Building Trust: A Leadership Imperative

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Committing to a life of stewardship is built on trust in God. Practicing a life of stewardship is built on trust in people and organizations. People give to persons and organizations that they trust. They withhold support from persons and organizations that are not trusted.

Church leaders do well to teach a biblical understanding of stewardship. But if church members have a low level of trust in leadership they will practice their stewardship outside of church organizational channels. Therefore, a basic task of leaders is to conduct their personal lives and public leadership in a manner that builds trust. Leaders should remember that, “To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved.”

Building Trust

There are two kinds of trust that influence the stewardship practices of church members. The first is personal trust, the trust that employees and church members have in individual leaders. We judge ourselves by our intentions; others judge us by our actions. Building trust takes time and careful attention. It can be lost instantly through a single action.

Questions of personal trust are as old as human community. Jacob cheated his brother Esau. Laban cheated his nephew Jacob. Critics of the apostle Paul insinuated doubts about his integrity. Paul responded with a statement about the authenticity of his life. “...we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.”

For Paul the complexities of ethical and moral decision-making were governed by the overwhelming awareness that he was called by God.

Through God’s mercy he had been given a work to do. This conviction became his central reference point. Paul asserts that the disciplinary code for his life is an internal one, not the result of external rules.
guidelines, policies, audits or supervision. The realization that his ministry comes by the grace of God compels him to live a life of integrity. His behavior is based on the privilege of being associated with God’s program for the world.

“We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry.”

The development of trust towards someone in leadership finds its base in the interplay of character and competence. Leaders with upright character but who lack competence do not inspire trust. Similarly, those with unquestionable competence but with questionable character will not be regarded as trustworthy. Character and competence teamed together create a solid foundation for the growth of trust. Stephen M. R. Covey writes about the loss and restoration of trust in leadership. “Generally, the quickest way to decrease trust is to violate a behavior of competence. The quickest way to build trust is to demonstrate a behavior of competence.”

So let us consider behaviors that, over the course of time, help to build a reputation of trustworthiness.

1. Keeping commitments, deliver results. One of the most common reasons that people give when describing why someone is not a person of integrity is that “he doesn’t keep his word.” Keeping promises, even oral ones, is a critical element that enables society to function. Imagine what life would be like if no one could be trusted. Confidence in leaders diminishes when people perceive that we don’t really mean what we promise.

2. Practicing openness, honesty and transparency. In building relationships with people words are like windows—they permit others to see into our innermost being. Leaders are seen to have integrity when they communicate with objectivity and fairness about their own actions or those of others. Admitting mistakes, acknowledging that one does not have all the answers, sharing the bad news along with the good helps to build trust.

3. Building healthy relationships. Practices that build good interpersonal relationships also build a perception of integrity. When leaders affirm the value of others and care deeply about their well-being, when leaders protect the confidentiality of sensitive information they are acting in ways that nurture trust. Even the simple act of listening indicates respect for others, their views and personhood.

4. Demonstrating principle-based convictions in moments of crisis. Psalm 15 describes the kind of person who can stand in the presence of God. One of the characteristics is that he “swears to his own hurt and does not change.”

Moments of crisis do not develop character, they only reveal it. The person who is able to subject emotions to objectivity and reason, even under adverse pressure, is likely to be trusted.

Organizational Trust

The second kind of trust is organizational trust, the firm conviction that an organization’s purposes are valid and its operations will be consistent with its policies and public statements. Besides living in a way that builds personal trust, leaders in the church must also function in a manner that builds trust in the church as an organization.

This is one of the most important global leadership tasks in the Seventh-day Adventist church. For the reality is that mistakes and failures occurring in one local church or conference can be, and usually are, communicated instantly to many other locations around the globe. An attitude of distrust focused on a particular unit of church organization can quickly metabolize into a generalized distrust of the whole organization. This is especially true in the area of managing church funds, the tithes and offerings made available to the church as an expression of members’ stewardship.

Since responsibility and decisionmaking are widely dispersed throughout the Seventh-day Adventist organization a church member should have confidence that the financial oversight system assures credibility in financial management and accountability across the entire range of denominational structure. When a church member, as a response to God, presents tithe and offering to the church the member has a right to expect that the funds will be used responsibly and for the purposes indicated.

Members deserve to know how tithes and offerings are used. Timely reporting of what is done with tithes and offerings is as important as instructing members in the practice of stewardship. There is a very close connection between the practice of stewardship in the life of church members and the practice of leadership in those entrusted with responsibilities. The examples set by those in positions of leadership exert a weighty influence, beneficial or detrimental, to the culture of stewardship in the entire church.

1 George Macdonald (1824–1905).
4 Stephen M. R. Covey, The Speed of Trust, Free Press, p. 133.

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To Think About...

Earn Trust by Doing the Right Thing

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. Ezra 7,10

Even at a young age, Ezra diligently studied and learned to become a scholar. He won the respect of many, including the political leader of the land of his exile, King Artaxerxes. He established his connections and influence over time—a necessary step if the dream of restoring Jerusalem were to be fulfilled.

As a result of many years of consistently doing the right thing, the king finally trusted Ezra with great power and resources, acknowledging his character qualities in writing. He provided all that Ezra needed to get the job done.

Ezra led many Israelites back to Jerusalem during this time of restoration. As a spiritual leader, Ezra had prepared, studied, and connected with many ordinary Jews, and his pronounced influence prompted many to follow him to Jerusalem. Ezra did not utilize his power, intellect, and influence for personal gain, but rather to restore Jerusalem.

Throughout his life, Ezra exercised the best leader’s qualities with both passion and zeal.

The Maxwell Leadership Bible

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