

**PATHFINDER:** Lt. Col. Pete Kilner, USA (Ret)

## Four Factors Make a Trusted Leader

I've noticed the best leaders enjoy the trust of their subordinates, peers, and superiors. However, I haven't always understood how they earn and maintain that trust.

Some years ago, I came across a simple framework that empowers me to think more intentionally about trust. The framework proposes a person's trustworthiness is a function of four factors: **honesty, reliability, competence, and compassion.**

Knowing these four factors helps me understand why I trust some people more than others. Reflecting on "the big four" also informs and guides my own efforts to become a more trusted leader.

**Honesty.** It is the foundation of trust. Lies are catastrophic "trust-breakers" of relationships. No one trusts a liar.

Honesty, however, is much more than simply not telling lies. Truly honest people are careful never to deceive others or allow others to be deceived. They do not quibble, equivocate, or engage in half truths. Instead, they treat others with a deep respect marked by truthfulness and transparency of motives.

**Reliability.** This is more closely related to honesty than I'd ever realized. Honesty and reliability are two sides of the same coin. Honesty is saying what you do; reliability is doing what you say.

Reliability is sometimes

viewed as a boring virtue, which is unfair.

In practice, reliability requires a courageous faithfulness to commitments and a strong determination to overcome obstacles and never quit.

Honesty and reliability are important to building trust in all relationships.

Competence and compassion are especially important trustworthiness factors for leaders.

**Competence.** This is the ability to accomplish one's responsibilities, and it's a function of knowledge, skills, attitudes, relationships, and practical judgment.

We can trust less-than-competent subordinates; after all, it's our responsibility to train them. But it's very difficult to trust an incompetent boss, es-

pecially in a profession where a leader's incompetence can put subordinates' lives at risk.

**Compassion.** This is often overlooked as a factor of trust.

Compassionate leaders recognize and respond to their subordinates' humanity.

Due to the natural power differential between leaders and subordinates, subordinates feel vulnerable and often won't give fully of themselves to the unit's mission unless they know their leaders care for them. Compassion breaks down those barriers and builds trust.

Trust is both the foundation and the fruit of healthy relationships and effective organizations. One way to build trust is to focus on being honest, reliable, competent, and compassionate. ■■■



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