

Angela Spaxman
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Building Trust, the Foundation of Coaching

**By Angela Spaxman, Business and Career Coach, Director of
Spaxman Ltd., Coach Training Expert for Progress-U Ltd.**

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In the August 2005 issue [<http://www.progressu.com.hk/Newsletter-CM2005-3.htm>] of the Manager as Coach News, I introduced some common management issues that are addressed by coaching. The symptoms that indicate a need for coaching include:

1. Inadequate trust and support,
2. A lack of motivation for work,
3. Insufficient empowerment of team members and
4. A need for further staff development

In this issue we'll look deeper into symptom #1, inadequate trust and support, to see what impact this symptom can have and what you can do to correct it.

What is the importance of trust for managers who coach?

Creating a strong foundation of trust is the first step in building every coaching relationship. Coaching happens in a collaborative relationship based on mutual trust with a high degree of openness between both parties. When trust is not sufficient, the manager will be unaware of a lot of information that is critical to managing effectively.

For example I've had many career-coaching clients who would not share their frustrations in their jobs with their bosses. And yet their managers would greatly benefit from this information. If these employees were willing to share their feelings, the company might be able to retain the employees, improve workplace efficiency and/or correct the employees' or the managers' behavior in ways that would reduce the frustration. Even if the employee is not suited to the position and needs to quit, the information about their frustrations would allow the

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manager to improve conditions for their replacement. The lack of trust between boss and staff is a major barrier to workplace efficiency and good morale.

How can a manager build trust?

Building trust should be a conscious effort for managers, because boss-employee relationships often begin with disempowering assumptions and expectations that can cause staff members to distrust their managers and withhold information.

For example, employees may assume, based on their past experience of managers or other authority figures, that their manager is looking for ways to judge and criticize their work. They may assume that their manager prefers to keep them at their current level so as not to challenge the manager's own job security. They may expect to keep to 'their place' and refrain from interfering in the work of their seniors, challenging the organization or learning 'too much'. They may further assume that it would work to their disadvantage to reveal any aspirations that do not relate directly to their current job. To be effective, a coaching manager must dispel such disempowering assumptions.

Here are some key techniques for greatly increasing the level of trust between you as the manager, and your team members.

- ***Open yourself first. Share your strengths and weaknesses. Share your mistakes and achievements.***

I don't mean that you have to talk a lot or reveal a lot of personal details. You must simply display your willingness to reveal what is relevant and to treat your own and other's shortcomings lightly and positively. If you can accept your own weaknesses, it is much more likely that you will be able to

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accept other's shortcomings as well. Your team members will feel relief that they are not the only ones to have made mistakes. They will feel much more trust for someone they can know well. They will begin to model your openness.

Many of us have been brought up to feel uncomfortable about revealing our weaknesses, particularly to people who report to us. You may want to examine the reasons for your discomfort so you can consciously decide whether or not it is useful to continue hiding yourself.

- ***Have a frank conversation with each coachee about how you want to relate to them and ask for their support.***

This is the simplest and most direct way to initiate a more trusting relationship, regardless of the current level of trust you have. If your relationship has been rocky in the past, or if you believe your employee is resistant to opening up, you may want to prepare for a diplomatic conversation including plenty of listening. Your willingness to discuss such issues directly will impress your employees of the importance you place on your relationship.

- ***Listen to them fully. Give them a chance to be heard. Listen beyond their words for deeper understanding of their intentions, needs and assumptions.***

Deep listening builds understanding and trust. And it is something that all of us can do, as long as we give ourselves time and focus. That means we have to stop both external and internal distractions and be fully present to the

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other person. Although listening is a basic skill for all communicators, it is a skill that can be developed further through practice and attention.

- ***Openly appreciate them. Be generous with your praise. Point out the specifics of their personality and behaviour that add value.***

Many managers feel hesitant to appreciate and assume there is a risk of appreciating 'too much'. But these managers underestimate the power of positive feedback, even though they may have benefited from it personally. Have you experienced the burst of enthusiasm and initiative that comes from effective positive feedback? This is valuable energy that can be generated easily through frequent recognition and that leads to increased trust.

In my experience, appreciation and recognition is only 'over used' when it is insincere. There are many different ways to appreciate and recognize people that will help you retain full sincerity and positive effect.

Nonetheless it is useful for managers to also build their proficiency in giving positive corrective feedback so that they can freely give both while further enhancing the trusting and supportive relationships they have with their people.

- ***Do what you say you will do. Be reliable and consistent.***

Of course, the basis of trust is that we abide by our agreements and contracts. And even unspoken expectations act like promises that reduce trust when they are broken. For example, if you are usually calm when you learn of poor sales results, and then one day you lose your patience and blurt

out your frustrations, people will lose trust in you because they can no longer be sure that you will react they as expect.

What are the obstacles to building trust?

In working with managers who are learning to coach, either in workshops or as individual coaching clients, I've noticed that the main barriers to developing trusting relationships with staff, are related to the managers' beliefs about the role of a manager, and their beliefs about themselves. Do you feel uncomfortable reading through the tips above? Or do you have good reasons why these techniques would not work in your situation? If so, you might want to explore your beliefs and assumptions to see if any are blocking you. In the Manager as Coach workshop, we take time for participants to discuss with their peers the assumptions they are using and how they might be changed or improved.

One particular set of beliefs that has a strong impact on the manager's ability to coach is related to self-acceptance. Coaching managers who completely accept themselves can more easily be open about their own weaknesses, accept others, listen without judgment and appreciate others, all actions that build trusting relationships. Building self-acceptance is a worthwhile goal that can greatly improve coaching ability.

Once a manager truly believes in the value of coaching and has aligned his or her thinking with the key techniques, then skill building is required. For building trust, most managers can benefit from enhancing their listening, appreciating and recognizing skills. Although these skills sound basic, when they are practiced with above-average attention, they lead to greatly improved management and coaching results.

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Angela Spaxman of Spaxman Ltd . works with business people, professionals and managers who want to be at their best and be completely themselves at work. Her clients could be accelerating their learning about management and leadership skills; inspiring, empowering and developing their team members or creating careers or businesses that suit them perfectly.

Angela has been coaching full time since 2000 and has 12 years of experience in the people-development field as a coach, corporate trainer and consultant. She is a graduate of Coach U, a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-linguistic Programming, the Founding President of the Hong Kong Coaching Community and a Board Member of the International Association of Coaches.