



EMPLOYMENT ENTERPRISES INC

HR INSIGHTS

VOL. IX, ISSUE VI

magazine

from the eyes of industry leaders



“Inside of every problem lies an opportunity.”

- ROBERT KIYOSAKI



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LEADERSHIP ESSENTIALS: CREDIBILITY

BY VALERIE M. GRUBB

All the knowledge, experience, and skill in the world won't make someone a great leader unless people are confident that they know what they're doing and that they can achieve results. For that faith and trust to exist, that person must have credibility, "the quality or power of inspiring belief." Credibility isn't an inherent quality but one that must be actively developed and regularly sustained. It's difficult to earn and easy to lose. And as part of the foundation of effective communication, it's one of the most valuable items in any leader's box of management tools.

How to Build Credibility

Lack of credibility slays your character.

—BERNARD KELVIN CLIVE

Demonstrate mastery of your craft.

Before you can persuade anyone to believe (or follow) you, you first need to convince them that you know what you're talking about. Depending on your audience, your goals, and the particular field you're in, you have many options when it comes to establishing your expertise. For example, your credibility could be based on your level of formal education and training—university degrees, professional development seminars, and the like. Perhaps your on-the-job experiences have enabled you to master a subject (or position). The key is to be good at your current role and get stuff done. If you're not doing your current job well, your credibility will suffer tremendously.

In addition to building your knowledge, you also need to build trust. If your colleagues, your employees, your bosses, and your clients don't trust you, you won't get a chance to put your knowledge to work. Trust must be earned through thoughtful interactions with others.

TIP 📌 Never stop learning! Even subject matter experts (SMEs) constantly expand their knowledge to ensure that they know the latest information on a topic. Sign up for formal training (even if you have to pay for it out your own pocket). Do your own research on topics that will help increase your skill level. Throw your hat in the ring to lead new projects that will help develop your leadership chops. Find mentors. Volunteer with nonprofit organizations in ways that help you develop certain leadership, management, or technical skills.

Deliver on your promises.

Build a reputation as someone who follows through on their claims. If you describe yourself as a person who can be relied on to hit a certain deadline or meet a certain goal, for example, be sure you actually do it.

TIP 📌 That said, value yourself, your skills, and your time by agreeing to do only what you can reasonably expect to accomplish. Stay involved and work hard at your job, but learn how to set boundaries so you don't end up way over your head and unable to fulfill your obligations. Remember, "no" is a complete sentence!

Admit when you don't know something.

Saying "I don't know" out loud can be a humbling experience, but you're better off pointing out your own ignorance than having someone else shine a light on it. The longer you wait to reveal this—and the farther your project (or even your career) progresses before you're called out—the worse your fall will be. So rather than try to bluff your way through unfamiliar territory, ask relevant and thoughtful questions that will help you learn more about it. Don't be afraid of looking "foolish" in front of others: your willingness to ask questions can actually boost others' estimation of you. When you don't shy away from acknowledging what you don't know, people are more likely to have confidence in what you do know.

TIP 📌 When you come up against your own knowledge shortcomings, consider that an opportunity to build connections with people who have more expertise in that area than you do.

Own up to your mistakes.

No one is perfect, and everyone makes mistakes. When (not if, but when) you mess up, assume responsibility for your actions. If you had any control (whether as the decider or as a bit player) over a situation that didn't have the desired outcome, own up to the role you played in it. Then do everything you can to correct the problem immediately.

TIP 📌 Stepping up and being responsible for your actions can improve your credibility not just when things go wrong but especially when things go right. After all, everyone loves a good comeback story!

Be receptive to criticism and objections.

If you instinctively push back every time someone disagrees with you, you'll get a reputation as a difficult-to-work-with reactionary. But if people know that you'll give careful consideration to information even when it contradicts your own viewpoints, they'll be more likely to see you as someone who's open minded and a careful thinker—and therefore they'll be more likely to support your final opinion or decision.

TIP 🗨️ Being open to criticism isn't the same as letting people walk all over you! If you truly believe that your proposal is the best, then by all means stick with it. But just be sure to examine other reasonable perspectives first.

Keep confidences.

When someone tells you that a piece of information is confidential but you share it anyway, you violate their trust and diminish your credibility. Whether your actions are intentional or accidental, the fallout is the same: others will not want to trust you with their own confidences. On the other hand, if you demonstrate your ability to keep a secret, others will feel more comfortable sharing sensitive information with you.

TIP 🗨️ Along those same lines, refrain from gossiping about the company, its leadership, or its employees. However, think before agreeing to remain quiet about a potentially bad situation, and don't allow yourself to be drawn into a conversation that makes you feel uncomfortable: if you agree to hide anything immoral or illegal, you can kiss your credibility goodbye.

Show respect for others' input.

People who say, "I don't care what others think" may think that they're being independent but are actually setting themselves up for lots of problems in the workplace. By not respecting and valuing their colleagues' input, contributions, and time, they establish the precedent for their colleagues to treat them similarly. There's a big difference between being confident about yourself and alienating others. Credibility arises from positive social interactions, and those can't exist without respect and connection.

TIP 🗨️ Show your colleagues that you care about their projects and especially their success even when it doesn't have an impact on your own work. Showing empathy and support builds trust and credibility with your coworkers. People will reciprocate the care and trust you show to them.

Avoid exaggeration.

Exaggeration and hyperbole can add lots of spice to stories, but if you use them too often people won't know when to believe you—so they'll assume that they usually shouldn't. Your credibility increases when people know they can count on you to deliver the truth accurately and consistently. Stick to the facts.

Final Thoughts

*Once you lose your credibility,
you can never restore it.*

- REINHOLD MESSNER

If you want to be an effective leader, you need to know how to build workplace relationships that are founded on clear communication, trust, and respect. When you have credibility, people have faith that you know what you're doing and pay heed to your ideas and your feedback. They also have confidence that you'll have their back (and in return they'll have yours). Your credibility can inspire them to do their best work and achieve their goals, because they believe you when you tell them "I know you can do this."

Building credibility isn't a one-and-done accomplishment but an ongoing endeavor. The work can be challenging at times, but anyone who's willing to be thoughtful about their own actions and motivations can do it. The key is to cultivate behaviors that build trust—treating others with honesty and respect—while also cultivating your own knowledge. ■

Stop asking for favors.

When you want input, never lead with "Will you do me a favor?" Instead, start with something like "What do you think the best solution for this problem is?" to make it clear that you are inviting (and valuing) someone's assistance and not asking them to do the work for you. (And on that same note, if you want people to have a helpful attitude toward you, be sure you have that attitude toward them.)

Remove "to be honest" from your vocabulary.

When someone prefaces their comments with "to be honest," that begs the question "Wait—are you usually not honest?" By implying that for you stating the truth is an exceptional (and not typical) behavior, you undermine your own credibility. If you yourself are announcing that you aren't usually believable, why should anyone else have faith in you?

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