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The Role of Trust in Religious Education

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Throughout this dispensation, prophets and apostles have continually stressed the importance of trust in all of our relationships. President David O. McKay often taught, "To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved."[1] President Boyd K. Packer has said, "Talents and abilities and training may set us far above people in general. However, if there is a flaw in our character and we cannot be trusted, . . . all of these other qualifications may not be sufficient to make us of real service."[2] Why do Church leaders place such value on trust? How can trust help us become better religious educators? This paper focuses specifically on the role of trust in religious education, but the principles apply to teaching and leadership in any field.

Leaders and teachers in religious education must have trust in one another in order to be united and effective. This means they must understand what trust is and how it is built. Trust is built upon the ability to rely on another person to act in one's best interest under all circumstances. Trust can be thought of as oil in an engine. While not a built-in part of the system, oil is crucial to an engine's performance. When the oil in an engine gets low, the engine will begin to build up friction and heat and could be irreparably

damaged. In religious education, when the level of trust drops, all involved will slowly begin to feel the friction of contention and conflict.

Research on Trust

In the last fifty years, trust has been studied by scholars as an individual attribute, a behavior, a situational feature, and an ethical principle. This research originated from the notion that the feelings of individual people have an impact on organizational performance, which dates back to Elton Mayo and the beginning of human relations theory. In the late 1920s, while conducting research on the relationship between levels of light in workspaces and worker productivity, Mayo discovered that all workers tended to increase their productivity when they were being observed by the scientists. The workers saw their observer as a sympathetic listener and talked more freely every day. Mayo concluded that when workers feel important and valued, their productivity increases.[3] He wrote, "Increases in production—quantity and quality—occur in response to social and physical conditions and not as the result of conscious effort; in the majority of the instances the worker, himself or herself, is as much surprised by the improvement as the observer."[4]

The significance of trust has been referenced in major publications on human relations, organizational leadership, management, and communication theory. Julian Rotter was one of the first scholars to attempt to articulate the concept of trust. He emphasized that the survival of any social group, from the family unit to big business corporations, depends on the presence of trust.[5] He went on to point out that trust is an important variable in human learning because much of this learning is based on statements that have to be believed without independent evidence.

Education scholars Patrick B. Forsyth, Laura L. B. Barnes, and Curt M. Adams wrote, "The centrality of trust in school organizations seems unassailable."[6] Given such an assessment, focusing on building trust in religious education settings ought to be a high priority for everyone involved, beginning with those with the most formal authority in organizations.

Leadership and Trust

No person in a religious education setting is in a better position to influence trust than the administrative leader. Teachers depend on their administrators for fairness, a predictable environment, adequate resources, and professional

support. Actions taken by the leader that heighten a teacher's sense of vulnerability may create an atmosphere of fear and distrust.

Current research and theory points to a trusted leader as a person who is socially and emotionally intelligent.[7] Emotionally intelligent leaders understand the value of individuals, have the ability to perceive and manage emotion, have genuine empathy for others, and listen intently. Socially intelligent leaders are flexible and adaptive, accept full responsibility for mistakes, and are lifelong learners. The Lord offered a divine list of leadership qualities when he taught the Prophet Joseph Smith that power and influence ought to be maintained by "persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41). The Lord also refers to leaders as shepherds. Why? As Dana M. Pike has indicated, "Quality shepherds were . . . dedicated, hardworking, compassionate leaders who provided for and protected and guided their flocks."[8]

Because of the formal power vested in the administrator, many scholars emphasize the responsibility of the administrator to take the first steps toward building trusting relationships. Leaders who offer praise, set high performance standards, socialize with teachers, practice empathy, engage in meaningful conversation, and listen closely are more likely to be trusted. Likewise, leaders who are honest with teachers, treat them as equals, are sympathetic, and set realistic standards are not only appreciated by their teachers but are rewarded with their trust.

Teachers with high levels of trust in their school leader find their work personally meaningful. Within a climate of high trust, teachers do not hesitate to seek assistance from the leader and are quick to admit mistakes. What causes this willingness to seek support? Trust reduces vulnerability. Teachers feel free to open up because they do not feel threatened by potentially being seen as unintelligent or ineffective. President Spencer W. Kimball wrote, "[Jesus] taught us that there can be no growth without real freedom. One of the problems with manipulative leadership is that it does not spring from a love of others but from a need to use them. Such leaders focus on their own needs and desires and not on the needs of others."[9]

Because of increased understanding of the power of trust, the heart of leadership has changed from formal power to relationships. Effective management skills are no longer enough; they must be coupled with effective leadership—winning the hearts and minds of people to work together for a common good. It would be wise for administrators to study and seek to

develop the personal power necessary to build lasting relationships of trust with each individual. Ammon must have had these ideas in mind when he proclaimed that he hoped to "win the hearts of these my fellow-servants, that I may lead them to believe in my words" (Alma 17:29).

Building Trust

Trust is crucial in religious education, but how is trust built? Megan Tschannen-Moran offers five main facets on which leaders can focus their attention in order to improve trust in educational settings: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence.[10]

Benevolence

Benevolence is the belief that one's welfare or the welfare of someone or something one cares about will be safeguarded and not purposely harmed by the trusted person. Benevolent leaders are those that are perceived to genuinely care about teachers, convey authentic concern for each individual relationship, tolerate the imperfections of others, and help others learn, grow, mature, and succeed. John Bransford noted that "the more we know about someone, the more we are able to connect to their specific interests and needs and explain things in ways that make sense to them."[11] In addition, President N. Eldon Tanner taught, "To be an effective leader or teacher one must show love and actually feel love for the person he is trying to instruct."[12] The good leader studies the policy manual; the great leader also studies his or her faculty.

Teachers who believe that their leader has their best interest as an underlying motivation are more likely to seek help from the leader, work to meet high expectations, speak highly of the leader to others, and accept correction. Conversely, teachers who do not trust the benevolence of the leader often become anxious and worried for their own welfare. A leader should display benevolence through being optimistic, placing confidence in teachers, giving sincere compliments, expressing appreciation, protecting teachers' rights, and sincerely apologizing. Even small acts, such as making short social visits or leaving brief complimentary notes, can potentially make large differences in trust levels.

Trust can even be built in the middle of personal conflict or clashes of opinion if we are able to hold our tongue and act with benevolence. Robert L. Millet and Lloyd D. Newell wrote, "Our pride may prompt us to lash out and reprove harshly. Our own insecurity and fear may precipitate unkind

responses."[13] This behavior damages trust. Our efforts to help another person may be thwarted by our lack of emotional control. Trust cannot be built by attacking individuals or principles. Kent P. Jackson and Robert D. Hunt wrote, "Caustic responses are unlikely to correct a wayward person."[14] Teachers rarely grow when there is a constant fear of being reproved or punished. Similarly, Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, "So many times as leaders we give out criticism without providing even the basic reassurances, to say nothing of the need to give added assurances. Those we seek to lead will venture more in testing and developing their strengths and skills, if the climate we provide is one in which our love and trust is clear, and the risks of their losing our love are low."[15]

Honesty

Honesty is the congruence of one's words and actions; we perceive people as honest when we have a high estimation of their truthfulness. In order to be considered honest, principals should genuinely behave in a way that highlights consistency between their word and deed on a daily basis. Elder Richard G. Scott taught, "Integrity is the hallmark of a righteous man or woman. It is the root of trust. It acts as cement in worthy human relationships and is the foundation of spiritual communication. Oh, how the world suffers today because of dwindling integrity."[16] Principals who are consistently honest are much more likely to earn the trust of their faculty members.

Honesty also involves authenticity. When a person's words and actions are not congruent and consistent, the feeling of authenticity is weakened. A leader, especially a leader in religious education, cannot cut corners on teacher relationships, because trust cannot be counterfeited. Like oxygen, trust is something we tend to think more about when it is absent. Attempts to "fake it" will only create more distance between the teachers and the leader. In these circumstances, even the smallest interaction can turn into an emotional conflict. In order to avoid both real and imagined harm, people will refrain from taking any assertive action whatsoever, and it is likely that cooperation and support among the teachers and leader will be abandoned.

There is a better way to build relationships. Leaders that genuinely take personal responsibility for their actions are likely to be perceived as more honest than those who don't. Patrick A. Duignan and Narottam Bhindi emphasize the role of genuine trust in the overall organizational environment. They state, "Authenticity is not only a quality of the leader but it is also a product of relationships and interrelationships. The quality of the relationships

greatly influences everything else that happens in organizations, including the quality of leadership. Trusting and caring relationships are identified in many studies as central to the development of a culture or climate where values relating to honesty, integrity, fair-mindedness, loyalty, justice, equity, freedom, and autonomy are internalized and find expression through everyday practices and procedures."[17] Likewise, President Spencer W. Kimball taught, "A good leader will remember he is accountable to God as well as to those he leads. By demanding accountability of himself, he is in a better position, therefore, to see that others are accountable for their behavior and their performance. People tend to perform at a standard set by their leaders."[18]

Openness

Openness refers to the willingness to share relevant information in the form of facts, alternatives, judgments, intentions, and feelings. Leaders who offer information in a truthful and straightforward manner enhance trust, while leaders who guard information incite suspicion. Tschannen-Moran explained that openness can correct problems before they are compounded because "in schools with a greater level of trust, teachers and other staff members are more likely to disclose more accurate, relevant, and complete data about problems."[19] Openness does not mean leaders share information that is considered confidential. By choosing to keep confidential information confidential, leaders inspire trust. Leaders who share confidential matters in the name of trust will likely bring about the distrust they were trying to avoid.

Leaders can exhibit openness through sharing resources, successful teaching strategies, relevant budget numbers, and appropriate personal information. Shared decision making and appropriate delegation are also practices that cultivate openness. Leaders who wish to be perceived as open should create transparent decision-making processes within their institutions.

Reliability

Reliability is one's assessment of the consistency and predictability of another person. Reliability is developed through consistent and positive interaction over a period of time. Trust cannot be built by simply assuming its existence; rather, it is built and maintained through these repeated positive exchanges and undermined by instances of negligence.

Leaders who spend more time engaging with teachers in social and unscheduled interaction improve trust. These consistent and positive exchanges between an administrator and teachers are vital to building a culture based on trust. President Ezra Taft Benson wrote, "We know . . . that the time a leader spends in personal contact with members is more productive than time spent in meetings and administrative duties."[20] Evoking the leadership demonstrated by the Savior, President Kimball wrote, "[Jesus] walked and worked with those he was to serve. His was not a long-distance leadership. He was not afraid of close friendships; he was not afraid that proximity to him would disappoint his followers. The leaven of true leadership cannot lift others unless we are with and serve those to be led."[21]

Personal social exchanges must occur often to build trust. A series of these positive interactions builds confidence that the next interaction will be positive regardless of the circumstances. On the other hand, sporadic contentious interaction diminishes predictability, which sows distrust. Such behavior leads to wasted energy spent by teachers in mental planning on what to do in the event of another negative interaction. Leaders need the ability and emotional intelligence to have interactions with others that are both frequent and positive. They must exhibit enough consistency to inspire confidence.

Competence

Despite being consistently benevolent, honest, and open, leaders may not be fully trusted if they do not have the ability to carry out their responsibilities as expected. Teachers will ask, Can the administrator develop and maintain a budget? Can he or she handle difficult situations? Does the administrator know what good teaching is? Can he or she lead effective professional development? A teacher may feel that a leader is benevolent and desires very much to help, but if the leader lacks comprehension or otherwise cannot adequately fulfill expectations, the teacher will likely lack trust in the leader. Elder Richard L. Evans said, "It's good to be faithful, but it's better to be faithful and competent."[22]

Competence also enables a leader to understand that not all trust-building behaviors are appropriate under all circumstances. Certain behaviors that will effectively build trust in a high-trust relationship may have the opposite effect in a low-trust relationship. For example, a new leader will likely hurt trust if he or she moves directly to giving critical feedback to teachers. However, once a high-trust relationship has been established, giving critical feedback can increase trust. Likewise, certain behaviors that will effectively build trust in a personal interaction with one teacher may have the opposite

effect in a different situation. Such relationship management requires that a leader have competent interpersonal skills.

The level of trust between two people can change in different contexts. For example, a teacher may trust an administrator to tell the truth but not trust the administrator's ability to take over his or her classes for a day. Therefore, leaders must seek to become more competent in all aspects of their assignment. Elder David A. Bednar taught, "You can't use spirituality as an excuse to slack off on necessary competencies. In fact, because of what we know spiritually, then there should be a greater yearning for developing whatever competencies are necessary so that I can act in the office to which I have been appointed and learn my duty."[23]

Because the behaviors that will most effectively build trust vary according to situation, leaders must have the interpersonal skills needed to engage other adults effectively across a wide variety of circumstances. A leader's competency will enable him or her to discern the level of trust in a relationship and take appropriate action.

Conclusion

Trust is an essential factor in the success or failure of religious education, and no person is in a better position to influence the trust level than the leader. The leader can improve the institution through daily opportunities to increase trust based on how they demonstrate their benevolence, openness, honesty, reliability, and competence. If used effectively, trust will set a deep foundation upon which the success of any organization can be built.

Religious education scholars would benefit from researching the role of trust and strategies to build trust between leaders and teachers. Directors and supervisors would be wise to implement in-service leadership programs to educate principals on the power of trust. Thus the Seminaries and Institutes program will be more likely to achieve its objective of helping the youth of the Church to understand and rely on the Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the temple, and prepare for eternal life. **RE**

Notes

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18. Kimball, "Jesus: The Perfect Leader," 5.

19. Tschannen-Moran, *Trust Matters*, 26.

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21. Kimball, "Jesus: The Perfect Leader," 5.

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