

# Maximize

YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL



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## The Credibility Cash Account

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### A Reflective Learning Activity

What does it mean to have credibility? Consider the following story...

Imagine you're on a service-related trip in a third-world country. The goal of your project is to drill wells in remote villages to provide people with access to clean, safe water. There are also a small number of people in your party who will be providing free medical services to the villagers you meet.

All is going well on the trip until day three—when you suddenly develop a sharp, shooting pain in your stomach. The pain is intense and...well...scary, so you quickly seek out assistance from the small medical team in your workgroup. After a quick examination, the team determines you're suffering from appendicitis. Given the intensity of your agony, they determine your appendix is about to rupture. Simply put, you could die. Because of your remote location, your only option is to have a member of the medical team perform an emergency surgery. You have three choices:

#### Option #1: Ricky

Ricky is a first year-medical student. You like Ricky. He's been easy to talk to, and you admire what you've learned about him. He came from a poor family and has paid for his own education through scholarships and summer jobs. He is on this trip because he feels compelled to serve others since—as he puts it—so many people have served him over the years. Ricky has knowledge of your condition and has observed the type of surgery you need. He has never performed it though...

#### Option #2: Dr. Daleedo

Dr. Daleedo is a plastic surgeon. You're not really that crazy about Dr. Daleedo. You've found that he's loud and obnoxious and tends to make jokes at other people's expense. He also seems like a bit of a gossip. He's practiced medicine for 10 years and is very skilled with a scalpel. The only surgeries he's ever performed, though, have been of the "nip and tuck" variety.

#### Option #3: Dr. Esperanza

You've been intrigued by Dr. Esperanza since you met her three days ago. She is what you would call a "class act." She is well-spoken, kind, and considerate. Because she is so down-to-earth and humble, you were amazed yesterday when you learned from someone else on the trip that Dr. Esperanza is a board-certified and highly regarded gastroenterologist. As it turns out, she has performed abdominal surgeries for the past 20 years.

Given this situation and these options, whom would you choose to perform life-saving surgery on you? I'm guessing you would choose Dr. Esperanza. After all, she has the exact expertise you need in this moment. You also admire her personal characteristics—the way she interacts with you and the way she carries herself.

Another way to explain Dr. Esperanza as your top choice is to say she is “the most *credible* option.” *Credibility* is the beautiful combination of great competence *and* great character. When you review the three medical experts through the lens of credibility, it’s easy to see why Dr. Esperanza rises to the top:

- Ricky does not have enough competence to perform your surgery. You do trust his character though
- Dr. Daleeto has surgical competence but not the type you need. His personal characteristics also make you uncomfortable
- Only Dr. Esperanza is the complete picture of credibility. She has excellent competence in the surgery you need. She also has admirable character. The mixture of her skills and personal qualities are what lead you to trust her the most

When it comes to your profession, how can you develop your *own* credibility in the workplace? In this activity, we’ll review specific behaviors that will help you build trust and be more effective as a leader. We’ll also explore these trust-building behaviors through a case study I call “The Credibility Cash Account.” Then we’ll conclude with some question for you to consider individually or with your colleagues.

Here are five keys to improve your workplace credibility.

### 1. **Be good at what you do.**

Abraham Lincoln once stated, “Whatever you are, be a good one.” What does quality work look like in your profession? Are you achieving those standards? Is the work you’re doing meeting or exceeding the expectations of those you serve? Do your colleagues and customers see you as a great resource? Basically, are you a professional who gets great results? In order for people to trust your input and direction as a leader, they will need to respect your work.

Being good at what you do also means having an improvement mindset. The best professionals don’t rest on their laurels. They seek out opportunities to get even better. They pursue feedback from others through informal means and even formal systems. They see feedback—even tough feedback—as a gift because they know it will drive them to learn more, improve their skills, and develop new capabilities. So be a model of professional growth for your team members.

### 2. **Cultivate your communications.**

How well we communicate with others has a direct impact on our credibility. Great communicators will always be seen as more trustworthy than those who lack this skillset. Here are a few questions to ask yourself about your communication skills:

- **Am I a good listener?**

While many people first think of speaking and writing when it comes to communicating, the best communicators recognize that *listening* is where great communications start. Do you assume you have all of the right answers or do you start conversations with questions and an open mind? Do you engage in more monologues or more constructive *dialogues*? Leadership author, Stephen Covey, describes the art of listening as “seek first to understand and then be understood.”

- **Are my communications easy to follow and transparent?**

When you speak or write, do so in a straightforward manner that anyone can understand. A great teacher once taught me to think of my message as a cookie jar. If I put my cookie jar on the top shelf, only tall people can reach it. If I put it on a lower shelf, everyone will have the chance to enjoy my cookies. Long story short: Communicate to be clear—not to sound smart. If you convey information in a verbose manner or in a way that only a select few people will understand, your message will get lost.

When it comes to communicating, operate by a “no mysteries” philosophy. In other words, be forthright and don’t make people have to guess your meaning or question your honesty. Build a reputation as someone who is open, authentic, and truthful. The people you work with want clear expectations, and they also want to

know where they stand. Don't disappoint them with fuzzy direction, empty praise, spinning, minced words, and hidden agendas.

- **Are my communications fair?**

Make no mistake. Being a clear communicator doesn't give us the license to be harsh. There is certainly a big difference between being direct and being despicable. As leaders, it is important that we uphold the standards we value and communicate our ideas, expectations, and feedback in a way that is productive and civil. When faced with a difficult conversation, such as having to give tough feedback or hold an employee accountable for poor performance, ask yourself, "How can I communicate in a way that gets an A+ for honesty for an A+ for being respectful? How can I ensure that all parties walk away with their dignity intact?"

### 3. **Consistently follow-through and follow-up**

One of the most popular quotes from *Forrest Gump* is "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get." When it comes to being a leader, don't be a box of chocolates! Perform in a consistent manner, so people know *exactly* what they're going to get. Just like building endurance in running requires routine workouts, building credibility requires consistent performance. If you take on a responsible number of commitments and consistently keep your word, people will learn to trust you. They will take comfort in the steadiness you provide.

A surefire way to diminish your credibility is to be all over the map in terms of your performance. If you're up on Monday, down on Tuesday, absent on Wednesday, lost on Thursday, and fine on Friday, people will grow weary of your performance gyrations and lose faith in you. When we take our responsibilities seriously, hold ourselves accountable, and discipline ourselves to achieve regular success, we build a foundation on which trust can be built. We also put ourselves in a better position to be consistent in holding *others* accountable.

### 4. **Be courageous.**

Credible leadership takes more than smarts—it takes courage. John Wayne once said, "Courage is being scared to death—but saddling up anyway." In our work as leaders, we will often find ourselves in situations that make us uncomfortable—or in worst-case scenarios, downright terrified.

Maybe you need to stand up for someone who is being mistreated, give a presentation to a hostile audience, redirect an employee who is off track or out of line, deal with a difficult customer, make an unpopular decision for the greater good, or ask for forgiveness when you've done something wrong. All of these types of situations are scary, but to be a leader others will trust and follow, you must be willing to confront tough realities directly and allow them to strengthen you. As Eleanor Roosevelt put it, "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'"

Being courageous also means having the strength to trust others—even when risk is involved. When it comes to delegating work, for example, your natural inclination might be to think, "This person can't do the job as well as I can. I should really do this myself." This is a dangerous way to work since you certainly can't take on everything alone. If you find yourself in this situation, start small. Look for opportunities for your colleague to build his or her *own* credibility with assignments that carry less risk. As your employee racks up small victories, extend even greater trust. If you manage and coach this person well over time, you'll eventually be able to assign that bigger and riskier project, and it won't be quite as scary.

### 5. **Show you care.**

If you want people to believe in you and believe in the mission of your organization, they will need to see that you care about them. They will need to have experiences with you that show they are not just numbers or resources for getting work done. They will need to know that you value them as employees and as people.

The simplest way to show you care is to make time for people and show them respect. Sadly, many leaders fail in this regard. A 2015 Interact/Harris Poll of 1000 workers reveals the following:

- 52% of employees reported that leaders don't have time to meet with them
- 51% stated that leaders refuse to talk to subordinates
- 36% of workers relayed that leaders don't know employees' names
- 23% reported that leaders never express interest in employees' lives outside of work

How can you avoid becoming one of these disappointing statistics? One strategy is to hold regular check-in meetings with each of your direct reports. Depending on the size of your team, you might choose to do these weekly, bi-weekly, or once a month. The duration can be 15 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour, or even longer depending on your capacity and what needs to be discussed. These types of meetings show employees that they (and the things they are working on) are a priority to you—that every person and role is worthy of your respect and attention. These types of meetings are also a chance for small talk and getting to know about employees' lives outside of the office.

When interacting with your employees, freely acknowledge their contributions, and do it in a way that shows you notice the details of their work. Rather than a simple “thank you,” explain from your perspective why you think their work matters and make your praises specific. Even a simple email or note expressing why you value a colleague can go a long way.

Employees also want to know that you will honor them even when they're not present. This includes not talking about them behind their backs and being able to keep confidences. A technique for navigating those situations in which you really will need to talk about someone who isn't present is to imagine the person being in the room with you. As for keeping a confidence, this is foundational to any healthy relationship, so remember: If you can't keep a secret, you won't keep many employees or friends. Assume most things are confidential, and when in doubt, be sure to clarify with your team member.

Leaders who show genuine care and concern for their colleagues—by making time for them, getting to know them as people, praising their contributions, and showing loyalty to them—will develop much more productive and meaningful relationships at work. Employees who feel respected and valued are much more likely to show a deep commitment to an organization and hold themselves to a high standard.

To recap, here are my top-five ways to build workplace credibility:

1. Be good at what you do
2. Cultivate your communications
3. Consistently follow through and follow up
4. Be courageous
5. Show you care

Leadership author John C. Maxwell describes developing trust as earning and spending pocket change. In a sense, we all have a certain amount of “credibility cash” to our names. Our conduct and decisions will grow or deplete the account over time.

Maxwell states: “Each time you make a good leadership decision, it puts change into your pocket. Each time you make a poor one, you have to pay out some of your change to the people. Every leader has a certain amount of change in his pocket when he starts in a new leadership position. From then on, he either builds up his change or pays it out...When you're out of change, you're out as a leader.”

Let's examine the concept of a credibility cash account through a case study. What you're about to read is a fictional narrative about a new manager named Leah Stone. As you review her story, consider what Leah does to demonstrate competence and character. On the flipside, what does she do to *undermine* her competence and

character?

### Case Study

Leah Stone is a new manager for a news and communications office at a major university. Leah and her team of four direct reports maintain several websites across campus, put out a monthly e-newsletter focusing on leadership and technology topics, and also produce regular videos to support change management efforts for various departments.

Leah has now been on the job for six months and has gotten to know her direct reports reasonably well. Her team has a long-standing reputation as an organization that delivers on their stated deadlines and produces high-quality communications.

Leah's most experienced team member is Brock, who has been with the team for over 6 years. Leah has learned that Brock communicates in a very direct style and can be abrasive when he disagrees with a teammate. Despite Brock's years of experience and his apparent confidence in his views, Leah has found that his skills are not as sharp as others on the team. His writing, in particular, is at a much lower standard than she would expect for someone in a communications role.

To help ensure that the team puts out high-quality writing in their monthly newsletter, Leah has communicated to her direct reports that all articles must be proofed by a "feedback partner" and receive final approval from her at least two business days before final publication. Things were going well with this system until a couple of months ago. While all other team members turned in their proofed work on time, Brock turned in his articles a couple hours before the final launch without any proofing from a partner. Leah found various glaring errors that she needed to correct (including misspellings of people's names and titles). She had to scramble to get the e-newsletter published according to their advertised release. She was extremely frustrated that this happened but decided not to address it. She figured this was a one-time thing.

"Everyone has been really busy with our current video project," she thought, "so I can understand if people were pressed for time with the articles. It's better that I stay positive and show the team that I'm cool under pressure." However this past month, Brock's performance was even worse. Leah noticed Brock routinely leaving work 20-25 minutes early without any explanation. It was well understood on the team that working hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. She had discussed this directly with each team member during her first one-on-one meetings. Brock's most visible violation of this rule happened a couple of weeks ago. Leah needed to call an emergency meeting at the very end of the day. She assembled the group in the conference room at 4:40 p.m., but Brock was already gone for the day.

Leah made her displeasure known: "Well, I guess Brock has better things to do than stay at work until 5:00 like the rest of us, huh?" Brock's writing assignments for this month once again came in right before the launch riddled with errors. Leah had to stay late that evening to edit his writing. With butterflies in her stomach, she clicked the Publish button. "Gosh, I hope I caught all of his mistakes," she thought to herself." It was 6:30 p.m.

The next morning Brock was not in the office. Leah's supervisor stopped by her cubicle: "Hey, I noticed the newsletter went out after hours last night. What happened?"

Leah made sure to respond in a volume loud enough for her team to hear: "Well, I won't beat around the bush! Brock's articles came in late again, and they were a total mess! So I needed to stay late to make sure they were right. I'm disappointed this happened too, and I'm going to make sure it doesn't happen again." Leah's manager gave her a look that said, "Let's talk later," and then headed to his office.

Enough was enough. Leah decided it was time to address the issues directly. Leah crafted a strongly worded email reiterating the importance of the feedback partner system and the expectation that everyone work until 5:00 each night. As Leah proofread her email, she couldn't help but think, "Man, I wish Brock was a skilled communicator like I am." Then with a loud click of her mouse, Leah sent the message to her entire team.

### Here are some questions to consider:

1. When our story begins, Leah Stone has a certain amount of “money” in her credibility cash account. What are some of Leah’s behaviors that build up her credibility?
2. What are her behaviors that diminish her credibility cash account?
3. And finally, what are some things Leah could have done to better manage this situation and build greater credibility in the eyes of her team?

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