Building Trust as a School Leader

Never Harder, Never More Important

In the past six months teachers have been asked to undertake something entirely new and highly anxiety-provoking, operating in a turbulent environment that turns their expertise on its head and pushes them out of their comfort zone on a constant basis. When humans are stressed, anxious, threatened, and fearful, one of the first things to suffer — as a result of brain chemistry — is their feeling of trusting others and being trusted themselves. Even more problematic: researchers have found that trust is a key ingredient in elevating our performance at work, our ability to grow and learn, our ability to take creative risks, and our productivity at work. So as stress increases and trust decreases, all of the behaviors and capacities we need most from our teachers will diminish as well. School leaders hoping to give their schools the best chance of success this year — to innovate, educate, support, care, and grow — must double down on trust-building now and for the foreseeable future.

Harvard researcher Paul Zak and his team have studied and written about this topic extensively; their advice to leaders — about key leadership behaviors that can help create, reinforce, and deepen trusting cultures in the workplace -- has never been more crucial. Take a look at the suggestions below, drawn from Zak's work and Folio's expertise supporting schools and school leaders, for some ideas about building more trust within your school.

Recognize excellence

Zak identifies recognition of success as a key trust-builder, especially when it is instant, tangible, unexpected, and personal.

- **Seek ways to celebrate the little moments of excellence you see from faculty and staff every day in a way that is instantaneous, easy-to-do, and somehow lasting or memorable — whether it's with "thank you" notes, a surprise phone call, or the Spotlight feature in myFolio — and encourage others to do the same.**

Provide autonomy

Giving people choice — in how they do their work and craft their plans for growth — provides autonomy that correlates with increased trust. In a crisis it's tempting to move towards a command-and-control state. Resist this.

- **Help your team think about challenges and growth areas and set tactical and growth goals that feel authentic to them.**
- **Support employees' work towards these goals, perhaps using myFolio's Goals Wizard and goals tracking tools.**

Create "challenge stress"

When teams are challenged by a leader to work together towards a concrete, timebound, achievable goal, they build trust.

- **Consider the challenges faced by your school which, if structured with goals and intermediate deadlines, could provide this trust-building context for a team.**
- **Use myFolio's Workspaces feature to help groups organize their work, share ideas, and keep track of waypoints as they work towards their challenge.**

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Define reality and set a clear direction

When a leader "calls things as they are", articulates a vision, and sticks to it, the trust built among faculty and staff is tremendous.

- **Start by articulating themes or priorities for the coming year: nothing breeds distrust more than a leader who claims everything is (and can be) equally important.**
- **Use the Themes feature in myFolio to identify your themes for the year; articulate them clearly, repeatedly, and with a rationale, to faculty and staff.**

Share information broadly

Transparency and openness breed trust.

- **Share what you can: news about your school, resources and suggestions, expectations, and updates. The initial discomfort that comes from being a more transparent organization is quickly outweighed by increasing levels of trust.**
- **In myFolio, use the myFolio Community Feed or a similar channel to post information, ideas, and share updates, and encourage other leaders to do the same.**

Attend to relationships and whole-person growth

See faculty and staff as whole people: their identities, their struggles, their personal histories and goals.

- **Model what it is to share your whole self in a work relationship, and create the conditions where others can do the same.**
- **In myFolio, invite and encourage faculty and staff to create Profile pages — and read them!**
- **Encourage faculty and staff to complete the myFolio Mindful Minute tool to share with you how they are doing and their recent struggles and wins.**

Show vulnerability

Vulnerability is a key trust builder; people feel safer when they see others, especially their leader, as human and imperfect rather than devoid of "faults." Unfortunately, cultural expectations and norms make it hard to show vulnerability as a leader.

- **Look for opportunities to admit mistakes, share your growth goals, and ask for feedback and help.**
- **Post on the myFolio Community Feed or talk in meetings about your recent missteps or emotional struggles.**