

We Are Not the Enemy

Positioning HR as a Trusted Ally

By Helena A. Rodrigues and Allison M. Vaillancourt

After an extensive national search, Noah was hired as the chief human resources officer for a community college system. He was given an ambitious mandate: position the system to recapture the enrollment market share that had eroded during the last decade by elevating the quality of institutional talent and creating a more nimble organizational culture.

Elsewhere, Sophia looked forward to making a name for herself through the newly created director of HR administrative operations role she had just accepted at a research university. Her charge was also daunting: centralize all human resources activities to increase consistency and drive down costs.





Within eight months of joining the community college system, Noah was already exploring other opportunities. Despite being told that he had absolute support to revamp hiring efforts, compensation strategies, performance management approaches and anything else he decided was not working, he found that there was more pushback than he ever anticipated. In fact, he was challenged at every turn. Although Noah was told “profound change is essential,” he discovered that campus leaders did not actually want change as much as they thought they did.

Regrettably, Sophia was not faring much better. While she took great care to explain that the centralization initiative was a mandate from senior leadership, she was unable to gain traction on the concept, and long-time employees across campus used both subtle and overt strategies to undermine her credibility. Feeling defeated, she no longer considered this role as her springboard to a more senior role in higher education administration.

Noah and Sophia, composites of colleagues with whom we have worked, were each hired by senior leaders whose boards argued passionately about the need to “disrupt higher education” in order to increase access, quality and affordability. To deliver on that promise, Noah was hired to increase revenue and Sophia was hired to drive down costs. Both were perceived to be “dynamic change agents” who would save the day. And within a very short time, each had created significant disruption, just not the kind of change that had been intended. While each was committed to being successful, neither was able to perform in their new environment.

What could have helped Noah and Sophia deliver on the charges for which they were hired? Here, we reflect on how HR professionals tasked with leading organizational change can use trust as a foundational principle for moving ideas forward. By building trust across campus, HR leaders position themselves as valued partners capable of building the coalitions and alliances necessary to advance high-stakes agendas.

Defining Trust

What is trust, and why is it critical when seeking to advance organizational change? Political scientist Kenneth Newton in his article “Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society and Democracy,” defined trust as an individual’s “belief that at worst, others will not knowingly or willingly do him harm, and at best, that they will act in his interests.”

When we lack trust, we take efforts to protect ourselves, and in many cases, that means blocking change that others attempt to promote.

Trust facilitates organizational effectiveness and institutional change in several ways. It creates a sense of community and cohesiveness (“we’re all in this together”) and the comfort of certainty and predictability (“you’ve been open to my concerns in the past, so I can count on you to understand my concerns in the future”). Perhaps most important of all, trust makes it easier for people to work together. When there is trust, people feel comfortable advancing innovative and risky ideas without fear of criticism and are more likely to admit to shortcomings and ask for assistance when it’s needed.

Trust is essential for HR professionals because we can only be effective when we are viewed as organizational rather than tools of administration. To be successful in our roles, we must be perceived as driving the organization’s mission and supporting client contributions to organizational goals. Importantly, HR professionals must be considered as partners and insiders because, as George Cvetkovich asserts in his book *Social Trust and the Management of Risk*, individuals tend to trust those who are part of networks and not outside them.

A lack of trust slows organizations down, and carrying out our responsibilities is more difficult when others fear us. When HR professionals are not trusted, recommendations are challenged, evidence is demanded and motivations are scrutinized. When trust is scarce, the flavor of interactions is transactional in nature — clients come forward because they have to, not because they want to. Instead of calling when problems are small and manageable, clients tend to come forward only when there are no other alternatives. And by then, situations are often much more complex and even intractable.

Consider the difference between being asked to offer advice about whether a candidate for a department director seems to be a good fit, rather than being asked how to manage the organizational fallout after she has shattered the confidence of everyone who works for her. Or, reflect upon the difference in complexity between advising on a disability accommodation as opposed to responding to a charge of discrimination for failing to engage in the interactive accommodation process.

While our knowledge and expertise are undoubtedly important to our clients, whether or not they trust us will determine how successfully we can and will work together.

Subject-Matter Expert vs. Trusted Advisor

Beyond making our work easier, trust-based relationships make our work more interesting. HR professionals who are trusted get asked more challenging questions and are invited to participate in more stimulating projects. They are far less likely to be stuck in their “HR box” and instead are invited to engage more fully in the life of their organizations.

As explored in the book *The Trusted Advisor*, there are distinct differences between those known only for their subject-matter expertise and those also known to possess a solid understanding of the broader organization and to have deep relationships with those with whom they work. Subject-matter experts are asked to apply their specific expertise to provide answers, but trusted advisors are called upon to frame the questions. Trusted advisors often advise on matters outside their recognized areas of expertise. They have solid relationships with major stakeholders. They are considered strategic and are seen as key confidants and authorities in times of crisis.

Success in advancing an initiative or promoting change in our organizations will ultimately depend upon whether or not our major stakeholders and senior leadership have confidence in our ability to apply more than just our HR expertise.

What Do Trusted People Do?

Trust tends to build after parties have multiple opportunities to interact, a process that can take considerable time. Given that trust is often a prerequisite to move novel ideas forward, those who are new to an organization and charged with a change agenda often find themselves without the foundational support necessary to carry out their charges successfully. However, we believe it is possible to jumpstart the trust process by modeling certain behaviors and characteristics from the outset.

Forge connections and be relatable. Create a sense of relatability by finding multiple points of similarities and connections with others across your organization. Share information, demonstrate respect and positive regard for others, practice empathy, admit mistakes, share credit and praise others publicly.

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Communicate effectively. Listen intently, express curiosity and communicate complex concepts in concise and accessible ways. Customize your communication to the audience and use stories to convey ideas in a more personal way.

Possess organizational acumen. Understand the organization’s financial picture, know where the real power resides and provide context for decisions based on organizational needs and plans.

Practice optimism. Express enthusiasm about what’s next and demonstrate a positive attitude.

We consider organizational acumen and relatability to be especially critical skills for HR professionals. When we can speak about funding, political threats, enrollment trends and other matters that affect our organizations,

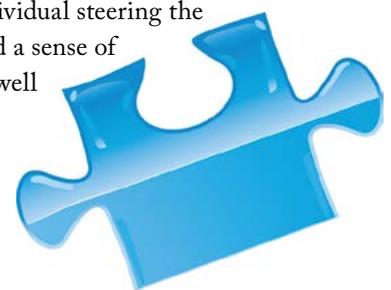
we demonstrate our ability to act in our organizations’ best interests. Being “relatable” or “like me” is important as well. We achieve this status with our clients when we find common experiences,

demonstrate vulnerability and communicate in ways that resonate with our intended audiences.

Those new to an organization are challenged to eschew their outsider status in order to generate critical trust. Being intentional about honoring people and traditions will prove valuable to forging the partnerships necessary to move ideas forward.

Trust and Organizational Change

While trust certainly facilitates routine, day-to-day work, it more importantly accelerates change. The SCARF model demonstrates the value of trust in situations when one is asked to lead change. SCARF, an acronym for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness, provides a framework for helping members of an organization work through change. When the individual steering the change initiative has established a sense of predictability and certainty, as well as a commitment to fairness, those affected by the change effort can move forward with a stronger sense of confidence. When things go wrong in an





organizational change effort, those who are trusted are generally provided greater leeway than those who are not.

As we reflect on the experiences of Noah and Sophia described in the beginning of this article, let's consider how each of them missed opportunities to use the power of trust to move their respective agendas forward. Both jumped into their roles by creating a detailed project plan, rather than launching a listening tour. Each announced they had been hired to change cultures and systems, rather than spending the first few months helping their organizational members realize that the status quo was not in the institution's long-term best interests. Noah and Sophia were both well intentioned and highly competent, but they both would have benefited from building a guiding coalition (as John Kotter describes in his book *Leading Change*) and a community-based mandate rather than going it alone.

They also would have benefited from a "perspective taking" approach as they pursued their ambitious change agendas. With this approach, one considers what it is like to be in someone else's situation. How might my actions affect this person? Why might certain issues hold emotional significance?

The following are some examples of strategies that leaders can employ to build trust when leading change:

Change strategy: Make the need for change obvious.

Related trust-building strategy: In Noah's case, gather the data — e.g., review 10 years of enrollment data and help others see the trends. In Sophia's case, present a cost analysis of decentralized vs. centralized HR activities.

Change strategy: Create demand for change.

Related trust-building strategy: Ask people what is working and what they would like to be different. Form a committee of key constituency group members and document the desire and consensus for change.

Change strategy: Build a guiding coalition.

Related trust-building strategy: Secure the endorsement of influential stakeholders to demonstrate broad support for the initiative. Ask this coalition to talk about the initiative with their networks and to share concerns that may emerge.

Change strategy: Honor the past.

Related trust-building strategy: Hold focus groups to identify approaches and values that should be preserved. Speak well of those who made contributions in the past and describe how the proposed changes build upon their earlier contributions.

When trust is achieved in an HR environment, the benefits are significant. Recommendations are more likely to be embraced. Decisions are perceived as appropriate and fair. Vital information is shared willingly. Bold ideas are supported. And best of all, clients recommend us to others. Noah and Sophia's experiences tell us that even when a mandate is clear and change is needed, how we interact with others (and how we go about proving our trustworthiness) will ultimately determine whether or not we can advance the change with which we are charged. 

Helena A. Rodrigues, Ph.D., is director of human resources strategy and planning at The University of Arizona. She can be reached at hrodrigu@email.arizona.edu.

Allison M. Vaillancourt, Ph.D., SPHR, is vice president for human resources and institutional effectiveness at The University of Arizona. She can be reached at vaillana@email.arizona.edu.

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