

Trust

'Trusting you, I also learned to trust myself.'

He sounded distraught. He said, 'Things have spiralled out of control. I'm not sure I can salvage this institution. I feel responsible for this situation.'

When I met him, the chairman, of a large and reputed educational institution, I learned that the institution was slowly falling apart. The attrition rate of teachers was at an all-time high. Complaints from parents were pouring in. Parents were seeking appointments with the principal to discuss issues and concerns. His trusted staff had begun to distance themselves. They were not cooperative anymore. All channels of communication had been blocked.

He said, 'It has become impossible for me to trust anybody.'

All this while, I had only lent a patient ear.

'Do you think your principal, administrative team, teachers and parents trust you?' I asked.

He remained quiet and contemplative for some time. I did not disturb him.

‘Well. I’m not sure. To be honest, I don’t think they do. I must confess I have been inconsistent in my actions and words.’

He had transitioned from denial to acceptance. That was a vital first step.

We planned a series of trust-building strategies with the staff by creating an open and transparent communication environment. We established a system to receive feedback from staff and ensure their proactive participation in troubleshooting.

Giving staff creative freedom rather than micro managing them; incorporating their ideas and opinions into the system rather than blocking them; listening and not confronting when they voiced challenges or asked for advice; and, making plans flexible rather than enforcing rigid ones — these were a few active steps taken to enhance transparency in communication and to initiate a feeling of being respected among the staff.

Within a quarter, there was a noticeable change in the atmosphere of the institution. Teachers were treated as valuable assets. Teachers communicated and interacted responsibly with parents. They listened to complaints and found solutions without hesitation and fear. Teachers felt involved and valued.

A series of small changes led to an environment where all felt respected and cared for.

People occupying leadership positions often experience trust issues with their employees or team members. One of the primary reasons is that they distance themselves from their employees and teams. Leaders forget that it is the entire team that makes the institution run and not just one individual, however powerful or distinguished he may be.

Sometimes, leaders mistake micro management and control for efficiency and responsibility. In fact, micro management is a sign of mistrust, and many leaders are at risk of adhering to

practices, which may lead to trust issues among team members.

I was scheduled to meet a small corporate team of four members and the team-lead who were working on a critical account. The brief given was that the productivity of the team was deteriorating day by day, even as the release date was approaching.

My first interaction with the team revealed a lack of transparency among the members. However, when I talked to each member separately, they were more forthcoming, and a bizarre fact emerged: After every review meeting and goal setting meeting, the team lead would begin to follow the activities of the team members on Facebook, although he was not an avid user of Facebook himself. The team members noticed that he was tracking their every movement and was trying to micromanage them. The team-lead, on the other hand, said, that instead of attending to work, he found his team members on FB all through the day.

The next session, I invited the team members and the team-lead for a discussion. The session was focused on how people respond to stressful situations. One of the members said, ‘Micromanagement is a clear indication of distrust. Why should I perform?’

The team leader was shocked. He realized that he had created an atmosphere of mistrust and had hurt his team in the process. He promised to give his team the necessary space to work. A quarter later, the team was winning accolades for its performance in the company!

To know that you are trusted is an uplifting experience. It is key to establishing self-esteem and self-confidence. Trust also enhances performance because when you receive trust from a parent, a coach or a boss, it fortifies your own inner strengths. I can say this out of my own personal experience with a senior psychologist with whom I was co-facilitating my first ever Personal Growth Lab. To be paired with a highly acclaimed professional, with over three decades of experience was unnerving

enough; and this being a first I was low on confidence too.

I feared my inexperience would show up. I fretted about little things. Five minutes before the session was to commence, he said, flashing his signature smile, *'What are your hot and cold tips?'*

I was pleasantly surprised. 'Sir, this is my first session. You are asking me for tips!'

He said, 'Why not? Remember, we are both facilitators for this session!'

That statement was an expression of his trust in my abilities. The implied meaning of the words hit me. He saw me as an equal! The impact of his words was sinking in, when he said, 'I think you should lead the session.' To my surprise, he took a back seat, giving me complete freedom to run the session and pitched in only to support.

While it is an exhilarating feeling to be trusted, to invest trust in another person does not come

easily. As much as we would like to believe that we are sensitive and fair, there are ways in which experiences shed light on remote corners of our personality that are still raw. And one such opportunity came during a Personal Growth Lab for facilitators, where a senior staff member and I would discuss and review training sessions conducted by facilitators. Just before we could enter the room, the senior staff asked me, *'What do you want to enter with?'*

I was surprised because the format of this Personal Growth Lab did not require any aids such as a laptop, PPT, hand-outs, etc.

I said, 'Myself.'

'What about yourself?'

'My abilities, my willingness ...'

Was he prompting me to explore something more profound? I wondered.

After the session, at the end of the day, he said, **'Enter with 'emptiness'**. Trust the group. Trust the innate human potential to be rational, to

strike a balance and create harmony in their lives.'

Learning to trust another person has a therapeutic impact. It reduces the burden of your own ego. A client recovering from post-natal depression made an insightful remark. She said, 'Trusting you, I also learned to trust myself. The fact that I trusted you was crucial to my recovery.'

Post-natal depression can become traumatic and acute in an environment of family and friends who are neither aware that it is common among most new mothers nor are equipped to handle it. My client's depression worsened when she was accused of 'being unhappy in the happiest situation of her life', and her identity was judged against the stereotype of an 'ideal mother'. Her sister had identified signs of depression and had offered her some tips to deal with it. However, she hadn't trusted her sister. When her sister noticed that her symptoms were increasing, she advised her

to seek professional help. It was not until her gynaecologist insisted that she reluctantly reached out to me. A few sessions in, and she began to trust me as a professional.

After a few sessions she confessed, ‘My sister is very intuitive and she knows me inside out. She often gives me advice. Sometimes, I accept and follow her advice blindly and sometimes I don’t, depending on my moods. After our sessions, *I have learned that trusting you, I have also learned to trust myself.* I have become confident enough to make decisions based on my own judgement.’

A mutually trusting family environment is very essential for emotional well-being. The role of the family in fostering mutual trust among members is particularly crucial during teenage. Teenagers crave for independence and freedom and oppose rules and regulations. Parents struggle to deal with the pace of change in their children’s attitudes and behaviours. I often interact with parents to discuss how to build

meaningful, less-conflict ridden relationships with the younger generation. During one such facilitated self-help group process, I was assisting parents to help each other through a process of ‘sharing’ — issues they faced in everyday interactions with their teen children and how they resolved them. Topics ranged from changing value systems of the younger generation to behavioural patterns such as argumentativeness and recklessness, apathy to feelings and emotions of adults, etc. One parent talked about how her teenage daughter would end every conversation, which was really an argument, with the standard phrase, ‘You don’t understand’. The parent said she had no idea *what* she had to understand. She had noticed this behaviour over the past 2-3 months, and incidentally, during this time, her daughter’s performance in math had deteriorated drastically.

I explained that this is typically a gap created by a lack of trust. Whenever I discuss trust as a value to be imbibed and expressed, I remember

one particular incident that occurred several years ago, which I shared with the group.

I was at my friend's house, and her son was manoeuvring the wave board. Observing the ease with which he moved, my friend impulsively said, 'I want to learn too!' The boy first explained how the wave board worked. He held her hand and guided her. He said, 'Don't be afraid of falling. Just do it.' He patiently shared the secret of manoeuvring and moving forward. There were a few things that he did very differently from an adult; most importantly, he did not fear that she would fail. He was patient and encouraging. He invested complete trust in her ability. He never got frustrated. Teaching and helping her out was no burden at all, but an experience of great joy.

She gave it a break and sat down with me. She said, 'I have so many inhibitions and blocks. Why does learning a new activity cause fear? Why do I resist change? What stops me – past experience or fear of failure? The goal is set.

I want to learn. But I just can't muster enough courage.'

As an act of supreme will, she acknowledged the possibility of falling and hurting herself, and she went back to trying again. Her son stood next to her and offered his shoulder for support. He shared some tips and secrets, which he had learned the hard way — by falling and hurting himself. He made it easy for his mother. He said, 'Just concentrate. You can do it. *I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT*'.

What a reversal of roles! I thought. An eight-year-old teaching his mother!

Although she didn't master the art of wave boarding that evening, she said, 'I am pleasantly surprised. His complete trust in me has motivated me. Someday, I will learn to wave board.'

I quoted this experience to illustrate how an expression of trust helps build confidence and understanding.

Our perspectives, as adults, are coloured by fear, experience, bias and prejudice. Our ability to extend unconditional trust even to our own children weakens because we become rigid and fail to accept differences. I talked about how the attitudes and perceptions of our children are unlike our own and hence the need to accept and adapt to changes. The fact that children have other ways of doing things has reduced our trust in them. We need to rebuild our trust in them. This will open up channels for communication, for us to guide them and explain the options/choices before them and the consequences of those choices.

The mother who had talked about her teen daughter called back to tell me that she had had an open conversation with her daughter, but this time, without blaming her and with complete trust in her abilities. The child opened up and said that the new math teacher's dominating style didn't allow students to interact freely and ask questions; besides, he ridiculed children when they asked questions

or expressed doubts. That was the real reason for poor math grades. She explained that she felt her parents also did not trust her because they thought that she was lazy and irresponsible. The mother said that she and her husband had become better listeners and had initiated regular, open, non-judgemental conversations so their daughter could share and confide.

How often do we not approach a task with a whole baggage of biases and preconceived notions that can cloud our vision and interfere with healthy group dynamics? The beauty of emptiness and trust is that it creates a space for assimilation of viewpoints so that viewpoints are not just arrows shot randomly, but transmute to a collective understanding of an underlying principle.