



PSYCHOLOGY

Regaining lost trust

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Do you trust the current Federal Government? Do you trust the local bus driver? Do you trust your memory enough to undergo a quiz show? Do you trust your washing machine to handle woollens safely? Do you have any idea what trust means?

Trust is a word that gets thrown around when discussing large organisations (such as an educational system) and smaller ones (such as your school). People using the same word in the same field might have different views on its meaning – and therein lies the problem with this topic.

In the previous issue (A Matter of

Trust), I suggested you might like to consider a situation where the trust you had once enjoyed in a particular situation was now damaged, and I challenged you to consider ways to restore it. I hadn't realised just how wide a question it was until I started to seek examples of my own – and so I would probably be wise to rephrase my challenge. Let's forget about politics and transport drivers, quiz shows and washing machines – and concentrate on what we know most about. No matter how well respected your school might be, there are probably some shadows where some parents might have disagreed with a decision you implemented and they had

accordingly lost some of their positive feelings about the ways things are done at your school.

I realise many of the feelings we call 'trust' might not wear that label as clearly as others. I might trust the school to start and end during the established term times, to engage only those teachers who are qualified for their role, to take part in local sporting events and to supervise your child in class time and during breaks. However, while these are all important issues, they are probably not the major issues that constitute a 'trustable' school since they are shared by all schools. Far more important for a parent or carer is the

question of whether a child is able to feel safe in school; whether the actual values of the school are those espoused in their prospectus and newsletters; whether teachers and other staff care for and care about the needs of your children. This list could go on, but I want to examine what happens when parents or carers discover that their child's school is not delivering the goods.

When I was a child, my mother used to visit my school about once a month to work in the tuckshop and my father used to help out at occasional working bees when the playing field (actually the back paddock) needed mowing. That was about the limit of their involvement, and I doubt that they ever asked each other whether they *trusted* the school. The question would have been meaningless to them. Back then (we still used white chalk on blackboards, drank milk in small bottles delivered each day, and dipped our pens into inkwells), schools underwent only minor scrutiny – it was assumed the teachers would teach, the pupils would learn, and the time would come when we eventually closed our exercise books and went out to work.

Whether you applaud or lament the passing of those days, schools no longer escape scrutiny and today some parents take very seriously my earlier question about trust.

I suspect most Australian parents trust schools today, but what they trust them to do is unclear. Today we know a lot about the inner workings of schools, offices, shops and community services; this awareness is tested when we are approached by polling groups such as IPSOS or by an annoying voice with a mechanical tone on our phone. The actual fallibility of such surveys was clear in the recent Federal election, but their relative success means they will continue to ask questions. The limit of their inquisitiveness is boundless.

Every year, these pollsters collect, collate and publish data indicating – among other issues – how much we trust other people. They might tell us which professions (e.g., lawyers, doctors, teachers) are highly regarded, or they might group various institutions (e.g., media groups, state parliaments) and measure their performances and their adherence to truth. I don't know who studies these lists but I

enjoy them. I always check teachers' ranking but as for other groups the details are usually forgotten before I reach the bottom of the list. (I note nurses always score well and I hope they retain that position because as I grow older, my need for hospital care will increase.)

As educational leaders in schools, we might ignore the results for other groups, but it makes sense to be attuned to the esteem or otherwise with which schools are held. In particular, we need to be sensitive to local feelings about our own school even if we cannot afford professional pollsters to measure these. If one parent is unhappy with the way we allocate awards, for example, this can very quickly become a major issue for our community but the only way we hear about it is when some-

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one tells us that they were reading about the school on social media yesterday.

The old days are gone when measuring satisfaction was virtually unheard of. What has changed since my parents sent their children to school? How does news travel so fast?

The answer, as you know, is obvious: it is the ever-growing phenomenon of social media. While my parents kept their thoughts fairly enclosed in a very small group, today's parents can get instant access to thousands of willing ears – and we all know bad news travels quickly. Let us consider a scenario to see not only what happens but also how we can deal with it to minimise fallout.

Mr and Mrs Kiddlehopper have just heard that their son Wenceslaus was beaten again for the term's mathematics prize by the daughter of the Parents' Association president. This time they are not taking it lying down. Mum goes onto Facebook and complains to 'friends' that favouritism is rife at their son's school, preventing the just distribution of academic awards. Dad tweets about it with a prodigious use of hashtags; soon both are inundated with likes, retweets and reposts. The bottom line: the school soon suffers a very negative image without

anyone having taken the trouble to justify the claim. As a result several parents at the school are now asking why *their* offspring receive very few awards. To overcome this will take some very considered and time-consuming action.

Let us skip the detailed fallout and concentrate on just listing the different steps that will be needed if the damage is going to be neutralised. The first of these is for the Principal to explore the truth of the claim. This should involve careful questioning of the teacher and the family. (Be careful when dealing with the child so that you cannot be accused of bullying; it is probably best to have the parents present.)

If it turns out that the teacher is at fault, some changes will be needed and they are probably self-evident. Even though this might be painful for individuals, handled sensitively it can lead to personal and professional growth. The parents and their child would rightly expect an official apology. A wise Principal will keep an eye open for similar breeches in the future, but no teacher should be treated as though they are henceforth unreliable. The parents, meanwhile, might be counselled on better ways to effect changes in a school.

If it turns out that the charge is spurious and if this can be objectively demonstrated, the parents cannot be allowed to escape censure. The Principal (I'm afraid this sort of fault requires action from the top) must confront the offending parents and express the school's concern about the charges. Hopefully this will not necessitate the child moving to another school, but it will certainly require the parents making an apology, both to the teacher and to the school community – preferably using the same media used to spread the original statement.

On-going monitoring of the situation is advisable but should not be so obtrusive as to make either party think that they have been branded for life.

In summary, to gain a satisfactory restoration of trust, we should:

- Seriously examine the accusation
- Determine its accuracy
- Apologise where necessary and issue corrections
- Monitor future performance.

In the next issue, I would like to explore positive and negative aspects of using social media to enhance trust.