

## PMI – Trust Buster & Organization Killer

By Jay D. Rohman

During the Presidential administrations of Kennedy and Johnson, a gentleman by the name of Robert McNamara was Secretary of Defense and was considered one of the key role players during the conflict in Vietnam. In the most recent past he has been a part of an American delegation of officials that have traveled to Vietnam and met with Vietnamese leaders to study and try to learn what brought about such an escalation of hostilities. By learning what mistakes were made, they hoped to prevent such an event again in the future. During their meetings they were able to reconstruct the events and decisions that were made in response to those events. Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara remarked in his book, *Argument without End*, “perhaps the central failure of both sides to the Vietnam conflict was a failure of empathy. Each side fundamentally misread the mindset of the other. This ‘*profound mutual ignorance*’ encouraged each side to project onto the other motivations and objectives that had little, if any, semblance to reality”. You see what happened is that the governments on each side perceived each other’s behavior in such a way that were for the most part almost completely in error and it was these assumptions that led to the death of over 58,000 Americans and 3.2 million Vietnamese.

Now it may be true that PMI (profound mutual ignorance) in your organizations may not bring about the result of millions of deaths. But because it erodes the basic fundamentals of trust, it most certainly could lead to the death of your organization. It is important to realize that trust is an important link to your organizational success. In "The Leadership Crash Course" by Paul Taffinder, he writes, "Trust elevates levels of commitment and sustains effort and performance without the need for management controls and close monitoring." To put this into a nutshell is to understand that trust between a manager and an employee is based on the perception of each party and then acted upon based on those perceptions. It should be common sense that an organization cannot succeed without there being high levels of trust between its members, but the sad reality is that most companies do little to actively build trust. The typical corporation will spend large sums of money training its managers in management and interpersonal skills, but has profound ignorance and indifference to the cultivation of trust. The employees perceive that they are being taken advantage of and consequently lose confidence in the decisions that are made by leadership. They are dictated to, not communicated with and are not made a part of the process. Their actions are a direct reflection to what they perceive which are counterproductive to what management wants to see happening. Thus management perceives the workforce to be hostile and out to take advantage of them. The end result is a continuing and destructive cycle based on PMI and leading to organizational distress.

In a study conducted by Prof. Dale Zand at New York University in 1972, the level of trust was noted as being essential to the success of the organization.

Professor Zand says, "Apparently in low trust groups, interpersonal relationships interfere with and distort perceptions of the problem. Energy and creativity are diverted from finding comprehensive, realistic solutions, and members use the problem as an instrument to minimize their vulnerability. In contrast, in high trust groups there is less socially generated uncertainty and problems are solved more effectively." One can then conclude that in organizations that have high levels of trust, employees are comfortable being creative and therefore are far more productive than employees that work in organizations that have a low trust level.

The best way to overcome PMI is to first understand the definition of trust. For the purpose of this article we will define trust as *a shared belief that each party can depend on each other to achieve a common purpose*. Understand that for there to be true trust it must be mutual. If only one side is trusting, but the other side is not, then there will be conflict and each side will begin acting out of ignorance of the others intentions. Trust is something that must be earned, it does not usually come about by osmosis, and it can be easily broken making it very difficult to repair. There are certain steps to creating a safe and trusting environment.

### Non-Judgmental

Too often we tend to assess what we believe the other party is thinking when we interpret their actions. If we are coming from a mindset of low trust, then we will naturally assume that their actions are not in our best interest and we will view it as a potential lose/win outcome and act in a defensive manner. The opposite is also true. If we come from a mindset of high trust, then we will assume that their actions are in favor of a win/win outcome and we will act accordingly to that scenario.

The best way to avoid PMI is to not judge the actions or the intentions of the other party. However; what we do need to do is to evaluate the action itself and decide whether the outcome of the action is in our best interest. The other party simply out of ignorance, not premeditated maliciousness, may do something that may not necessarily lead to a mutually beneficial outcome. It is far easier to point the finger and accuse someone else of not playing fair. We also tend to feel good when we do that. It gives us a feeling of superiority and satisfaction that we are on the top of our game and no one is going to get away with taking advantage of us. We can then justify in our minds that if the other side has the intention of being dishonest, as we believe them to have, we have every right to act in a way that will allow us to take advantage of them.

When we evaluate the action and make decisions based on the potential outcomes of that action, we leave all the emotional baggage behind. The action itself is not threatening. It is simply an impassive thought process that can be accepted or rejected on its qualities alone. It is our emotions that tend to get us in

trouble. Getting mad at a potential action is like kicking your car because it has a flat tire or whacking your computer because it isn't running properly. An action has no thought process and therefore can be dealt with accordingly. By dealing with the action and not judging its creator you imply that you trust them to make decisions based upon achieving a common purpose. The outcome, not the person, becomes the dispute.

### Meaning

We have all heard the expression '*read between the lines*'. If we read too much into it we can often find ourselves in a vat of hot water. Many times when we are dealing with a low trust situation we do have to listen for more than what we hear in the content of the message. People with low trust often tend to play verbal word games and drop hints about certain things they want to convey, but afraid to openly reveal.

A good example of this is an employee that comes to their manager in regards to a project that they have been assigned. As they talk about some of the parameters of the project they may say things like "this project is bigger than I thought" or "the deadline to complete this is really coming up fast". On the surface these seem to be nothing more than mere comments. However, listening for *meaning* is *hearing* the deeper meaning, unspoken needs, feelings, and fears. What the employee is really trying to convey is that they feel they may not be able to handle a project of this magnitude or they feel that there isn't enough time to complete it.

You need to listen to the message that is being communicated for any verbal hints that you can pick up on that may be of significance. Then you need to probe with specific questions to bring out any unspoken concerns. This shows a genuine interest in what the employee is really saying and reveals a desire to communicate openly in search of a win/win outcome. Such actions help the employee feel comfortable sharing their concerns without fear of being judged and a relationship of trust begins to take hold allowing the employee to feel safe in expressing their concerns in the future without playing verbal tag.

### Involvement

Have you ever communicated to another individual that was in front of you but you couldn't figure out if they were really listening to what you were saying? Involvement means that we are more than just passive receivers of communication but that we have to convey that we are listening, receiving, and processing the information that is being relayed to us. This can only be accomplished through active listening skills.

Using positive attending skills or the SOFTEN method is an excellent way to let the communicator know you are listening and 'with them'.

Smile. Your facial reactions can invite or discourage someone to talk.

Open posture. Keep your body language open. This means don't cross your arms. Often times the communicator gets the message by this gesture that you are not inviting conversation. This particular gesture can make or break a communication opportunity.

Forward lean. By leaning forward you are indicating that you are genuinely interested in what the speaker has to say and you want to build a closer bond with them.

Tone. The sound of your voice and the tone that you use can show that you are listening. Using verbal cues such as "hmm", "really?", and "interesting" demonstrate that you are present in the conversation.

Eye communication – When you make eye contact it helps the communicator to feel safe. You don't want to stare them down, but by using soft eye contact, where you drop your eyes occasionally as if in reflection and then bring them back to contact, puts the speaker at ease.

Nod. A simple nod of the head shows acknowledgement that you are hearing what the communicator is sharing.

Using active listening skills involves you in the communication process and invites the communicator to trust you. If a safe and trusting environment is not established at the start of a dialog, then all the information may not be shared and actions taken may be based on incomplete data. This in turn can lead to miscommunication and organizational distrust due to PMI.

### Response

We are additionally able to impart our understanding of what the speaker is trying to communicate, at the same time create a safe and trusting environment through our responses. We do this in a number of ways.

Inviting. We need to communicate to the people around us that we want to develop a safe and trusting environment. The best way to do that is to invite them to enter into dialog with us that will promote that type of environment. The most accurate way to exchange ideas is through open and honest communication. To advance that cause, we invite others to participate in such a manner by being open and honest ourselves. If we step out and trust by making ourselves vulnerable it will open the opportunity for those that we communicate with to open up themselves.

Clarifying. Rather than take the risk of misunderstanding the communication or the actions of an individual or group of individuals, meaning the organization, we need to ask questions to clarify. We want them to expand upon their opinions or fill in any missing data that we do not have to make a correct interpretation. Why take the risk of misunderstanding something when we can go straight to the source and ask them to elucidate their position. We tend to make mistakes when we bring our emotions into the picture and try to decipher a particular comment or action.

Priming. Sometimes the other party is not open to communicating their position. Many times this is because they do not feel safe doing so. By making a statement that represents our 'best guess' about what they are feeling or thinking can help them open up. When we do this we want to make sure that we are not responding in a challenging or aggressive style. But it must be done in a gentle and non-accusatory manner. We must also use the 'I' language and avoid the 'you' language as much as possible. Take responsibility for how you are feeling toward what you perceive them to be thinking.

Reflecting. By rephrasing back what we hear them say in our own words, helps to clarify their point and avoid any sort of misinterpretation. This gives them the opportunity to correct you when they see that they have been misunderstood. It allows you to own the interpretation in your own mind and respond to it in a clear and concise manner. The other benefit is it exhibits to the other individual that you have taken the time to listen and absorb and make sure the response that you give back is going to be accurate.

Summarizing. Once all the information has been laid out on the table and decisive action has been agreed up, it is important to bring closure by reviewing all of the main points, action steps, and responsibility. In this way we make sure that nothing falls through the cracks and everybody understands what is happening and who is responsible for what. It is also advisable to summarize this in writing and make sure everyone involved has a copy.

### Case Study

A friend of mine, whom I'll call Stanley, served as a volunteer on a program committee for a local professional association. He was in charge of a particular month's program meaning he would coordinate with the selected speaker and the association to make sure that everything that was needed to market and conduct the meeting was received and implemented. About 45 days before the actual event, he received an e-mail from the Program Committee Chair who we will call Julie. Here is a portion of it that I would like to study.

*"Frankly, this entire situation has been very frustrating for me. You*

*are the expert on this subject and the lead for this program, and that position entails certain responsibilities that you have not been fulfilling. Doing the extra work and research myself has been difficult and beyond what I would normally deal with. I am also concerned about the lack of communication and the lack of the sense of urgency on your part. We are aware that you travel, but when you joined the committee, you assured us that communicating would not present a problem. To date, however, that has not been the case.”*

As you read this portion of the e-mail do you feel that there is the feeling of a safe and trusting environment for the receiver? Here are some points of PMI that is cause for an environment of distrust.

1. Stanley was given no exact dates for completion of certain responsibilities so he did not feel any specific urgency. Because Julie was not seeing any progress, she assumed that nothing was being done. Because of this Stanley points the finger at Julie and says it is her fault for not setting specific goals and completion dates.
2. Stanley was playing phone tag with the program speaker and there was some difficulty in corresponding with her by e-mail. Because Julie was not receiving needed information from Stanley, she was making phone calls and gathering information that Stanley was suppose to be doing. Stanley becomes angry that Julie is duplicating his efforts and confusing things even further.
3. Stanley wasn't communicating because he saw no need to at the current time. Julie felt that the lack of communication was a sign of irresponsibility and a lack of urgency. Stanley wants to know what Julie expected of him and why she never made that clear.

Bottom line is that these two individuals will probably never work together again. Julie doesn't trust Stanley to get the job done and Stanley feels he cannot rely on Julie to adequately make her expectations clear. Thus you have through *profound mutual ignorance* (PMI), miscommunication, mistrust, and frustration.

### Summary

In organizations today across the country there is a sense of apprehension. People are concerned about job security because they believe that the only thing corporations are concerned about is the bottom line. Because of this they have demanded more and are willing to give less. Corporations on the other hand have done little to boost employee trust. They hide the fact that there is going to be downsizing, large bonuses are paid to upper management, and jobs are outsourced out of the country.

It is only through deliberate and open communication that trust can ever be rebuilt. Each side needs to have a full understanding of what each is thinking and

how they feel about what is happening. For most organizations, they will need to bring in a third party to facilitate the healing process. Paradigms are too strong and emotions run too deep. But there is hope. The organization that decides that its people are its most valuable asset will be able to make the turn and survive. That's when PMI, *profound mutual ignorance*, turns into PMC...***profound mutual commitment!***

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