



The Trapeze Effect: How to Coach for Reliability

By Mike Cook

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Performance in an organizational setting is not an individual phenomenon. It hinges on interdependency and an understood, but rarely discussed, concept: reliability. These two elements create a reputation that others can count on.

As an extreme example of coworker interdependency and reliability, consider the high-flying maneuvers of a pair of aerial acrobats. In order for the act to work, the trapeze artist must be able to count on her partner to be at exactly the right place, at exactly the right time, as she leaps through the air to grasp his outstretched hands. The knowledge that each artist can count on his or her partner is what drives the acrobats' graceful and daring performance.

This is what I call the trapeze effect.

Ask employees if that's the kind of relationship they want, and they always say yes. Employees want to know that if they ask a coworker to do a task, that coworker will accomplish the task well and on time. Often, however, employees become resigned to the reality that reliability and trust are not core values in their organizations. Because organizations are by nature interdependent, it is extremely difficult for even the best employees not to get discouraged when this is the case.

In any organization, in order to deliver value consistently over time, in varying circumstances and with diverse groups of people, each team member needs to focus on his or her reputation for reliability. That's where management comes in.

As a manager, you are a visionary. You need to have a meta-awareness of your employees' relationships and reputations. If you see a process breaking down, it's your job to have a perspective on the big picture so you can help the team move in a new, more constructive direction.



More often than not, a lack of reliability plays a key factor in the breakdown of workplace processes. Like those two trapeze artists, your people have to do the hard work of developing a learned relationship built on earned trust—and many employees aren't prepared to do it.

What Happens When Reputation Is Not Valued

Let me give you a classic real-life example. In the early 1990s, my firm was called in to diagnose a “broken process” at a manufacturing business. In those days, “re-engineering” was the usual prescription.

We asked the client if, rather than consider re-engineering as a first alternative, we could just observe the teams at work for a short while. What we found was a very bright, very misaligned, very frustrated group of people.

By poking about, asking questions, and watching team meetings, we soon discovered that the core value of reputation was missing. With each new project, Marketing would consult the customer and determine product specifications. These specs would then be discussed at the obligatory full-team meeting. Next, the guys in Development would tell the folks in Marketing that they could design the product, and the people in Manufacturing would tell everyone they could make the product. At that point, Marketing would go back to the customer and promise the product by a certain delivery date.

And then everyone—Development, Manufacturing, and Marketing—would begin the process of failing to live up to that promise, without realizing it. Development would go back to the lab and begin working on a truly elegant solution (never mind that elegance was not in the specs). Manufacturing would go back to their site and add four months to whatever Development had given them as a delivery date—and even that late date was written in pencil. Throughout the process, none of these departments talked to each other about what they were doing. Meanwhile, the folks in Marketing stood by and developed ulcers, since they had no clout in the process. They were forced to make up a series of excuses for the customer. As a result, the company's market share dropped by one full point each year over a ten-year period.

The problem here was simple: These employees had learned not to rely on one another. Interdependence and a desire to maintain the company's good reputation as well as the reputation of each employee were not at the center of their actions and interactions.



Through a series of workshops, we were able to have all parties begin to see their complicity and responsibility for the situation. We got them to own up to their lack of collaborative skills, their disregard for good reputations, and their non-commitment to act on behalf of the company's greater good. The net result of this newfound awareness was that the promises made to the customer became the driver of the process (good reputation), and technical elegance, while important, became a secondary concern. We coached these employees as they worked on developing the necessary collaborative skills and concerns for good reputation.

Market share improved dramatically during this period, new team members were oriented to this team's way of working as soon as they joined, and this working team became the "place to be."

Coaching for Reliability

As a manager, you can dramatically improve both individual and team performance at your company by reminding everyone that reliability is a fundamental value. Reliability is not the same as technical competence. Reliability is a character issue, and it requires collaboration and communication. It is built on one's desire to maintain a good reputation—and to expect others to do the same.

Here are the basic tenets of reliability to present to your employees.

- **If you cannot do what is requested, don't say you will do it.** Each time you take on a project or task—large or small—take a moment to consider how you will do it and when you will do it. Know your limitations before you commit to saying yes and agree to a deadline. This is a simple rule. Tell your employees that you expect them to follow it.
- **If you say you will do something, be willing to move heaven and earth to make it happen.** Intention is only half of the reliability equation. Action is the other half. Let workers know that you expect both well-thought-out intentions and follow through. Remind them that reputations are built on trust.
- **If you can't make it happen, let them know.** If you discover that, for whatever reason, you aren't going to be able to deliver, let the people who are counting on you know so they can make adjustments. Explain to employees that, once they have established an excellent reputation, managers, coworkers, clients, and customers will always cut them a break when they really need it.



- **Let everyone know that this is the only way you want to work.** All employees should let those with whom they work come to understand that this is the only way they want to work—as if it really matters; like they are playing for keeps. When reliability becomes part of your company’s culture, everyone wins.
- **Good reputations are built one interaction at a time.** Remind employees that every conversation and every interaction builds others’ confidence in them as people who will do what they say when they say they will, and will do it well. Even a small action, such as returning a phone call promptly, builds reputation.

Reputation for Reliability Counts

Having a good reputation counts, and reputations are much easier to build than to repair. Let employees know that they may be part of the project team, but chances are better than good that each worker’s performance is being evaluated individually—by you as well as by peers. Their ability to perform without constraint in your organization is a function of their good reputation.

In any organization in which good reputation is a core value, you can usually count on that value to spread across departments and teams, further reducing friction in future interactions with both old and new coworkers, and reducing the amount of energy you and they will have to expend for each accomplishment.

Good or poor reputation of any company—including yours—is the sum of the reputations of the people who interact with each other and with customers.

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