



# Building Trust: Actions Speak Louder Than Words

**DR. KAREN BERMAN** is the President of the Business Literacy Institute and a sought-after expert in the fields of business and financial literacy, open-book management, training and development, and communication. She wrote and published the first academic study in the fields of business literacy and open-book management. Through consulting, coaching, and speaking engagements, Dr. Berman has helped organizations implement successful business literacy programs. She has a doctorate in organizational psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology. She can be reached at (310) 312-9929, (800) 270-2537 or at [kberman@business-literacy.com](mailto:kberman@business-literacy.com).

**T**rust is the firm reliance on the integrity, ability or character of a person or thing. At work, we act every day trusting in the integrity, ability, and character of our peers, employees, and managers. We can all agree that trust is important for organizational success.

Yet, building trust can be elusive. It is not a skill to be trained, a tool to be used, or information to be gathered. Trust is only built through actions. And I propose that it is the actions of management, rather than employees, that start the process of building trust.

This article will briefly explore the traditional methods of trust building and then discuss a new best practice that builds trust through management action.

### **Traditional Trust Building**

One of the most common ways organizations try to build trust is to include a statement about trust in the mission or values statement. We've all seen those statements, and we've seen the posters on the wall. Unfortunately, in most organizations, the mission statement usually remains just a poster and the actions that might support the statement do not occur.

Another common method is to develop a communication plan with the goal of building trust. The communication plan includes the President's address, meeting agendas, and newsletter article outlines. However, telling employees to trust each other, or talking about the importance of trust, does not build trust.

### **A Best Practice: Business Literacy**

An emerging best practice that is a trust building action is "business literacy." Business literacy means educating employees about the business and treating employees as business people. Organizations that practice business literacy conduct training programs, coach managers, and regularly share information with employees. A training program, for example, might include teaching employees about:

- the goals of the company
- the financial statements,
- how employees' decisions impact the numbers

Business literacy is a powerful best practice and action that builds trust because:

- When employees are trained to understand the financials, leadership is taking action that says they trust everyone to understand how the company makes money and what is important in the company
- When information is shared on a regular basis, leadership is taking action that says they trust everyone to use the information responsibly
- When employees are asked to think as business people, leadership is taking action that says they trust employees to make good decisions

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When a business literacy program begins in an organization, most employees don't trust the process. They say, "they must have two sets of books" or "these aren't the real numbers." However, as the program continues, and managers continue to share and discuss the business, we see a transformation. Through the management actions of training, sharing, and follow-through, trust is built. One employee was so sure the company wasn't being truthful

that he spent time on his own digging deep into the numbers. By the time he realized the numbers were real, he had learned what they all meant!

The keys to developing trust through business literacy include the following actions:

- Management takes the first step with training everyone about business basics
- Management ensures all managers are prepared to share and discuss the business on a regular basis
- Management shares both good and bad news

Creating a business literate workforce does not happen overnight. Resistance will come in many forms, from management and employees. And almost all of that resistance is grounded in a lack of trust. If you want to build trust, you'll need to take the first step — with actions rather than words.

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