What Is Trust? How Do We Build It?

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This is the time of year to think about cultivating trust&mdash;between ourselves and our coachees or mentees, between teachers and students, between supervisors and supervisees.

We can start this reflection by exploring what makes us trust others and by considering what we really mean when we talk about trust. It’s an overused, under-defined word and concept.

[Brené Brown](http://brenebrown.com/) is a social scientist and self-described “shame researcher.” She writes and speaks about vulnerability, courage, love and shame, and if you haven’t seen [this TED Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability), treat yourself and do so now. I’ve only just started her latest book, [*Braving the Wilderness*](https://www.amazon.com/Braving-Wilderness-Quest-Belonging-Courage/dp/0812995848/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1506186836&sr=8-1&keywords=braving+the+wilderness), which is an exploration of belonging. So far, what I like most is her description what makes us trust others (and ourselves).

In her research, Brown identified seven elements of trust, for which she offers the acronym “**BRAVING**.” Here’s what the letters represent:

**Boundaries:** You respect my boundaries, and when you’re not clear about what’s okay and not okay, you ask. You’re willing to say no.

**Reliability:** You do what you say you’ll do. You are aware of your competencies and limits. You don’t overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments.

**Accountability:** You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

**Vault:** You don’t share information or experiences that are not yours to share. You don’t share information about other people that should be kept confidential.

**Integrity:** You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast or easy. You practice your values rather than just professing them.

**Nonjudgment:** I can ask for what I need and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

**Generosity:** You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words and actions of others.

(See p.38-39 Brown’s book for more information.)

Think about someone whose trust you’re trying to gain&mdash;perhaps a coachee whom you’re just getting to know. Re-read this description of trust, reading the statements through the mind, eyes and ears of your coachee:

* *They look at you and wonder whether you’ll respect their boundaries.*
* *They look at you and wonder about your reliability, wonder whether you’re overpromising support.*
* *They look at you and wonder whether you’ll apologize if you overstep or say something hurtful.*
* *They look at you and questions whether you’ll keep the conversations you have together in a vault of confidentiality.*
* *They look at you and wonder whether you act on your values, whether you are a person with integrity.*
* *They look at you and wonder whether you will judge them when they ask for whatever they need.*
* *And they look at you and wonder how you’ll interpret their words, their actions.*

Given this description of trust, what are the implications for you as a coach or leader?

When I reflect on this definition of trust, and think across the last 10 years of my life as a coach, I see that at different times and places, and with different people, I struggled in one or more of these areas. There were times when my judgment of others was the primary obstacle to trust. And other times when I over-promised and couldn’t make good on my commitments.

Trust is not something we can build by using a check list, and it takes focused attention to build and maintain. But as coaches, it’s something we must work on&mdash;perhaps front and foremost. As coaching gurus Rafael Echeverría and Julio Olalla say, “Without trust there can be no coaching.”