



Trust and Fear in the School

The Link to Mental Health and Well-being of Teachers

by ROSS FLOOD

Trust is seen as the core operating principle in managing school systems and working in an effective and professional learning environment. (Gilmour, 2010, pp.4-5; Telfer, p.2) Gilmore's study of the link between trust and change in schools in southern Alberta shows trust as a key element in getting staff to buy into an atmosphere where teachers feel safe to express ideas, take action and evaluate teaching outcomes without a fear of retaliation or ill feelings by the principal. (Gilmore p.31) Research also shows the connection of leadership and trust and the positive or negative influence on organizational health and employee well-being. (Gilmore, pp.4-5) In the reality of a world of school reform, school consolidations and a rapidly changing teaching environment, trust is particularly important and allows the principal to introduce instructional and organizational changes to a more receptive faculty. (Gilmore, p.39)

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The influence of mistrust in organizations is demonstrated by intrigue, informal hierarchies and leaders, miscommunication, and misperception about teacher's administration. The more force (emotional and psychological) that is applied, the more intense the fear reaction, until the fear includes emotions such as apprehension, distrust, disgust and anger. (Gardner, 2003, p.2) Additionally, the resistance will likely turn into opposition towards any of the leaders' efforts to implement change.

Fear in the workplace is defined as “feeling threatened by possible repercussions as a result of speaking up about work-related issues”. (*Trust and Fear in the Workplace*, p.1) Four sources contribute to these feeling of threats: 1) the experience a person has had with fear; 2) stories about the experience of others; 3) your own assumptions and interpretations of co-workers' behaviours; and 4) negative stereotypes about leaders. It is also about reliability in being able to predict how the other person(s) will react in any given situation. (*Teacher and Principal Trust*, p.1)

Fear is not always present in the school, but low-trust relationships show more fear than high-trust relationships. Fear focuses on what went wrong, it demeans people and makes them feel unworthy and threatened. In an organizational context, fear is learned behaviour and may be represented by the expectation of rejection, failure, shame or social disapproval. (Telfer, p.2) It also contributes to the rise of strong emotions in a staff – usually negative emotions such as anger, sadness, aversion, grief, bitterness and vengefulness that impact on the mental health of individuals.

As shown previously, fear elicits strong emotions. Emotions arise in response to ongoing situations and how people evaluate them with positive or negative implications for one's goals, values and beliefs. (Schwarz & Clore, 2006, p.385) People who feel threatened are more highly stressed, more highly anxious, and can be in a constant state of agitation or hyper-vigilance. For workers in this position, they often have difficulty coping with the emotional and psychological feelings that they experience. Fear is about punishment, control and creating conflict. (Campbell, p.2) Being continuously exposed to fear in the workplace generally leads to increased sick leave or disability, a withdrawal from activities and people and diminished quality of work. Overcoming fear means developing the capacity and skills to diminish the negative emotions of fear and develop-

ing more trust and self-confidence in yourself. While individual teachers have a responsibility to help themselves overcome fear, professional leaders have a role in reducing fear and increasing trust in their teams. (Tefler, p.2; Campbell, p.1)

Trust and fear: How they influence mood in the workplace

In an organizational sense, moods can be viewed as overarching atmosphere that influences a work team, a teaching staff or work environment. It is a persistent state with feelings and emotions that may have multiple sources. It can also be the history the group has of the members of the team, the organizational culture and their group view of leaders in the organization. The real impact of mood is that it can greatly influence the expectations and future view of the individual or collective about an employer. The more pervasive moods tend to be negative and can have a debilitating effect on a team or work environment. Strong negative emotions greatly reduce an individual's ability to cope with a workplace. (Campbell, p.2, Fisher, 1998, pp.18-19, Telfer, p.3)

Schwarz & Clore, 2006 contend moods may develop gradually, can last for an extended time and are typically of low intensity. A negative or positive mood may exist after the experience of a negative or positive emotion (event) and the specific cause may be blurred. However, if the mood is accompanied by strong emotions, the overall impact is one of high intensity that influences the work environment. Moods have a pervasive influence that impacts many employees for a long time. (Schwarz & Clore, 2006, pp.386-387)

Some of the more common and pervasive moods influencing the work place are:

- Skepticism – doubting the honesty, integrity of the leaders or organization overall
 - Resentment – feeling hurt and helpless to effect any changes in your situation
 - Cynicism – no one or nothing is worthy of respect in the organization
 - Frustration – I have to make something happen - but can't (either individually or collectively, so why bother
 - Resignation – nothing new is possible especially for me – I give up
 - Disillusionment – disappointment and see no reason to make an effort to change
- (*Coaching for Managers*, pp.16-17)

(cont'd)



School Representative Seminars

Coming in Fall 2010

A series of School Representative Seminars will take place as a continuation of the ongoing triennial program in October 2010. Nine groupings of branches have been arranged and three seminars are offered each fall on a rotating basis. Schools will have the opportunity for representatives to attend every three years. School Representatives will receive specific information directly from the NLTA office.

Group 1 – Gander

October 15-16, 2010 – Albatross Hotel, Gander

Branches Attending: Fogo Island, Ganova, Hamilton Sound, Notre Dame, Trinity-Deadman's Bay

Group 2 – Goose Bay

October 22-23, 2010 – Hotel North II, Goose Bay

Branches Attending: Churchill Falls, Coastal Labrador South, Labrador West, Lake Melville, Nutak Labradorimi

Group 3 – St. John's

October 29-30, 2010 – Capital Hotel, St. John's

Branches Attending: Baccalieu, Bay Roberts, Carbonear, Marconi, Placentia, Upper Trinity South

Mood influences a teacher's assessment of their work environment. If members usually experience a pleasant interaction in a group, it usually encourages the group to look forward to the next event. Conversely, if they dread the next interaction, the group will start in a negative mood that leads to greater negativity, (Barsade & Kelly, 2001, pp.116-117) in essence a self fulfilling prophecy. Flashes of anger, or rage or affection and joy in stressful situations may serve to influence the group's emotional history and set up future expectations and behaviour. (Barsade & Kelly, 2001, pp.117-118)

Trust is the counterbalance to fear and negative moods. The highest form of positive valuation (value in another person) is trust. (Gardner, 2003, p.3) It develops when we depend on the willingness and competence of others to look after what we care about and value. (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.1) Teachers need to have a belief that their well-being will be protected by a principal who will act reliably in their best interest. (Gilmour p.42) The more powerful a person believes in his/her belief system, the stronger the motivation to maintain it. (Gardner, 2003, pp.3-4) If a leader does harm – something a colleague does not want – the relationship is severely tested. The more often the relationship is tested and the greater the threat is to someone's belief system, then trust is diminished and fear is increased.

Trust can be seen as both a glue and a lubricant. As the glue, trust unites leaders and to one another. Trust is essential to build and keep up cohesive relationships and to promote effective cooperation within a staff. (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.2) When teachers have open communication and they feel that they can rely on others (colleagues and principals) to follow through on their commitments, trust is enhanced. Trust does not develop on its own, but takes effort from both sides to develop and nurture. (P. Bishop, 2010; Gilmour p.40; Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.2)

Principal As a Conduit for Developing Trust

The principal, more than any other official creates the conditions for trust to develop by establishing the structure for good interpersonal and professional relationships in the school. (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.5) Principals also set the tone for the interactions between school leaders, school staff, district staff, in essence modelling effective behaviour. By showing trust of his/her staff, principals are also encouraging and developing trust from the teachers in the school. The principal's personal and professional work ethic gains the trust of teachers and without trust, any sense of collaboration, team development and empowerment is replaced by fear,

teacher alienation and the absence of professional development. (Bishop, 1999; Gilmour, p.41)

Elements/Characteristics of Trust

Cheryl Ann Gilmour lists five qualities of trust that have been identified in the literature as necessary for a climate of trust to exist:

- Staff are confident that the principal has their well-being and best interest at the forefront of any actions. This benevolence is necessary in a climate of establishing new strategies in time of structural change.
- Staff see reliability when they can count on the principal to be predictable in standing up for them and following through on their commitments. This reduces anxiety for staff.
- The staff see the principal as competent, having the skill and knowledge to be an effective leader in the school.
- The principal is seen as honest, trustworthy and authentic. Their deeds match their words and they accept responsibility for their actions and do not attempt to shift blame to others.
- The principal has open communication and does not attempt to withhold information from staff members. This openness builds trust and confidence of the staff and principal. (Gilmour, pp.42-43)

Where that effort at developing trust can be undermined is when principals have to implement mandated changes from higher levels. (Bishop, 1999) The principal may be judged as being uninterested in teacher welfare or having no control or influence with the district level staff. How principals mitigate against this is by having a practice of collaboration. This is a climate where teachers are involved to the limit they can be in making decisions that influence their work environment and quality of teaching for the students.

Not to be overlooked is the positive impact high levels of trust have on individuals and a team. (Barsade & Kelly, 2001, pp.116-117) If teaching staffs are formed with respect for each other and the administration, with a positive history as a staff, with good support from administrators and from each other, with positive, trusting two-way communication, collaboration and shared decision making, trust is already developed. Continuous work is needed to maintain the relationship, making many of the points and traits in this article moot.

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 (References for this article can be found at www.nlta.nl.ca)