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LOL Journal - Treat Trust Issues like Kitchen Fires

You're in the kitchen, dinner is being prepared, and a grease fire erupts on the stove. What do you do?

- A. Look disgusted, point a finger at the nearest person, saying, "It's their fault."
- B. Remain calm, find a note pad, write down, "To Do's: put out kitchen fire."
- C. Ignore it and continue chopping onions.
- D. Jump into action, alert everyone, put out the fire! (Note: NOT with water.)

Too many teams treat trust issues like A, B, or C above. Big mistake. Trust is core to team effectiveness. For sure, if trust is damaged, team performance will decline. For this reason, we suggest that you treat trust issues as you would a kitchen fire. In other words, answer D above. Jump into action and put it out immediately. You know that any delay could mean a larger fire and possibly injury and severe damage to your home.

Unfortunately, too many teams ignore trust fires. They rationalize that things will get better over time. Time heals all wounds, right? Wrong. FCG has seen this mistake time and again. Recently we worked with a senior team that wanted us to deliver a training seminar on trust with their managing directors. In the course of planning this work, we asked, "How is trust at the senior level? That is, with YOU guys." The response was an embarrassed silence and awkward glances. FCG suggested that any serious training in trust has to start at the top. The response was, "We tried that but it didn't go so well." No action was taken.

Within a month of that discussion, the CEO had jumped to another firm. Chalk up another point for "lousy succession." In the weeks that followed several talented professionals left the firm, and the exodus continues. Morale is sinking. We have countless stories like this. And they all hinge on broken trust at the senior level.

The antidote is immediate corrective action when trust is damaged. Again, put the fire out as soon as you spot it. **Trust Issues = Kitchen Fires**. Burn that one into your memory bank. Same way that kids learn, **Stop, Drop and Roll**.

So, what are the signs that a Trust Fire has started? John Gottman is a world renowned expert on trust and relationships. He has studied them extensively and come up with what he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.¹ Here are the signs of a Trust Fire and the remedies for each:

¹ For a short, excellent video from Gottman on trust, watch this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgWnadSi91s>

Apocalypse Level	Symptoms	Remedies
1) Criticism	Attacking a colleague’s personality or character, with the intent of making them wrong. Generalizations like: “You always” and “You never”	Learn to state specific concerns and requests with “I” statements: “When X happens, I react with Y and I want you to Z.” In other words don’t make it about them, with “You” statements.
2) Contempt	Attacking a colleague’s sense of self with the intention to insult or abuse. Name calling, hostile humor, eye-rolling.	Treat all team members with respect and appreciation. Listen deeply and show you understand their position. Assume good intent on their part.
3) Defensiveness	Seeing yourself as a victim, warding off a perceived attack. Making excuses, attacking back, yes-butting, whining.	Take responsibility. Get curious. What can I learn from this? Notice the stories you make up and practice letting them go. Or testing them out. (Are they accurate?)
4) Stonewalling	Withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. Appearing neutral but actually disapproving and showing contempt. Stony silence, avoiding the other person.	Break away and take a 20 minute time-out. Then when you are calm, return to the conversation and practice listening, respect, and appreciation.

Gottman has shown that the 4 levels of distrust are predictable in relationships that are heading “South.” So, just as the kitchen fire will predictably spread and cause great damage, so will the trust fire. Don’t make the mistake of assuming that things will “just get better.” Unfortunately, it almost surely goes the other way. The two parties begin to amplify their stories, showing that they are right and the other party is wrong. They lose sight of the bigger victory—team trust—and go for the petty battle: *I’m right and you are wrong. (Sometimes followed by, “Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah, Nah”)*

The phrase “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of intervention” is wise counsel. When you feel the slightest trust issue emerge, jump on it immediately. See the kitchen fire in your mind’s eye and act. It helps if the whole senior team is familiar with this language and imagery, so that any person can invoke the “kitchen fire” rule. For example, during a routine staff meeting, one of your colleagues seems to take credit for work that you and he did together. You feel a little irritation and have the story, “He’s trying to take all the credit for our project.” That is a trust fire. Jump on it. How? Either during the meeting, or afterwards (certainly within 24 hours), respectfully bring up the incident using FCG’s cube it model:

- **Set-up** – “I want to put out a possible trust fire, because I believe we are both good team members and want to succeed as a team.”
- **Facts** – “In the meeting, you mentioned the work that you had done on project X. You didn’t mention that we worked on that together.”
- **Story** – “My story is that our CEO now thinks you did that work on your own.”
- **Reaction** – “I was a little irritated and felt like that created a small trust fire. Specifically, that I will not get credit for my contributions when we work together.”
- **Request** – “My request is that we share credit fairly for work we’ve collaborated on. And that you would mention to the CEO that you forgot to state that you and I worked on it together.”

Can you see how easily it would be to let this trust fire grow? I mean, it’s not a huge deal. Right? But that is the problem. These little deals gather and fester and pretty soon it’s a big deal and you are marching South on Gottman’s scale. Eventually, you are criticizing or blaming or stonewalling. And then these trust issues become MUCH harder to solve. The house is ablaze. Often, FCG gets called in to put out these fires and despite our best efforts and tools, many are beyond repair.

So, if you are currently a member of a high performing team with high trust, then GREAT. Use that leverage—money in the trust bank, so to speak—to maintain the high levels of trust. Pass this note around to your team and discuss the concept and language with them, so that it becomes common practice to put out trust fires before they cause any damage.

Maintaining high trust requires courage and skill. But nothing valuable comes easily. Given the importance of trust, agree as a team that you will work to maintain it. Repeat after me, “Trust Issues = Kitchen Fires.”

Curiously yours,

JW