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Building trust through ethical culture – a guide for SME firms

Leadership

Setting a personal example: the single biggest influence on trust in your firm

Trust is important for your firm's growth. It makes people want to do business with your firm and makes people want to work at your firm.

An important component to building trust is for the senior people at your firm to 'set a personal example' in how they behave and make decisions.

'A personal example of what?', you might ask. As ethics is the foundation upon which trust is built, that personal example is about the ethical behaviours we have and the ethical decisions we make. It's also referred to as 'doing the right thing'.

This guidance shows you how to set a better personal example. You may think that as a good person, it will just happen naturally, but unfortunately, there's more to it than that.

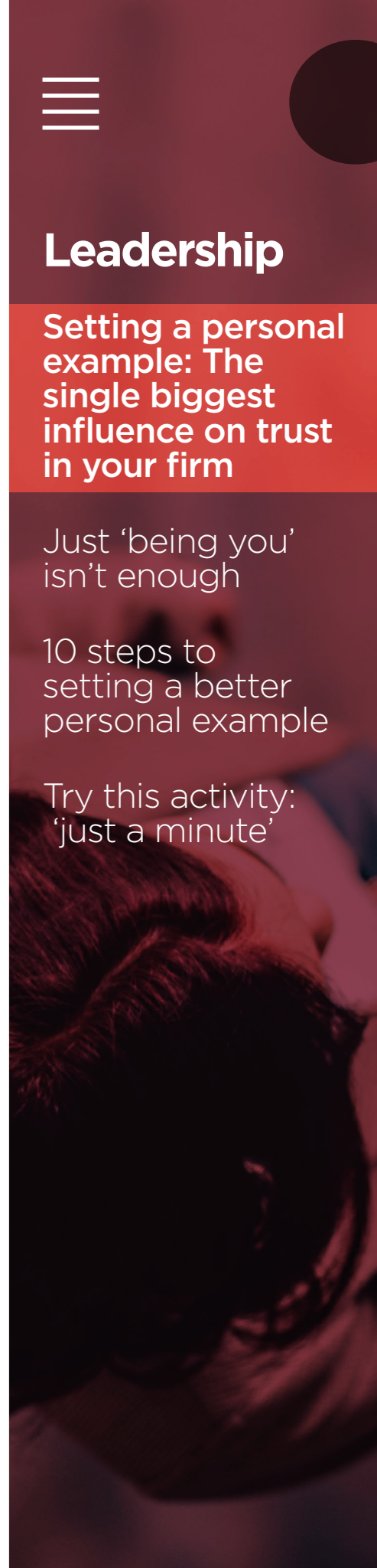


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Just 'being you' isn't enough

10 steps to setting a better personal example

Try this activity: 'just a minute'



Just 'being you' isn't enough

Consider this statistic from a 2013 study in the UK: "80% of workers did not think that their manager set a good ethical standard".

Managers may have the best intentions, but most of them are not setting a personal example that is strong enough, clear enough or consistent enough to be picked up by the people who work for them.

In a small firm, the personal example set by the owner/director will be the biggest single influence to how trusted their firm becomes. If they don't set the right personal example, then people will take the cue and not bother either.

Spending a little time getting better at 'setting a personal example' is like dropping a pebble into a pond: it sends out ripples that get noticed for some time afterwards.



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Here are ten steps that we can all use to set a better personal example, based upon those three things mentioned earlier: strong, clear and consistent.

A stronger personal example

- Only ask others to do what you would be prepared to do yourself, and prepared to be seen to do so yourself.
- Position your personal example within the context of the firm and its business. Make sure that for people following your personal example, it's more about what the company needs and less about what you personally need.
- Be honest with people about the challenges the firm is facing. Don't just set a personal example on the positive or easy things.

A clearer personal example

- Practice talking about the types of ethical challenges that firms like yours typically face. This avoids you having the right intentions, but coming across in an unclear or muddled way.
- Listen to other people's opinions. Ask them questions, but also be prepared for them to ask questions of you. Getting people to really support the type of personal example you're setting involves more than just telling them what matters to you.
- Talk with people about any personal events in your life that have shaped how you think about trust and 'doing the right thing'. Use stories from your career to explain why setting a personal example to build trust has been important to you.
- Shift the tone and focus of your personal example from time to time. So for example, every so often, demonstrate it in specific terms that are relevant to a key audience. Don't just drum out the same message.

A more consistent personal example

- If there are procedures in your firm, make sure you follow them yourself. This should be particularly the case with business gifts and hospitality. The more senior you are, the more you're likely to be offered them and the more your personal example will be in the spotlight.
- Set aside some time to revisit your personal example from time to time, and identify opportunities to retune it and keep it relevant to evolving circumstances;
- Never use rationalisation such as 'everyone else is doing it' or 'no one will be worse off'. And if you hear them yourself, openly and vigorously challenge them.



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Based upon the long running radio show of the same name, this activity focuses on setting a clearer personal example and in particular, being able to talk more confidently about trust and the ethical issues that matter most in your firm.

Take trust (or that ethical issue) and practice talking about it for one minute, without repetition, hesitation or deviation. In other words, talk about it in an interesting, relevant and informative way for a full minute. You could even try 30 seconds first and then go for 60. You could do it while on your way home from work, or while walking the dog.

Remember at what points you got tangled in hesitations and use them to think more carefully about the issue. Ask people for their opinion, so as to broaden your perspective. If you find it a real challenge to get to 60 seconds, search out some articles online to help build your knowledge. If you want to increase the 'real life' feel of these practices, think of a particular client or prospect raising this as a question with you.

Get others to join in. Turn it into a team game that involves each person in turn having a go at talking about an ethical issue that matters to them. Remember to give it a relaxed tone though!

Ultimately, put these 'just a minute' practices to use. Prepare an in-house talk on trust, and then move on to raise it with a client or prospect at a suitable opportunity. Show them that trust is something you really do understand.



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