parks, which measures the perceived consistency of leaders’ actions and words and how well they keep their promises.<sup>8</sup> These tools will aid academic leaders in improving their levels of personal and professional integrity, which will in turn foster a spirit of trust throughout their institutions.

### **Create the Atmosphere for Effectively Engaging in Difficult Conversations**

Engaging in difficult conversations in the workplace is inevitable. Because these conversations often emerge from tension or unhappiness and have the potential to create more of the same, they can easily destroy relationships if not handled effectively.<sup>9</sup> School leaders must be equipped to transform these potentially stressful interactions with

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teachers and staff into opportunities that build deeper levels of trust.<sup>10</sup> Developing the ability to handle these challenges will pay off in terms of reduced stress, increased confidence, improved relationships, increased trust, fewer problems, better teamwork, higher productivity, and better career opportunities.<sup>11</sup> A popular saying in leadership studies is that leaders should be *hard on the problems and soft on the people*<sup>12</sup> when approaching difficult topics. The individuals involved should be prepared beforehand to have these discussions, and a culture of openness and sensitivity needs to be cultivated.<sup>13</sup>

Academic leaders should encourage an atmosphere wherein faculty and staff can discuss with honesty, clarity, and directness “inflammatory issues such as equity of workload, teacher evaluation, the underperforming educator, racism, and compensation”<sup>14</sup> without fear of retaliation from their administrators.

Through professional coaching, mentoring, and professional learning sessions that model how to speak and listen while having difficult conversations, educators learn how to build and cultivate environments of trust. There are four types of planned conversations that professionals should learn how to engage in consistently, and these should be implemented into training sessions and modeled effectively and often:

1. *Reflective conversations* that are non-judgmental and simply provide an opportunity for a faculty or staff member to provide input on the various issues.
2. *Facilitative conversations* that are data-centered; guided by what conclusions could be made based on the data available on any given issue.
3. *Coaching conversations* where administrators work closely with an individual faculty or staff member to help him or her come to conclusions and discover personal answers to issues.
4. *Directive conversations* where the educational leader sets very clear and firm expectations and/or consequences.<sup>15</sup>

The successful handling of difficult conversations will result in mutual respect and trust among institutional leaders and teaching faculty and support staff.

### **Empower Your Team Through Shared Governance**

An engaged educational team is essential to building trust. In building a foundation of trust, academic leaders should empower their faculty and staff and provide them with opportunities that will develop their leadership competencies. As Huntoon suggests, “empowerment creates a healthy, positive and ultimately suc-



successful organization—one in which there is ownership of the vision and trust in the leadership.”<sup>16</sup>

Larger schools might consider implementing leadership teams or teacher teams. Leadership teams typically consist of lead teachers from all levels and subject areas and may include administrators and staff such as special educators and counselors. Participants may volunteer to serve but are sometimes assigned. Also, goals are established based on the school’s mission, vision, and needs. Part of being on these teams includes receiving professional-development training in how to offer support to peers within the school. Based on this training, these teams lead out in coaching, professional-development seminars, or community initiatives.<sup>17</sup>

Teacher teams are more focused on instructional approaches, either by grade level or subject area. In larger schools, these are typically assigned by the educational leader.<sup>18</sup> Whether a leadership team or a teacher team, these groups function based on shared goals and experiences, and

with the intent of moving the school or institutions forward.<sup>19</sup>

A practical example of how trust was built through the process of shared governance occurred at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC).<sup>20</sup> Through an interactive, collaborative process that included university leadership, the faculty senate, staff senates, and student-government associations, the institution was able to transform its culture. UMBC’s experience proves that empowerment builds trust, and that the best way for educational leaders to receive trust is for them to trust others, delegate, and to make room for their teams to develop their talents. As Freeman Hrabowski III, UMBC’s president, highlights, “shared governance embodies a spirit of empowerment that develops allies, change agents, champions and innovators.”<sup>21</sup>

While this example is of a large, public university, and Adventist schools and higher education institutions may not have all of the groups listed above, the essential point is that shared governance built through establishing interactive and collaborative processes is foundational to

building trust. Small Adventist schools or institutions will need to adapt based on the number of administrators, teachers, or support staff available to serve on teams, but the outcome can still be beneficial to the process of collaboration and building trust.

### ***Celebrate Your Team***

In addition to empowering faculty and staff, academic leaders should also celebrate their successes and accomplishments through both tangible approaches (verbal affirmations; thank-you messages) and intangible gifts (bonuses; special awards) in real time. As Wong rightly points out, “Everyday appreciation builds a sense of community and helps employees feel emotionally secure, so when you recognize your team often, they’ll be more likely to trust you. Approximately 90 percent of employees who receive thanks or recognition from their boss reported feeling high levels of trust in that individual. This figure went down to 48 percent for workers who did not receive recognition. So if



you want to foster trust in your workplace, lean into the direct relationship between trust and recognition.”<sup>22</sup> Building relationships and a shared sense of community requires academic leaders, then, to intentionally lean in, to press forward deliberately and purposefully in creating environments that nurture trust and create an atmosphere of security.

### ***Practice Consistent and Transparent Communication***

Effective communication is fundamental to cultivating a culture of trust in any organization. Building trust involves effectively managing the different channels of communication, being truthful with faculty and staff members at all times, providing opportunities for feedback, and striving to communicate face to face as opposed to being over-reliant on e-mails.<sup>23</sup> When face-to-face communication takes place on a regular basis, leaders (1) ensure that proper communication occurs; (2) see firsthand what is happening in the institution; (3) learn new things; (4) seem more approachable and trustworthy; and (5) are perceived as part of the team.<sup>24</sup>

Integral to any communication process is effective listening, and school administrators should make this a priority. Admitting with humility that they do not have all the answers, leaders of academic institutions must convey that they value the input of those they serve. This can be done by intentionally taking time to seek out feedback, spend quality time listening to the ideas and thoughts of their faculty, staff, students, parents, and constituents, and then incorporating that information into the decisions and plans they make. Since trust is built when an individual feels listened to, leaders should seek to build trust by the way they listen during conversations.<sup>25</sup> School leaders improve their listening skills when they: (1) refrain from interrupting the person with whom they’re conversing; (2) ask clarifying questions and paraphrase to ensure that they understand what the person is trying to

communicate; (3) take time to understand the individual’s story; and (4) stay engaged and resist distractions during the conversation.<sup>26</sup>

Other effective listening techniques include: (1) listening carefully in order to hear the intended message; (2) allowing the speaker to finish before formulating a response; (3) using paraphrase, restatements, and clarification questions to acknowledge that the speaker has been heard; (4) dealing with emotions—theirs and yours; and (5) building listening skills by participating in workshops or professional development sessions that model and teach how to listen well.<sup>27</sup> Dorn is correct in stating that “open, constructive communication is the basis of trusting relationships, and effective listening is at the heart of constructive communication.”<sup>28</sup>

### ***Lead With Compassion***

Another powerful tool for building trust in an academic institution is compassion. Compassion is the ability to respond to others with genuine empathy and relate to others in a way that focuses on their potential. Three components of compassion that school leaders should model include: (1) understanding or empathizing with others and their problems; (2) loving and caring for others, and (3) selflessly helping others in need.<sup>29</sup> Leaders should express care and concern for each individual member of the educational team, for the interdependent work group or department at all levels, and for the organization. Employees must have faith that the people they trust are taking their best interests to heart.<sup>30</sup> Focusing on compassion at work promotes healthy interpersonal relationships. It acknowledges and appreciates others wholeheartedly, and builds trust, mutual connections, and reciprocity.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Finally, trust is an essential factor in the success or failure of all schools. Leaders of Christian institu-

tions of learning have the unique opportunity to influence the trust level in their institutions. As they place their trust in God, those they lead will also pattern their example. Leaders of Christian schools can improve their institutions through implementing daily opportunities to increase trust based on benevolence, openness, honesty, reliability, and competence. Each of these components are foundational to building trust, the key factor upon which the success of a Christian education institution can be built.<sup>32</sup>

Building a culture of trust must constantly be regarded as an imperative for school leaders. Trust has to be earned. Institutional cultures of trust are established when educational leaders intentionally lead with integrity, create atmospheres for difficult conversations, celebrate and empower their teams through shared governance, practice consistent and transparent communication, and lead with compassion. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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### Recommended citation:

Rodney A. Palmer, "Building a Culture of Trust: An Imperative for Effective School Leadership," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 83:1 (2021): 4-8.

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