Every day people go to work and experience situations that diminish, break down, or destroy trust in their relationships. According to Gallup, a growing segment of our nation's employees feel betrayed or "actively disengaged" from their jobs. Gallup said these alienated employees not only "assume the worst" about their bosses, they also "spread mistrust and doubt throughout a company's workforce" and "do significant harm to both company productivity and the bottom line."

Employees often feel uncertain and anxious because of organizational changes—budget cuts, greater demands on their time, or the need to learn new skills—as well as from misunderstandings, unmet agreements, and workplace gossip magnified during times of change (table, p. 30). This can lead to feelings of betrayal (figure 1), which can make employees less inclined to take risks, less concerned about creativity, and more likely to take time off or entertain thoughts of leaving. Perhaps they'll even know their reactions will impact the organization's bottom line, and they won't care.

The bad news is that almost everyone experiences these feelings. The good news is that these feelings can be used as opportunities for personal and professional growth. True change cannot happen until healing from betrayal has occurred. People pretend everything is okay, focus on something else, and say these problems/issues are behind them when, in fact, they are not and continue to fester until they are fully worked through.

In our research and practice during the last ten years, we have found specific steps that all individuals, teams, and organizations can take to work through and heal from feelings of betrayal, to rebuild trust, and perhaps even grow stronger from the organizational change (figure 2). These steps are critical to the process: Until employees observe and acknowledge what has really happened and constructively work through their feelings, only then will they heal. Anything less will be a temporary bandage covering deep wounds.

1. **Observe and acknowledge what has happened.** Formally assess the organization's environment through one-on-one interviews, focus-group discussions, and valid and reliable trust-measuring instruments. Also assess the climate informally: Listen to what people are saying at the watercooler, in the break room, out in the hallways, and wherever people congregate. Uncover how people are handling organizational changes or any feelings of betrayal.

2. **Allow feelings to surface.** Encourage people to express their emotions about these change/betrayal situations in constructive, safe forums, preferably with skilled facilitators.

3. **Get/offer support.** During times of change, employees need:
   - **Information.** They need to know the direction the organization is taking.
· **Roles.** After the changes, they need to know what their roles will be.
· **Reassurance.** They need to know if they will be able to meet the demands and expectations placed upon them.

**4. Reframe the experience.** Put the experience of change into a larger context. Give people the business reasons for the change. Honestly acknowledge the changes and why they happened or are happening. Help people explore options, if relevant.

**5. Take responsibility.** Acknowledge your role in the process; even if you inherited the situation, continue to acknowledge the difficulty people experienced or are experiencing. Manage expectations and keep promises (at times like this it is best to underpromise and overdeliver). Make amends, if these seem in order. Pay dividends (i.e., give back more than what was perceived as taken away).

**6. Forgive yourself and others.** Help people shift from blame to focusing on today’s needs and solutions. You may not be able to erase the past, but you can help people heal their pain by listening to and acknowledging their concerns and seeking a resolution rather than blaming, complaining, or ignoring these problems.

**7. Let go and move on.** Help people accept the situation so that they can move on. Acceptance is not condoning; it is telling the truth without indulging in blame. Help people shift from their preoccupation with the past to investing their energies in the present to create a better future.

All of this involves learning and takes time and commitment. You won’t always “win,” but by focusing on the behaviors that create trust, or mistrust, in the first place, these steps will make a difference. If your organization wants to increase employee loyalty, improve performance, and weather these challenging economic times, building workplace environments based upon a solid foundation of trust is crucial. It is the key ingredient for organizational success. **BHM**

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Dennis S. Reina, PhD, and Michelle L. Reina, PhD, are the authors of *Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace* (Berrett-Koehler, 1999). They are principals of the organizational and research and development
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Table. Situations Affecting Workplace Trust

Feelings of disappointment, unease, or even betrayal harm workplace trust, particularly during times of change. Here are some situations that you might be able to relate to:

- You felt frustrated at work because people didn’t share all the information you needed to do your job. Maybe they only told you what they thought you wanted to hear. Or maybe they thought you couldn’t handle the truth.
- You were upset when someone you were relying on didn’t follow through on his/her commitments or didn’t deliver as promised.
- You felt aggravated by all the “work-arounds” you were seeing—i.e., people spending so much time and energy trying to cover their posteriors (e.g., the cc e-mail memo wars) they lost focus on the job at hand.
- You were blindsided by criticism in a meeting because there was a “meeting before the meeting” by people who, as it turned out, colluded against you.
- You felt angry and hurt because someone was unable to confront you directly, yet talked and gossiped about you behind your back.
- You felt annoyed by people who were negative about everything and everyone, in the process creating a poisonous work environment.
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