Build Trust with Operating Principles

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Trust is an essential ingredient for a successful workplace. People do their best work when they feel they can trust their bosses and those around them. Conversely, without that bond of trust, employees will not extend themselves beyond the minimum required to do their jobs. That makes sense, but how is trust built in the workplace?

Many ingredients go into building trust including honesty, consistency, respectful communication, predictability, and dependable actions over time. Creating operating principles together is a tangible activity that can help a work group establish and develop a climate of trust.

Operating principles are written statements that describe how group members will interact with each other and those they serve--clients, customers, members. Operating principles translate values and beliefs into concrete actions. They are not the same as an organization's value proposition such as "We serve only the freshest organic produce" or "We will send your purchase to you on time every time." Those are promises to the customer or client or buyer and they are necessary, but different. Operating principles are about everyday behaviors of employees.

> **"Business operating principles** are the rules of the road that enable people to know what's in bounds – and what's out-of-bounds – in their companies and workplaces. Operating principles can serve as guides, helping people make sound decisions, building trust and enabling greater innovation" (Lynch, 2008).

Google has ten operating principles, one of which is, "You can be serious without a suit." One of the Whole Foods Market, Inc. core values for team members is, "We take responsibility for our own success and failures. We celebrate success and see failures as opportunities for growth..."

The Raymond Management Group in Madison, Wisconsin which manages a large network of hospitality properties and real estate has identified 10 operating principles:

1. **No Gossip** - Don't start the gossip, don't participate in the gossip, don't listen to the gossip.
2. **Go to the Source; Resolve the Problem** - The best way to handle a concern is to go directly to the source of the perceived problem. Have a conversation in an open and positive manner and seek a win-win solution.
3. **Be Proactive - Take Ownership** - It is amazing what can be accomplished when everyone feels "If it is going to be, it is up to me!" Take the initiative in every aspect of your job and look for the opportunities throughout the company to help teammates.
4. **Build a Culture of Applause** - Celebrate success, both big and small, both publicly and privately.
5. **Earn Respect; Give Respect** - True and lasting respect cannot be mandated, but must be earned.
6. **No Surprises** - Surprises are signals that our structures, processes, and/or teamwork are inadequate. To minimize surprises, the right information must get to the right people at the right time so that they can take the right action for the right results.
7. **Get Closure** - Closure means that everyone takes responsibility to see a task, problem or issue through to its completion.
8. **State a Problem; Offer a Solution** - Develop the practice that whenever you have a criticism, concern, issue, or problem, take a few seconds more to consider your recommendation, your suggestions for improvement or a solution.
9. **Choose Your Attitude** - Accept full responsibility for choosing your attitude. In one moment we can change our whole day. It is a decision we make.

10. **Have Fun** - Having fun while getting our work done helps us to enjoy our jobs. Humor gives us a positive attitude, allows us to handle stress and naturally puts us in the mood to provide great services to customers and teammates

At Raymond Management group, these principles are discussed both in the home office and at the hotels.

Operating Principles can be very good glue for developing a trusting, cohesive and mutually-supportive work environment. They are only useful, however, if everyone from top management to the newest employee pays attention to them. Economist Kay Plantes (Plantes & Finfrock, 2009, pp. 159-160) uses the term "guiding principles" and says,

> There is no one set of 'right' guiding principles; what is important is that they are acted on, as opposed to being window-dressing statements. Leadership must genuinely attempt to model the guiding principles through their own actions and words so that no cynicism develops around these principles. You know you have a strong guiding principle when people feel free at any time to say to any other employee, including a boss, 'Your actions are not consistent with our agreed-to values.' (pp. 159-160)

I use a two-part process for helping groups identify their operating principles. The first part is having participants interview each other in pairs about a situation where they felt the organization was "at its best." We then debrief as a group on the values that were the underpinning of those memorable situations. Secondly, participants silently respond to a question such as, "What are the everyday behaviors between us as employees and between us and those we serve that demonstrate our values?" Participants silently generate their own ideas on paper, then agree within their small group. The categorizing process Michael Wilkinson describes in *The Secrets of Facilitation* is ideal for clustering the behaviors and deciding together what to call them.

I urge my clients not to expect perfection. Everyone will have "slips" and will make mistakes and sometimes act totally out of alignment with the operating principles. The important thing is to acknowledge the slip, apologize as necessary and move forward with renewed commitment.

Resources

Plantes, M. K. and Finfrock, R. (2009). *Beyond Price: Differentiating Your Company in Ways That Really Matter*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press.

Our Philosophy: Ten Things We Know to Be True (September 2009) Accessed February 13, 2011 at http://www.google.com/corporate/tenthings.html.

Staubus M. and Lynch, R.P. *Building a System of Trust: Ten Hidden Secrets of Success in Employee-Owned Companies. Accessed February 13, 2011 at* http://rady.ucsd.edu/beyster/newsletter/2010/fall/system-trust2.html.

Wilkinson, M. (2004). *The secrets of facilitation: The S.M.A.R.T. guide to getting results with groups.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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