

## YOUR SPACE Stories and observations about the workplace

# Trust issues can creep up in the workplace

A newcomer to a project team discovered a disquieting truth about the people with whom he'd been assigned to work.

"I'm noticing this pattern," he told Pam Brill, a New York-based executive coach and author. "Whenever anybody gets up to leave the room, everybody else starts talking about him or her."

Turns out, the group's leader made a practice of pitting his team members against one another.

Brill asked her client how he handled the situation.

"I make sure I go to the bathroom before I go to the meeting so I don't need to get up."

Self-preservation is a healthy instinct but there's a better way to protect yourself. When you discover there's nobody in a room you can trust, it's time to get out.

Trust and betrayal are the bedrock of happiness and heartache in our personal lives. At work, despite Brill's client's unfortunate experience, it is often the unspoken rivalries that drive wedges between people.

Trust gets chipped away by betrayal—disappointed expectations, shifting allegiances.

Sometimes it gets zapped by a single event.

Barbara Runyen, a partner at Executive Coaching Partners in Chicago, thought she had a great team at a hospital where she was chief operating officer. She believed the people who worked for her could come to her about her anything, and vice versa.

One day, the hospital's chief executive called her in to tell her that one of her subordinates had come to him about Runyen's inaction on an important initiative—a project the subordinate and her friend, another vice president, wanted pushed through faster.

"They felt I was holding back when I wasn't," she said.

Runyen recalled asking herself, "Did she not respect my opinions? Did she not think I was being assertive enough?"

"I trusted that if she had an



Barbara Rose

### What to look for

Some qualities of a trustworthy person:

- Is likely to respond in a healthy way when things go wrong.
- Admits and learns from mistakes.
- Is aware of how their behavior affects others.
- Admits when they don't know something.
- Tells me when I do something wrong.
- Helps me be a better person.
- Sticks by others in tough times.
- Speaks the same of everyone whether in their presence or not.

Source: "Trust Rules: How to Tell the Good Guys from the Bad Guys in Work and Life," Praeger Publishers, \$34.95.

issue she would bring it to me. She lost confidence in my eyes and in [the CEO's] eyes. I never totally trusted her again, or this other vice president."

An end run around a boss is a near-certain trust-buster. When you question somebody's judgment, take it to the person directly. If he or she won't budge, pursue it with higher-ups at your own peril.

### Expectations differ

Dennis Vicchiarelli, regional development executive at nonprofit World Business Chicago, trusted a young staffer enough to go to bat for her time and again when he was deputy director of a government agency.

"She was a very, very good 'issue' person but people didn't take her seriously," he said. "I



Tribune photo by E. Jason Wambsgans

Barbara Runyen lost confidence in two subordinates after they went around her, trying to push their project through faster.

went out of my way to highlight her accomplishments."

Money was tight when it came time to dole out pay increases that year. He pushed for her to get the raise he felt she deserved, risking resentment from other employees.

"I thought she'd be pleased," he recalled. "She said, 'Thanks but that's really not enough.' And not long after, she quit.

Did she betray his trust? Her actions certainly stung like a betrayal but Vicchiarelli is philosophical. You can't expect

someone to respond with gratitude and loyalty unless they want the same outcome you do.

"People have their own formulas, their own circumstances," he said. "You learn to be realistic and curb your expectations. At the end of the day, employment is a contract and if the contract is not working for them, they leave."

### Less gut, more facts

Many people claim to have a gut feeling for whether they can trust someone, but Linda

Stroh, a professor at Loyola University Chicago Graduate School of Business, says her research convinced her that people's so-called instinct is the result of accumulated experience.

She surveyed more than 300 people about how they decide whom to include in their inner circle. Her conclusion? Successful people follow a protocol, however unconscious, for choosing the people they trust.

"They make these decisions in a more systematic way," said Stroh, author of "Trust Rules: How to Tell the Good Guys from the Bad Guys in Work and Life."

"It's an intuition they've built over time through experience. They're looking at objective facts. They're observing behaviors over time that show someone to be trustworthy."

Rather than a gut check, she recommends assessing people using a 20-item checklist of characteristics such as: "This person responds in a healthy way when things go wrong; This person voluntarily, in useful ways, tells me when I do something wrong."

If you can't answer the questions, you don't know enough to trust the person.

Most of our work relationships involve conditional trust: We can rely on someone as long as we share the same goals. An example is a boss who is generous with resources when her success depends on our performance but who no longer offers help when there is nothing for her to gain.

"The truth is, those really truly 'good guys' are few and far between—the number of people you can trust in any situation, regardless of what you're doing, regardless of who you're with," Stroh said.

"What we try to do is surround ourselves with people as close to that prototype as possible. And when we don't have enough information, we have to think of those relationships as 'conditional' to protect our career and our work life."

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