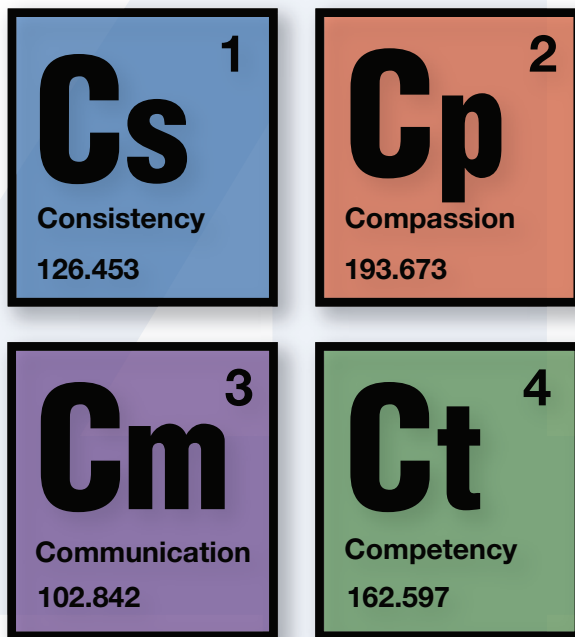


# THE Four Elements OF TRUST



BY DEVIN VODICKA

**T**HE COMPLEXITY OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP makes it challenging to distinguish any single essential feature. For example, Cotton (2003) identifies 26 key strategies that principals can implement to improve student achievement. The general literature on leadership is similarly diverse. School leaders are constantly being given direction and suggestions for how to best improve their leadership practice, parent and community involvement, staff morale, school effectiveness, and student learning—and the sheer number, span, and volume of the information can be bewildering.

As a former principal who has opened two new schools, I can testify to the importance of standards-based practice, safe and orderly environments, ongoing professional development for staff members, and parents and community members who are involved in the learning process. However, my experience, coupled with the research that I've conducted while pursuing my doctorate degree, leads me to believe that trust is likely the most important element in the development of learning community. Interestingly, the research indicates that the teachers' trust of the principal is also likely to be a predictor of the level of trust that teachers have with students, parents, and colleagues (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

## PREVIEW

Research and experience indicate that trust may be among the most essential elements in developing a true learning community.

Teachers' trust in the principal has been shown to correspond to positive performance and more trusting relationships with other stakeholders.

Consistency, compassion, communication, and competence are the key factors in establishing a trusting school climate.

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## Trust in Schools

In the context of schools, trust has been examined intensively in the past decade because it has been seen as the “lubricant” in efficient operations (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997) and is “fundamental to functioning in our complex and interdependent society” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 3). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy have been at the forefront of the studies that relate to trust in schools, demonstrating that trust facilitates cooperation and improves group cohesiveness, effective school leadership, and student achievement. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2001) assert that trust is multifaceted and has different “bases and phases depending on the context” (p. 3). Moreover, trust is a dynamic construct that changes over time. Individually and in tandem, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy have presented multiple studies that convincingly demonstrate that trusting relationships among teachers and principals contribute to a positive school climate, productive communication, increases in student learning, teachers’ collective sense of efficacy, and overall school effectiveness (Hoy & Sweetland, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

## In a study of 304 K–12 schools in Ohio and Virginia, teachers with high levels of trust for the principal were increasingly likely to trust fellow staff members, parents, and students.

Building on the work of Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, Bryk and Schneider (2002) measured trust in an urban school environment and determined that trust is foundational for meaningful school improvement. For example, schools with high levels of trust between school professionals and parents, between teachers and the principal, and among teachers were three times more likely to improve in reading and mathematics than those schools with very low levels of trust. Schools with consistently low levels of trust showed little or no improvement in student achievement measures. Bryk and Schneider conclude that trust between school professionals and parents, between teachers and the principal, and among

teachers creates a “moral resource” for school improvement that correlates with increased orientation to innovation, outreach to parents, professional community, and commitment to the school community.

## Teacher Trust for the Principal

Given the primacy of trust as a foundation for organizational improvement, it is important that principals understand how it may shape the degree of collaboration in their schools. The potential for catalyzing school improvement by promoting trusting relationships is reinforced by research that indicates that how much teachers trust their principal is wholly dependent on the behaviors of the principal and is largely unaffected by broader sociopolitical factors (Gimbel, 2003). Perhaps the link between principal behavior and teacher perception is important in understanding the common bond between the teachers’ level of trust of the principal and high levels of student achievement.

In situations in which teachers have high levels of trust for their principal, teachers exhibited greater levels of citizenship behavior during which they went “beyond the explicit requirements of the job” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 35). In addition, trusting climates were associated with significantly higher rates of student achievement even after controlling for such factors as poverty and race (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2005). Interestingly, teachers’ trust for the principal appears to be generalize to other relationships as well. The Hoy and Tschannen-Moran trust scales have been deployed in several education studies with consistent results that reinforce the centrality of the teacher-principal relationship. In a study of 304 K–12 schools in Ohio and Virginia, teachers with high levels of trust for the principal were increasingly likely to trust fellow staff members, parents, and students (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Brewster and Railsback predict that high levels of teacher trust for the principal will likely lead to “true collaboration.”

## The Four Elements

After reviewing extensive literature on the topic, I believe that trust can be defined in terms of the following components: consistency, compassion, communication, and competency. The prevalence of these components in both the education research (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and in the work of practitioners (Covey, 2004) reinforces the centrality of these notions in furthering an understanding of the concept of trust.

## Questions for Teachers

**Bryk and Schneider (2002) developed a scale with nine questions to identify the level of trust teachers have for their principal. These questions get to the heart of consistency, compassion, communication, and competence. School leaders who work in the direction of affirmative responses to the following statements can then expect to see increases in the degree of teacher collaboration, orientation to innovation, staff-parent interactions, and gains in student achievement:**

- It's OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal.
- The principal looks out for the personal welfare of the faculty members in this school.
- I take the principal at his or her word.
- The principal in this school is an effective manager, who makes the school run smoothly.
- The principal places the needs of the students ahead of his or her political interests.
- The principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers.
- The principal takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers.
- I really respect my principal as an educator.
- I feel respected by the principal.

**Source:** Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

**Consistency.** A concept prevalent in the definitions of trust in virtually all of the literature I reviewed, consistency means that messages for different audiences (e.g., parents, staff members, students, and the community) have the same meaning. Predictability also reduces the level of perceived threat, and consistency can therefore lead to a sense of greater safety. That said, consistency is not in and of itself sufficient to generate trust.

**Compassion.** Care is essential in a trusting relationship. Vulnerability is inherent in interpersonal interaction—if people fear that they will be exploited as a result of the relationship, they will not be likely to invest in it. Compassion in a relationship implies that there is a semblance of protection and that one person will not do harm to the other person. This demonstration of concern applies not only to the individuals in the relationship but also to the extended web of relations, such as friends, family, and professional colleagues.

Compassion can be established by showing confidence in the abilities of others and recognizing their contributions. Leaders can implement such practices as creating flexible work schedules, allowing for personal time, offering employment stability, promoting social events, and having frequent contact

with employees to show their concern for their well-being (Shaw, 1997). Simple courtesies (such as saying please and thank you) and offering forgiveness to others can demonstrate compassion and assist in building trust (Covey, 2004).

**Communication.** Soliciting feedback on personal and organizational performance builds trust by creating a sense of vulnerability and presupposing that this exposure will not be subjugated to exploitation from others (Gimbel, 2003). Covey suggests that loyalty to the absent, clear expectations, necessary apologies, and legitimate feedback are activities that promote trust (Covey, 2004). Barlow (2001) uses the word *openness* to describe trusted leaders, focusing on how sharing of information signals a “confidence that the information will not be exploited” (p. 26). Tschannen-Moran (2000) also refers to openness as a strategy that “breeds trust while withholding behavior provokes suspicion and distrust” (p. 2).

Well-timed sharing of both positive and negative information is linked with developing trust (Blomqvist & Stahle, 1998), and individuals within organizations that are typified by a failure to openly communicate in a timely fashion tend to rely on rumors and an informal network to provide information



(Shaw, 1997). Maintaining appropriate confidentiality (such as protecting the privacy of student and employee discipline files) also promotes trust (Fullan, 2003; Gimbel, 2003).

**Competence.** Consistently communicating goodwill is insufficient to develop trust in the absence of behaviors that match the statements. Competence, defined as the “execution of an individual’s role responsibilities,” is imperative (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 24). Displaying competence can be daunting, given the ever-changing context of schooling and the multiple aims that typify the education process. Nonetheless, teachers and principals are engaged in a mutually interdependent relationship and their reliance on one another is contingent upon how well they fulfill expectations (Barlow, 2001). Reputation, prizes, and affiliations are often outward representations of competence (Blomqvist & Stahle, 1998). In the context of accountability, producing results is often seen as the best determinant of competence (Shaw, 1997).

## Conclusion

Each of these four factors—consistency, compassion, communication, and competence—is necessary in a trusting relationship but insufficient in isolation. The four factors together develop trust. Although it may sound like an oversimplification, I believe that developing trust is the most central duty

for school leaders if they are interested in positively influencing their learning community. As I have discovered, the level of teachers’ trust for the principal appears to be predictive of the other relationships in the school environment. Improving those relationships improves teaching, learning, and student achievement. **PL**

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