

A World Class Future Built on Trust

Steve Wray 23 January 2013

This year's Leadership Exchange took place in the shadow of distrust – cast not by participants, but by the thousands of Americans gathering under the banner of Occupy Wall Street. Even as we rode the elevators to the conference rooms atop Three Logan Square, protesters in cities large and small were preparing to spend another day delivering a message: "We don't trust our leaders anymore."

So it was no surprise that an attendee asked Doug Conant what he thought of the Occupy movement. The man who saved the Campbell Soup Company replied that there's only one way to restore trust: earn it.

"There's a lot of stress, and it's not surprising that there's a lot of civil unrest," said Conant, who in the span of three days of speaking visits was confronted by Occupy Washington, Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Philadelphia. "The corporate world's story is probably not as well told as it needs to be. But that's a cop-out. We have to do better. It has to be unmistakable. Our commitment to the community has to overwhelm the populace. What we're doing is insufficient."

It was a response that fit directly with his keynote speech to the Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange that morning. To turn Campbell Soup around – to make it a world-class company, delivering a world-class product on a world-class timetable – Conant had to start by winning the trust of his employees. He had to prove that he was as committed to them and their communities as he was to the health of the company. He had to demonstrate his will to hold every worker – from executives to labor, from top to bottom -- to the same high standard, while treating each person with an equal level of compassion.

The result was a major shakeup and world-class results. The company is now healthy. The bonds between the workforce, management and the community are strong. Stakeholders and employees have found a common purpose, and Conant feels his strategy has been validated.

“We want to win in the workplace,” Conant explained. “We want to create a workplace where people are highly engaged in the work. As they lean into their work, we find we’re able to win in the marketplace. As we win in the marketplace, we find we’re able to contribute more to our communities.”

So what’s the lesson for Greater Philadelphia’s leaders?

The lesson is to embrace this cycle: world class results depend on collaboration; collaboration depends on trust;

trust is built when we commit to, and deliver, results that matter to our partners.

Trust in Action

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Throughout the Exchange, whether the topic was mergers, policy reform, or organizational leadership, we returned to trust as the essential precondition for successful collaboration. Where it isn't present, it has to be built.

Take the merger of Philadelphia Futures and White-Williams Scholars, for example. Its logic was obvious: the two scholarship organizations shared much in the way of mission and vision. But the merger was possible only after a long, careful exercise of trust-building that started with frank conversations between leaders and ended with a highly detailed due diligence process.

"You need to understand the liabilities that are coming because once you close, there is no recourse," said Philadelphia Futures' head Joan Mazzotti. "There are no shareholders to sue. We had to both be sure of each other." Even with that, Mazzotti said, the process is far from over. The two organizations have just begun to blend their day-to-day operations and learn how to deliver on the merger's promise.

David Foster, whose Greater Camden Partnership merged with the Cooper's Ferry Development Association to create the Coopers Ferry Partnership, said that it's only when those results start rolling in that everyone relaxes. "It probably wasn't until we were working together, post-merger, that we really exhaled and believed, 'This is going to be okay,'" he said.

Building trust is no less important in the for-profit sector. Robert Moul runs Boomi, a cloud computing technology company that has doubled in size since being bought by Dell. Throughout the courtship, Moul had to work hard to maintain the trust of his staff and investors – a role he didn't anticipate. "I ended up being the psychiatrist for everybody," he said. "I was like, guys, we can all make this work!"

Part of what made the deal possible was the trust Dell showed in Moul's tiny venture from the start. "We had about 40 employees, but they treated us as equals," he said. Dell trusted not only Boomi's technical expertise but also Moul's judgment about staying in Greater Philadelphia. "You have incredible universities, incredible talent, a great standard of living," said Moul, who has no plans to leave the region. "I have almost no unwanted turnover in my team. They're having kids, they're buying houses, and I feel really good about helping them do that."

Building and sustaining trust is vital for the organization that is trying to reshape itself. Conant knew that Campbell

couldn't win in the marketplace without clearly demonstrating, through tangible investments in both the workplace and the community, that the company deserved the trust of all 20,000 employees. "It's hard for me to imagine someone passionately caring about our agenda in our company if they don't feel we passionately care about their agenda in life," Conant said.

On the other side of the coin, we learned that even an organization that resists change would do well to place some trust in those with other ideas. Carmen Medina, formerly of the CIA, jokingly calls herself a "heretic," but by challenging her agency's outdated methods, she helped it tap the power of modern collaborative technology and social networks. Organizations ignore their internal critics at their peril, she said. "There's a lot of work to be done in coaching heretics to be better heretics and coaching managers to be better facilitators of the heretical impulse."

Finally, we saw that where trust has collapsed, systems become dysfunctional. "Exhibit A" is our national education system, where stakeholders at every level struggle to find common ground despite broad agreement that we must do better. "The number of colleges and [businesses] in this country that spend millions of dollars providing remediation is staggering," said Charles Kolb of the Committee for Economic Development. "We're kidding ourselves. We're kicking the can down the road, and we've got kids with high school degrees that can't do

second- and third-grade math."

And yet even in this field, the emerging bright spots of reform are created by partnerships that build and reward trust by clarifying the measures of success and each partners' responsibilities.

"Let's be honest – we've all been in partnerships, and most of them don't make much of a difference," said Jenny Bogoni of the Philadelphia Youth Network, as she described an emerging partnership methodology known as "Collective Impact." Some of its recommendations are technical – for example, effective partners must agree on a system for assessing performance and measuring success. But other essentials are as simple, and human, as a good conversation. "It's about high cell phone bills, and building trust, and going to lunch and dinner together, and being in constant communication," Bogoni said. "This is the most obvious, and easiest, and also the most difficult part."

Lessons for the Region

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The lesson from the 2011 Leadership Exchange was clear: any dynamic enterprise contains lots of potentially competing elements. Successful leaders encourage those elements to trust each other, and nothing creates trust like successful partnerships that deliver tangible,

world class results.

Whether those competing elements are labor and management, visionaries and the old guard, company and community, or Partner A and Partner B, an enterprise becomes world class only when it promotes working together toward a common goal that not only benefits them, but also meets the highest standards of the wider marketplace.

But just as clearly, no enterprise achieves that alignment with a single step. What's needed are a series of steps. Even the smallest results are worth pursuing. As these small steps add up, the bonds of trust between partners strengthen, and new goals come within reach.

Like any large enterprise, our region is full of competing elements of its own. But we share missions, networks, communities, and a common interest in regional success. Our leaders must learn to recognize the needs of our region's many stakeholders, build collaborative partnerships whose results address those needs, and then strengthen the bonds of trust that make those partnerships possible.

In other words, we must keep the virtuous cycle in motion.

And as Doug Conant emphasized, when it comes to trust, results are all that matters. Asked what companies can do to improve their image, Conant's answer was simple: "We have to do more," he said. "We have to stop whining and

start performing. To complain that we're misunderstood – the dog ate my homework – it's not enough.

"And you know what? Our employees are up for that," Conant went on. "We can do [more], and we can do it in a way that works for us and the community. We really have no choice."

Author Bio

Steve Wray is the executive director of the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia. In this capacity, he works with a board of more than 70 senior private sector leaders from the region's leading companies and institutions. Mr. Wray received an MS in Public Management and Policy from Carnegie Mellon University