

Building High Trust in the Invisible Workplace

By Adele B. Lynn

If you're working at home either as a telecommuter or a freelancer, you have to be more responsible than your colleague at the office.

Why?

It's not a case of out of site, out of mind. In the case of workers who are physically not in the office, it's more like out of site, what on earth are they doing? That's because bosses/ clients have pressure too. They are accountable if the work doesn't get done, so telecommuting can increase their stress. How can you reduce the stress for your boss/ client and build that high trust feeling when you're out of site?

- 1.) Acknowledge an email or voice mail request. Even though you might very well be on top of a request and are working to deliver, the person making the request doesn't know that and doesn't have the luxury of running into you in the elevator to say, "Hey did you get my e mail about such and such...?" So, it helps to acknowledge the email or voice mail and let the person know that you are aware of his / her need and that you are working on it.
- 2.) Turnaround time rules. The boss might know that Joe down the hall is working on 10 other projects and therefore may be more forgiving on deadlines for Joe. But when you are telecommuting, especially as a freelancer, your other projects are your concern, not your clients. Your client is only interested in what you can do for him / her and when you can deliver.
- 3.) Deliver more than expected. Performance is always an important ingredient and sets people apart from their peers. But for the telecommuter, an essential component in the trust component is that you deliver what is expected. If you deliver more than is expected, it's like compounding interest on the account.
- 4.) Find a way to build the relationship. The disadvantage to telecommuting for the employee or freelancer is that the geographic distance also can serve to distance the relationship. Work is still about relationships. Promotions, plum assignments, and the next business opportunity will come your way because you've done a great job AND because you have a good working relationship with

- the boss/ client. Work at building a personal relationship. Whether by phone or in person, take time to get to know the people you are working with.
- 5.) If you can't deliver as promised, do more than email the bad news. Pick up the phone and call the person. Offer alternatives to help him / her get the project done on time. Obviously, don't wait till the last minute to deliver this kind of news. Your boss or client deserves more.

Bosses / clients can also contribute to the positive climate of telecommuting:

- 1.) Be clear about the expectations. Take time to conference with the telecommuter about the project or needs. Up-front time can drastically reduce the surprise factor. Unlike the office counterparts, opportunity for interim discussion is limited. The casual conversation "how's the so and so project?" just doesn't take place. Therefore, more up front preparation about objectives and expectations is important. With all assignments, deadlines are an important part of the contract. Be specific with the telecommuter about when you expect a completed project.
- 2.) Don't forget about changes or details that affect the project. Again, out of site, out of mind, works to the disadvantage of the telecommuter. It's easy to forget to communicate changes or details that affect a project when the person is off-site. Work hard to maximize that communication.
- 3.) Watch the tone of your emails. As opposed to a face to face conversation, email communication can sometimes invites curt, even rude, remarks about project details or status. Somehow the computer keyboard brings out a sense of anonymity of that can work to destroy the trust relationship. Be careful.
- 4.) Schedule interim updates. On long projects, be sure to schedule regular updates with the telecommuter. Interim updates can provide a time to assess progress, exchange change information or details, and put the relationship at ease.
- 5.) Speak up if you're feeling concerned about a project or the telecommuting relationship. By all means, you have a right to expect results. But you also have a responsibility to speak up if you don't believe you are getting the results you expect. Let the

telecommuter know what's troubling you about the project or the work relationship. If possible, do this in person or by telephone, not by email.

And now for the relationship side:

A client from Illinois, whom I had never met in person, told me that she would be traveling past the town where I lived and worked with her family on their upcoming trip to the ocean. I asked if her family might need a 15 minute leg stretch and would be willing to stop by our small home town of Belle Vernon, Pennsylvania, located just one minute off Interstate 70. I promised I wouldn't keep her for more than a few minutes.

When she pulled off the interstate, I handed her a loaf of bread from our terrific hometown bakery with a note. The note said:

"Thank you for allowing me to repay a debt. When I was traveling in Paris some 30 years ago, hungry and short of francs, a lady who saw me standing in front of a bakery window bought me a loaf of bread. When I asked how I could repay her, she said she would be happy if I could someday buy a loaf of bread for another traveler. So my tradition has been to buy anyone traveling through my home town a loaf of bread."

Needless to say, my client from Illinois calls me regularly for business. It's about building relationships. It's more challenging to do that when you telecommute, but it is far from impossible.

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