Above Suspicion

By Andy Hargreaves

Most of us know what it's like to have been betrayed by a leader or colleague. Perhaps they took our idea and passed it off as their own. Maybe they lined their own pockets with money from the PD budget or the school trip. More shockingly, after we'd believed in their leadership and viewed them as an epitome of integrity, it's devastating to discover they were guilty of gross misconduct or abuse. More routinely, perhaps they simply failed to follow through on a promise of funding, opportunity or promotion.

Betrayal is a breach of trust. It's destructive. But it's not trust's only opposite. Another is suspicion.

Betrayal acts like a cobra. Its strike is deadly and fast. Suspicion works more slowly. It is a python that squeezes the life out of people and organizations.

Betrayals are sudden disruptions to who and what we have believed in. Suspicion is more systemic. It is built into the way we sometimes run our schools and school systems. It can be even harder to counter because it seems to be everywhere.

There are two responses to a culture of suspicion. First, understand it. Then, rise above it.

The Origins of Suspicion

There is every reason to feel suspicious in modern societies. Fake news, declining faith in public institutions, social media users waiting to pounce on every misstep – no wonder the German social theorist Niklas Luhmann observed how suspicion of manipulation easily arises. When the world seems unstable and difficult to understand, people look instead for hidden interests that might be pulling the strings.

Schools cannot escape this culture. The parent who challenges a grade, the principal worried about how a disciplinary decision will be interpreted, the district that seems more interested in test scores than deep learning, governments that rarely have a good word to say about teachers or their unions – all are fertile grounds for suspicion.

A few years ago, Alan Daly and his colleagues studied how U.S. principals respond to systems of high threat, top-down control and test-based accountability. When people perceive threat and work under conditions of low information and high control, they found, responses become more rigid, less flexible and more centralized. Fear narrows judgment. Trust becomes one of the first

casualties. Educators grow cautious about who they talk to, what they disclose and how far they are willing to innovate. They engage in self-protection, restrict participation or leave the profession altogether. Life begins to resemble the old X-Files universe where the rule is simple: Trust no one.

Cultures of suspicion diminish educators and their work because they make themselves into smaller and less vulnerable targets.

Creating Trust

The answer to corrosive suspicion is trust. Trust is the oxygen of organizations. It does not merely help them survive; it gives them life and energy.

High performing countries such as Finland and Estonia show that trust can be built through deliberate policies: investing in the profession, publicly valuing teachers and principals, providing time for collaboration and granting educators meaningful professional autonomy.

If whole societies can do this, so can schools.

Here is a 10-point Trust Guide for how to proceed. It appears in my forthcoming book, *Changing Teachers for Challenging Times: Teaching to Repair the World Together.*

10-Point Trust Guide

1. Forge a common vision drawn from the people already there, with a little of yourself added in, rather than arriving with a vision entirely of your own.
2. Visit classrooms because you are interested, not because you are checking up on people. Put down the clipboard and join in with the students.
3. Start on the right foot. Before visiting a school or classroom, find something it is doing well and make it the first thing you mention.
4. Do not communicate disappointing news by email or avoid communicating altogether. Empathize with how people feel and help them see a pathway forward.
5. Build ambitious shared goals from the bottom up. Develop them class by class, school by school and take collective responsibility for progress. Trust rarely survives targets imposed inflexibly from above.
6. Get a grip. If you are tempted to respond viscerally to criticism or poor judgment, wait. Self-regulate. One flick of a pen or tap on a keyboard can undo years of trust building.
7. Listen to resisters. Understand where they are coming from. Find their strengths and, if possible, give them responsibility.
8. Know your people even when you do not like them. Leadership is about building *professional trust* among people who are different, not merely *personal trust* among those we already know and agree with.
9. Do not treat colleagues as saints until they disappoint you, then condemn them as sinners. We are all imperfect. As Céline Dion sings, we all have our "scars to hide." Most people deserve another chance and a measure of forgiveness.
10. Trust yourself. If you do not, no one else will. When things get hard, do not lose hope. Trust your people. Trust the future. Most of all, trust yourself to find a way through.

Educators in Catholic schools know that trust is not simply an organizational resource. It is a moral commitment rooted in faith, dignity and hope. As Pope Francis reminded us in his 2020 encyclical, "Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment." Trust grows when leaders help people believe that such fulfillment is still possible, even in difficult times.

In an age where suspicion seems pervasive, the challenge of leadership is not to provide further grounds for it, but to rise above it. The most trusted principals are not those who never make mistakes.

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