

A matter of trust

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Would you employ a person as cleaner – either at home or in school – whom you believed to be a thief? Could you have as your best friend someone widely known as a chronic liar? Should you share a confidence with someone you know will repeat it (usually in an embellished form) as soon as you are out of sight? I think I would probably be certain that you would answer those questions with an emphatic no, or at best a very qualified yes. Why am I so sure? It is all a matter of trust.

Imagine your eldest child had just broken a leg, requiring urgent medical support, and your next-door neighbour and close friend knocked on the door just as the voice on the phone was advising you that there were no available ambulances, would you feel confident in leaving your other children in your neighbour's care while you rushed off to hospital? Here the answer would probably be yes – but imagine that instead of your neighbour, the person on your doorstep was a well-known town drunk looking for a handout, would you still feel comfortable to ask him to stay? I suspect not.

Again, it is a matter of trust. While you want to get help for your injured child, you also want those left at home to be safe. You would need to trust anyone you left in charge of your young children, and this feeling would be hard to sustain if you were filled with mistrust of the other party.

Trust is one of those qualities we often take for granted, until we are placed in a situation where the negative implications suddenly loom large. Confronted by a dangerous situation, you would know instinctively that unless you trusted the main participants you couldn't be sure of a safe outcome.

Most of us, for most of the time, probably lead a routine life built upon a series of shared notions that we rarely consider until our usual stability is disturbed. In our daily lives, we rarely think about virtues such as honesty, loyalty, respect for life, integrity, sobriety... the list goes on. Funnily, when attention falls on specific virtues, we might realise that we are not so confident about their universal presence as we might like. If we lose a wallet or purse, our immediate reaction these days often seems to be "I bet no-one returns it, even though my name and address are in it." So much for our traditional

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assumptions about trust; perhaps today we are more cynical than our forebears who lived together in a small tight-knit community.

In running a school, trust is certainly one quality that I would list as essential. We must trust our staff, the parents have to trust us, the children ought trust one another and their teachers, and so on. If you have ever worked in a situation where you could not trust other members of the school community, you will know what I mean. Your confidence in the smooth operation of the school would be undermined. In the #MeToo era, we are suddenly aware that many relationships we previously thought were solid are in fact quite suspect, and there are some situations where we are not sure that we can really trust anyone. We might distrust a teacher when they say they were not rude to a parent; we might distrust someone from Head Office who claims to be on our side in a potential industrial dispute; we might distrust a child who says (for the third time this week) "I didn't do it". Whatever the case, there are occasions when our internal warning system tells us to exercise extreme caution in believing what we hear.

So, is trust important?



Most of us might have to admit that over the years we have been betrayed, or at least let down, by someone whom we trusted. It might have related to a promised ice cream when we went down the street; it might have been the theft of some money from our wallet; it might have been some malicious gossip about us, started by a "good friend". Our age and our maturity will certainly impact on our reaction, but at any age it is hard to ignore the sense of being let down when a confidant turns out to be untrustworthy.

There is a lot of talk today about trust having been betrayed in different spheres of our life. Our recent Federal political history offers some very powerful arguments to the claim that trust has been destroyed, whatever our political persuasion. The Royal Commission into Institutional



Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has clearly shattered the faith of many church-going people; the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry has made us think twice about our financial position; the current Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety will probably also make many of us wonder whether anyone anywhere is safe. The fact that all these crises arose at a time when, compared to many nations, we are in a comfortable position makes them seem even more treacherous.

In answer to the question “Is trust important?”, I think we must answer yes – but what has that got to do with the sort of issues that we should be discussing in a context of improving schools? To me, it is a very relevant – indeed I would go so far

as to say, “This might be one of the most important questions facing us today.”

If we try to run a school where trust would not get a mention in a list of most desirable virtues, I think we might have missed a very important point. Put simply, we cannot educate children unless they (and through them, their parents) trust what we are doing. If parents feel that we are lazy, unprofessional or dishonest, these thoughts will seep through to their children, our pupils. If they think we do not know our subject, or that we do not treat children fairly, or that we are “only in the job for the money and the holidays” we will find it hard to get the best from their children, no matter how hard we work.

We were often told when we were growing up that a good reputation takes

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many years to develop but only minutes to lose; the same thing can be said about trustfulness. If we are known as someone who is loose with the truth, uncaring about the needs of our pupils, unfair in dealing with disciplinary issues, or guilty about playing favourites – to take just four complaints I have heard about teachers and principals – then we will look in vain for strong support among our parent body or strong performance from our students, especially the older ones.

Every year, various Think Tanks conduct surveys on the most trusted or the most well-paid of occupations, and while we miss the second of these lists, our profession usually appears in a reasonable position as regards the first. I always think this is a wonderful reflection on school teaching, but I also know that it would be better if we were right at (or near) the top of the list. After all, as educators we often spend time encouraging our students to develop that virtue, and so we should be able to give them a good example. Regardless of our placement in any particular year, however, I think it is important that we develop an overall reputation for being trustworthy. Further, we must also develop the skills that will allow us to restore trust if it is missing in our relationships.

Politicians are starting to realise the danger of being mistrusted and so are churches. Modern history shows that others who made a real effort when commissions and inquiries had revealed their weaknesses were eventually able to develop better images. It would be useful if our profession was to be proactive in such an important matter.

In the next two issues, I want to develop this topic, but meanwhile, I invite you to reflect on the varied relationships you have with your students’ parents, asking yourself if any of these relationships could be enhanced if both parties trusted each other. Also, see if you can come up with some strong suggestions about how to restore good relationships. Our lists might be quite similar.