

Living the 21 Laws of Leadership

The Law of Solid Ground Trust is the Foundation of Leadership

“Important principles may and must be inflexible.”

—Abraham Lincoln

Application Guide

How do you measure trust? Use this trust test:

Tested
Reliability
Understanding
Servanthood
Time

My wife Margaret and I have been married for nearly thirty years and trust has been one of the key ingredients to the success of our relationship. We both have a deep abiding confidence that, no matter what, we will remain faithful to one another. Beyond that most basic commitment, we devote ourselves to care for and nurture each other, to look out for each others best interests and to always be completely honest with each other. This foundation has provided us a wonderful relationship over the years. A relationship that, when tested with stress or challenges, comes through with flying colors because the foundation is built on solid ground — it is built on trust.

In contrast, several friends and colleagues who have not built their relationship on unswerving trust, have lost their marriages — permanently. So much is lost — the kids suffer, and generations to come pay a price. I share this contrast, only as an example at a personal human level that we all relate to, so that you can better connect with the *Law of Solid Ground* in the leadership arena.

Let's move now to a larger scope.

The Vietnam War is a powerful example of this leadership law. Most people are surprised to learn that American support for that war was strong in the beginning, even as the number of troops being sent overseas had rapidly increased and the casualties mounted. By 1966, over 200,000 Americans had been sent to Vietnam, yet two thirds of all Americans surveyed by Louis Harris believed that Vietnam was the place where the U.S. should "stand and fight communism." And most people expressed the belief that the U.S. should stay until the fight was finished.

So what changed to cause loss of support, which transitioned into open rebellion, that created a counter culture in the 60's against the war? The *Law of Solid Ground* was broken.

Vietnam was already at war when President Kennedy and Robert McNamara, his Secretary of defense, took office in January of 1961. The Vietnam War was being handled very badly. On top of that, our leaders continued the war even after they realized that we could not win it. The worst mistake of all was that McNamara and President Johnson were not honest with the American people

about it. That broke the *Law of Solid Ground*, and it ultimately destroyed the administration's leadership.

In his book *In Retrospect*, McNamara recounts that he repeatedly minimized American losses and told only half truths about the war. For example, he says, "Upon my return to Washington [from Saigon] on December 21, [1963], I was less than candid when I reported to the press. . . I said, 'We observed the results of a very substantial increase in Vietcong activity' (true); but I then added, 'We reviewed the plans of the South Vietnamese and we have every reason to believe they will be successful' (an overstatement at best)."

In time the American people began to recognize that his words and the facts were not matching up, and trust began to disintegrate. By then, it was too late. The price tag was thousands of young American men who gave their lives for what may have began as a good and supported cause, but eroded into open rebellion and society-wide turmoil.

The era that had begun with the hope and idealism characterized by John F. Kennedy ultimately ended with the mistrust and cynicism associated with Richard Nixon. Eventually, McNamara resigned as Secretary of Defense, Johnson recognized his weakened position and did not even run for reelection, and Nixon resigned in disgrace. In the case of Nixon, Watergate was separate from Vietnam, but the broken trust, the violation of the *Law of Solid Ground* set the stage for Nixon's fall. This illustrates my opening illustration of a broken marriage effecting generations to come. It began with Kennedy and Johnson, traveled through Nixon, and the American people's distrust for politicians has continued to this day, and is still growing.

The "sins and crimes" of the past, if not confessed and dealt with, will haunt the future for decades to come.

I. Assessment

The following questions will give you insight as to how well you are living the *Law of Solid Ground*.

- A. Do people question your authority?
- B. Do people resist your desired changes?
(This is not always about trust, sometimes they just do not agree!)
- C. Are people slow to follow your lead?
- D. Do they "open up" easily to you with personal information?
- E. Are you committed to never breaking a promise . . . with anyone?
- F. What are you intentionally doing to cultivate trust?

- G. Are you able to maintain long-term close relationships?
- H. Are you steadfast about telling the truth?
- I. What are the names of 10 people who, if asked, would name you among the top ten people in their life who exemplify character (integrity) or trustworthiness.
- J. Do you have any significant regrets from the last 12 months? If so, are any related to character or trust.

II. Application

★ The interesting thing about the Law of Solid Ground is that what develops (trust) is generally unseen, and the effects are not often dramatic. You see, trust is a lifestyle, that over the long haul reveals the true value of uncompromised character. In contrast, however, break the Law of Solid Ground, and everyone knows it immediately in a big way! What may not be a big issue, is a national scandal. Unfair? So it is in the world of leadership where the standards are — and should be, — higher.

A. Building trust

Trust is an issue of character that is based on trustworthiness. It is essential to develop and maintain your character in order to build and maintain trust.

10 hallmarks of character that build trust:

Rate yourself on the scale of 1-10. 1=poor; 10=strong
Read the comments under each hallmark before scoring yourself.
Have someone else rate you also.

1. Honesty: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

This is not simply the absence of lying, but a commitment to tell the truth. Honesty is one of the many non-negotiable virtues of your character that produces trust. Be dishonest once, people will approach you tentatively, be dishonest twice and people will pull their support, be dishonest a third time and the people will revolt against you. Shakespeare said, "No legacy is so rich as honesty." And the reverse is also true, there is no disgrace worse than deceit.

2. Discipline: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

★ **Aristotle said: "We are what we repeatedly do. Discipline then is not an act, its a habit." Leaders who are trusted are not people who lead by what they feel, or what mood they are in. They lead out of discipline by choosing to do the right thing day in, day out.**

Self-control is a key element of discipline. If we do not have self-control in the small things of life, we will not have self-control in the larger more important things of life. What does self-control at the dessert buffet have to do with trust within your company, church or American government? Plenty . . . for the quality inside you that produces self-control does not recognize size — you either have it or you do not.

3. Humility: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Arrogance never wins anyone to your side. Pride pushes people away from you and an independent attitude burns bridges that ultimately destroy the very endeavor or alliance you wish to develop. **Humility is most simply the recognition that you do not know everything, and that you are not better than other people. No matter how gifted and talented or powerful you are, you have bad breath in the morning just like everyone else.** Remember this, and you will do well.

4. Good Motives: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

★ **I use the word good, rather than pure because the hallmark of a motive is not about perfection — something none of us can achieve. It is about doing your dead level best to put the best interest of others before your own interests and desires. It is about your honest and sincere intent, not a flawless life. Set your heart on the good of the people, and you will do well.**

5. Integrity: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

This is one of most talked about and studied, yet not lived of the ten hallmarks. **Integrity is doing what you say you will do.** Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching. Integrity is honesty and motive in motion.

6. Courage: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The *Law of Solid Ground* is profoundly affected by the character hallmark of courage. **Plainly put, if a leader is fearful, the people will be concerned that he/she will, under pressure, compromise their security by selling out on core values and convictions.**

7. Work Ethic: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

★ **Leadership is not about perks and privileges but it is about responsibility and results.** Leaders are accountable to get things done and that requires work. Hard work and long hours. If the people you are responsible for believe they work harder than you do, or that you candidly do not put forth passionate effort, trust will begin to deteriorate.

8. Compassion: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I have said many times that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. People do not care how good you are unless they believe it will benefit them in some way. Caring and compassion for people is essential to trust. The compassion must be expressed. It is not enough for you to think to yourself, or say to key colleagues that you care about the people, you must show them that you care.

9. Commitment: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Leadership is influence and that requires trust. As a leader, you call people to commitment, but the people will never be more committed than you are. **Your personal commitment is the bar for their commitment.** Your passion and zeal for the project or the mission will set the tone for everyone under your responsibility's commitment level.

10. Consistency: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Consistency is a core component of trust. Erratic behavior breaks down trust. Mood swings, lack of continuity, emotional outbursts, unpredictable personal and professional patterns, and broken promises are examples of inconsistencies that destroy trust. Your character is left with a scar and your leadership suffers greatly.

★ **People need to be able to depend on their leaders, particularly in a day and age where change is so rapid and so significant.**

Well, how did you do? Remember this is not about perfection, but progress in developing your character so trust can remain intact.

★ **The following practical principles will help you in developing your character, so you may strengthen the trust between you and the people you lead.**

1. Extend trust to _____.

If you do not trust others, they will not trust you. The tough thing is that you, as the leader, must trust them first.

2. Make yourself _____.

As your authority, responsibilities and power increase, make sure that your character does not decrease. One of the best ways to do this is through the accountability of a small group of people close to you who know you and care about you. There are two ingredients for successful accountability, first, you must give them permission to be candid with you, and second; you must be completely honest with them.

3. Be _____, _____, and _____ to admit your mistakes.

Without this kind of transparency you cannot win the people's trust. There are obviously times where discretion is needed, but normally, you need to be an open book. I have discovered that if you "open the door", people are not nearly as interested in breaking it down!

B. Repairing trust.

1. _____.

★ ***If you have broken a trust, admit it immediately.*** Delay of "confession" only complicates things. The difference between a "human error" and a "huge conspiracy" is often a confession of truth — before the issue is discovered.

2. _____.

Depending upon the circumstances asking for forgiveness may take the form of literal forgiveness or perhaps as simple as an apology. Whatever the scenario, this is essential.

3. _____.

Ownership rather than blame is the mark of a leader. Non-leaders say "it is not my fault", or worse, lay the blame at the feet of others. Buck passing forfeits leadership and damages relationships by ruining trust.

4. _____ the _____.

No matter what the consequences, as little as embarrassment or something severe like a resignation, face the consequences with dignity. Avoiding consequences only lessens the strength of your character.

5. _____.

It is never too late. "Starting again" may seem over-stated if the issue was relatively

minor, but many times there will be significant impacts that require courage and determination to keep going. Get up, knock the dust off your "knees", and swing the bat again!

III. Action Assignment

- A. Invest a couple hours in answering the 10 questions in the assessment section.

Some of the questions appear to be simple yes or no questions, but take the time to think through the "why" behind each answer. Write out thoughtful answers. If you are not happy with some of your honest answers, reflect on:

1. The cause
2. The cure
3. The commitment to improve

- B. Evaluate yourself according to the 10 hallmarks of character.

Choose 1-3 to focus on in the next 30 days. Write out two or three sentences about what you will do to improve in your chosen areas.

- C. Gather together a small and trusted group of friends and or colleagues to keep each other accountable to the key values in your life.