



Know How  
to Listen

## Worth the Investment:

# Trust

Why learning to listen might be a principal's most important leadership skill.

By Sarah E. Fiarman

**R**ecently, a new principal asked me how she could build trust more quickly. My first response was, "You can't!" Trust can only be developed through daily interactions that accumulate over time until people know not just what your values are in theory, but how you'll act upon them. I experienced this in my first months as principal, when I asked teachers about a plan for professional development. There was mostly silence until one teacher bluntly said, "We don't have much to say because we don't know yet whether we trust you, Sarah." It was a helpful reminder: Trust takes time.

However, understanding that it takes time doesn't mean that school leaders should just wait for trust to happen. Trust also takes deliberate effort. Research, including that of Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider in *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), shows that principals can't skip this work. Success will be limited without trust. There are concrete steps to building trust, including knowing how to listen, knowing when to speak, and owning bias. They may not be glamorous action steps, but they are crucial.

Name Your Biases

### Know How to Listen

Listening is one of the most powerful acts we perform.

When we listen to truly understand what people mean, not just what they're saying, we build trust. This requires slowing down, checking to be sure we understand correctly, and sharing back what we hear.

When a parent charged into the office accusing the school of not taking care of her child when he missed bus dismissal, I learned a lesson in building trust. I could see my attempt to explain what happened was not helping. She was still fuming. Despite feeling attacked and misunderstood, I tried to deeply listen. Then I shared what I heard: "You must have felt scared when you didn't see your son. You're worried this will happen again." After emphatically agreeing, she calmed down.

What was most surprising to me wasn't just the mom's quick response to feeling heard but the fact that she became one of my staunchest allies.

The way we receive anger is an opportunity to build trust, say Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky in *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002). **When leaders meet anger or frustration with genuine, compassionate interest in the other person's perspective, we earn trust.**

This is true when people disagree, not just when they're angry. If I can demonstrate that I sincerely want to understand the person's point of view and then—this is important—say it aloud to show I understand, people will trust that I'm not dismissive of their opinions. It's important to note that a consequence of sincere listening is that leaders will realize that they're wrong sometimes. **Changing course based on input is a sign of integrity, not weakness.**

Another aspect of listening well is ensuring we're listening to a wide range of voices. This requires legwork. Who are the families we don't typically hear from? They are the most likely to be overlooked. At my school, we didn't regularly hear from immigrant and low-income families. I had to go the extra mile to earn their trust.

One year, I invited all the families in a particular housing project to meet to tell me how the school could support their children better. As their children ate pizza, mothers from Ethiopia, Haiti, Eritrea, and Guyana used their developing

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English to tell me they wanted their children to be challenged, they wanted good teachers, and they wanted to know that their children would do well in high school.

After they spoke, I repeated what I heard them say and promised to do my best. Then I worked to ensure our school fulfilled that promise. For years, I reaped trust from this outreach. At school events, these parents felt they knew me and brought friends and relatives for introductions. Several asked for help arranging after-school care or summer programs. Reaching out and listening signaled to these families that their opinions were valued. They responded with trust.

### Know When to Speak

The more we understand others' perspectives, the more we'll anticipate their concerns. Since a lack of information causes people to worry (or make up their own story) and distrust the leader, we must communicate more than we think we need to. After a long day of work, it's easy to skip writing a letter or making a phone call. But we need to go that extra mile. So, when the school cook exploded in anger at students and made several cry, I sent emails and called parents. When we implemented a new strategy for assessing student progress, I explained it at Back to School Night.

People pay attention when the principal speaks. It's one of the privileges (and perils) of the role. Wise principals use that voice of authority to communicate their values. One of my values is that respectful questioning and disagreement accelerates our collective learning. I explicitly say this at meetings and encourage "pushback." However, saying this isn't enough. Leaders need to show that dissent will be listened to. Without this reassurance, a disagreement doesn't go away; it just moves to the parking lot or staff room to grow.

**At an instructional leadership team** meeting my first year, an insightful but often quiet teacher gingerly disagreed with my idea. As a result, the plan took off in the direction she'd pointed us, and we came up with something better.

This moment was pivotal. If she hadn't disagreed with the proposal, we wouldn't have arrived at the stronger place. I shared this with



the entire team to show why I valued such behavior. The result? Teachers learned that their opinions would be treated respectfully and could be consequential.

One way to communicate respect and build trust with a teacher is to be familiar with his or her work. A union representative once said he trusted his principal because she was in his classroom every day, even if only for two minutes. Many teachers are reassured when the principal visits regularly enough to know the routines and identify the small victories in student behavior and learning. Teachers pour energy and effort into their work every day. It's easy to take this for granted; after all, it's what we do. However, it engenders trust when your boss can speak to the specifics of your work.

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differently instead of seeking to understand her concerns. Six kids of color are hanging out in front of the school and people worry that trouble is brewing. Such hidden biases undermine not only trust, but also the work we aspire to do.

Knowing that I'm biased means I have to watch my decision-making all the time. For example:

- Do I file reports with the state for child neglect more quickly with a family of color than a white family?
- Do I consider a parent of color pushy, but a white parent who does the same thing a strong advocate?
- Do I ignore when a low-income family doesn't show up for a conference, but feel worried for a more affluent family that does the same?
- How do I respond when a particular subgroup—whether it's black, low-income, or kids with learning disabilities—all fail the state exam? Would I react differently if all of the white students (or students in another group) failed?

### Name Your Biases

Some white people seek to build trust with people of color by claiming to be colorblind. This strategy may be well-intentioned, but it's not helpful. Race isn't something to be feared. Would we say that we don't see gender? Why do people feel they shouldn't see race? Leaders can't build trust without recognizing and valuing people's full selves.

Furthermore, our society is not colorblind. In a *New York Times* article titled "Racial Bias, Even When We Have Good Intentions," from Jan. 3, 2015, Senhil Mullainathan writes that study after study shows that people of color are treated differently when applying for jobs, buying houses, getting medical treatment and more. Increasingly, the research shows that these findings reflect unconscious biases rather than overt prejudice.

I've learned that as a white person leading a racially diverse school community, a critical step in building trust is to own and confront my biases. In their 2013 book *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, psychologists Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald show that we all unconsciously absorb prejudices about people of color. These messages, buried deep in our unconscious, can make us act counter to our best intentions if we aren't alert to them.

For example, an African American father walks into school and the principal assumes he's a janitor. An administrator assumes the young, new teacher of color is paranoid about being treated

Asking such questions helps me counteract my unconscious bias. In her 2008 article "Cultivating the Trust of Black Parents," psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum explains that when a white educator names race, it is reassuring not because it means the person is free from bias, but because it indicates awareness of her prejudices—an awareness of the larger problem so many families of color face. Recognizing the pervasiveness of bias is an important first step. Acknowledging that I might make mistakes because of this bias—then actively working to counter it—builds trust.

### Take the Time

Trust happens through thousands of small, purposeful interactions over time. In addition to the steps described above, **leaders earn trust when they keep promises, respond when teachers ask for help, and have difficult conversations with adults to ensure high-quality teaching for everyone.** It's not a simple task. Can you accelerate it? No. Can you make progress every day? Absolutely. ☐

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