
The Performance Catalyst

I'm frequently asked to help organizations become more "quick and nimble" by dealing with issues that mire down speed and momentum.

Clients usually come to me with a general idea of where the trouble lies. "We have a problem with communication," they say. Or morale. Or dedication. Or customer service.

But as I peel back these problems, layer by layer, I discover a common culprit lurking underneath. It's best described as a network of debilitating trust issues that have gone unrecognized, unaddressed, or unresolved.

These issues are often so far from sight, or else so cleverly disguised, that management has not sensed their presence, much less their magnitude.

Yet this kind of "silent distrust" invariably takes its toll on speed and momentum. This toll may not be readily apparent. But it's always there. By its very nature distrust gums up the works. Thwarts change. Bogs things down. Protects turf. And chokes off open communication.

Trust, on the other hand, is a performance catalyst. A performance turbo-charger. To see this inherent leverage, simply ask yourself questions like this.

- How swiftly can an organization reconfigure itself, transform itself, or reposition itself in the marketplace?
- How quickly can it innovate? Diversify? Bring new products on line?

The answer always depends on trust. To the degree that distrust prevails, time and speed are lost.

For this reason, we cannot optimize competitive advantage – certainly not *sustainable* advantage – unless we first optimize trust. Our leadership objective must go beyond simply building a high-performance organization. We must instead set our sights on building nothing less than a High-Trust, Peak-Performance Organization.

We cannot optimize sustainable competitive advantage unless we first optimize trust.

In their book *Built on Trust*, Arky Ciancutti and Thomas Steding lay out an artful description of how trust creates competitive advantage:

In an atmosphere of trust and support, different points of view can be expressed openly and safely. People feel free to speak their minds and contribute their unique wisdom without fear of recrimination or ridicule. This gives the team access to more information and more energy. Leadership organizations harvest the exponential intelligence that diversity affords them, and use it to create their competitive advantage.⁶

⁶ Arky Ciancutti and Thomas L. Steding, *Built on Trust: Gaining Competitive Advantage in Any Organization* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2000), p. 16.

To borrow a military term, trust is a force multiplier. Force multipliers are technologies and techniques that give military units strength, power, and ability far beyond what seems feasible for units of such size. And that's precisely what trust does in any human enterprise. Speed, agility, and innovation bestow competitive advantage. But they reach their full potential only in settings of high trust.

High thrust performance in the marketplace starts with high-trust relationships in your organization.

In high-trust cultures things run more smoothly. More quickly. More profitably.

- Marketing is more cost-effective, because it's easier to retain preferred customers.
- Turnover costs drop sharply, because talented workers are eager to stay.
- Learning is faster, because it's safe to admit what you don't know.
- Feedback is quicker, communication more transparent.
- Morale is higher. Productivity is greater. Commitment is deeper.

Harvard Business Review recently held that executives make better and more creative decisions in high-trust settings.⁷

In a word, trust is power. Competitive power. High thrust performance in the marketplace starts with high-trust relationships in your organization.

⁷ HBR article