

## An effective public works manager... builds trust/respect

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**Note:** The APWA Leadership and Management Committee has developed a set of core competencies for public works managers. The series of articles in the APWA Reporter based on these competencies—entitled “The Baker’s Menu”—is designed to help public works professionals recognize and develop managerial talent. Included in this issue is the third in the series of competencies recommended by the committee. For more information please contact Ann Daniels, APWA Director of Technical Services, at (800) 848-APWA or at [adaniels@apwa.net](mailto:adaniels@apwa.net).

Fellow Leadership and Management Committee member, John Ostrowski, writes in *Everything You Need to Know to be a Public Works Director*, “I came to realize that trust and understanding are what makes government work. When you don’t have them, life can be hell. When you do have them, government works like a well-oiled machine. If we all kept




that in mind and tried to do only the things that built trust, and avoided the things that destroyed trust, we’d be much better off.”

Trust and respect are *the* keys to organizational effectiveness. We can spend a lot of time working on our vision, mission, and goals; perfecting our policies and procedures; and putting in place all kinds of fancy software programs to track our costs and productivity. But in the end, the difference between you and the other guy is your people and the level of trust and respect they have for each other and the organization. The competition can try to copy your organizational structure and replicate the services you provide, but your people will make the difference if your organization is built on the solid ground of trust and respect.

Here are some things I’ve learned about trust:

- **Trust helps retain good people.** Most people quit or otherwise leave their jobs, not because of performance but because of relationship issues (trust/respect). During an exit interview they might say they found a better opportunity, but the reality is they don’t feel supported by their manager or supervisor and they don’t want to burn their bridges on the way out.
- **Trust does not exist when fear is present.** Managing through coercion and intimidation may lead to quick results in the short term, but the fear it instills stamps out creativity and productivity. It poisons relationships.
- **Trust means complete honesty.** Tell people what you’re thinking and share information they need to know. But tell them when you can’t share information and why. Ask and accept challenging questions and give clear responses. There is no room for hidden agendas.
- **Trust is momentum.** With high trust, little problems stay little problems and you can keep on track. With low trust, every little problem has the potential to turn into a big problem and derail your plans. With low trust you never build up the momentum you need to take your organization to the next level.
- **Trust is remembering why you hired your staff.** Let them do their job. You will be pleasantly surprised by the creativity and ingenuity of your staff when they are given a chance to use it. Micromanagement kills initiative and signals to your staff that you don’t trust them.
- **Trust is letting people make mistakes.** Instead of “mistake” or “failure,” think “learning experiences.” Both successful and unsuccessful people suffer failures and setbacks. The

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only difference between the two is that successful people don't quit; they have persistence. I would much rather have someone on my staff who uses their initiative to try something new and go through a few "learning experiences" than have a staff member who doesn't try at all. As Wayne Gretzky says, "You miss 100% of the shots you never take." However, someone who routinely gets punished when they make a mistake will make sure they don't fail again. They will narrowly focus their efforts on the things that they are sure they can do well and will avoid doing any more than that.

- **Trust and recognizing a job well done go hand in hand.** Too often, management spends time catching people doing things wrong. Instead, spend your time catching people doing things right and acknowledge them for it. Recognition is a strong motivator, creates job satisfaction, and helps build trust.

On the other hand, low trust has a high cost, both financially and emotionally. Some of the examples that follow have hard costs that you can quantify while other soft costs take an emotional toll. For example:

**Low Trust =**

- Higher than normal employee turnover.
- Additional costs to recruit, hire, and train new staff.
- Loss of corporate knowledge.
- Low morale, which translates into low productivity.
- Higher absenteeism and use of sick leave.
- Higher rates of accidents and injuries.
- Extra scrutiny both internally & externally, which adds time to the process of getting to decisions and implementing projects.
- Stifling organizational policies that severely limit the ability of staff to exercise their creativity and initiative.

I don't know how anyone can seriously think they can manage a group of people effectively without their trust and respect. I highly recommend that you read *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John Maxwell. Law number 6 is the Law of Solid Ground (trust) and Law number 7 is the Law of Respect. John Maxwell has a very simple definition of leadership: "Leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less." As an effective manager you will need

to exercise influence (leadership) over those in your unit to accomplish your mission. You can't break the trust with your people and expect to keep influencing them. When you lose their trust, you are through.

I learned another important concept from John Maxwell and it will help you as a manager in your organization.

**The people that work for you won't care how much you know until they know how much you care.** Former Notre Dame football coach, Lou Holtz, does a good job of defining what that means in his video, "Do Right." He says that there are three universal questions everyone wants answers to,

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to determine if they are willing to work for you and give their best:

1. Can I trust you?
2. Are you committed to excellence?
3. Do you care about me as a person?

If you truly care for the welfare of those you are responsible for, you will establish a connection with them that builds trust and respect. It's that old saying: Take care of your employees and they will take care of your customers.

What about respect? Respect grows out of trust. In a previous "The Baker's Dozen" article by Leadership and Management Committee Chair Sue Hann, entitled "An Effective Public Works Leader...Shows Respect for Others" [May 2004, p. 30], she concludes by saying, "Gaining respect and holding respect can only be accomplished through your own behavior." Are you walking the talk? If you have to ask yourself why nobody respects you, then you have behaved yourself into that situation.

In my previous career as an officer in the Navy Civil Engineer Corps, I had a commanding officer who taught me a valuable lesson about trust and respect. He would counsel the junior officers that we were given a "special trust and confidence" in our positions. We were held to a higher standard. If we violated the special trust and confidence placed upon us as officers, we had no chance of earning and maintaining the trust and respect of those in our unit. Your title as a director, division manager, or supervisor only carries you so far. That's called position leadership. In position leadership, people follow you because they have to. According to John Maxwell, "Respect is the highest level of leadership." At that level, called personhood leadership, people follow you because of who you are and what you represent. That is character.

If you relate all this back to "The Baker's Dozen: Core Competencies for Public Works Leaders," you will find that building trust and respect requires *integrity*, the ability to *delegate* and *empower others* to do what you hired them to do, to *communicate* honestly and openly with your staff, and to *show respect* for your staff at all levels of the organization.

I will conclude with some thoughts from *The Next Generation Leader* by Andy Stanley. He writes: "Character is what makes you a leader worth following. Integrity is not necessary if your aspirations as a leader end with simply persuading people to follow you. But if at the end of the day your intent is for those who follow you to respect you, integrity is a must.... Your gifts and determination may dictate your potential, but it is your character that will determine your legacy."

As we work our way through the management competencies in the coming months, remember that the trust and respect of those you lead and manage provide a solid foundation for you to be successful in the other competencies. People are watching you. They will evaluate you and their desire to work for you based on the example you set. What is the legacy you want to leave?

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## Quotes on trust and respect

*"In leadership, no word is more important than trust."*

– Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K)

*"How do leaders earn respect? By making sound decisions, admitting their mistakes, and putting what's best for their followers and the organization ahead of their personal agendas."*

– John Maxwell

*"To build trust, a leader must exemplify competence, connection, and character."*

– John Maxwell

*"Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him."*

– Booker T. Washington

*"The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out."*

– Proverbs 10:9, New International Version (NIV)



### Core Competencies at a Glance

- Encourages Team Building
- Involves Others
- Possesses Oral/Written Skills
- **Builds Trust/Respect**
- Prioritizes
- Sets Realistic Goals
- Helps Others to Succeed
- Resolves Conflict
- Manages Time
- Manages Workload
- Develops Staff
- Anticipates Future Needs
- Is Flexible