

# Building Trust: The Most Important Back-to-School Initiative

Excerpts from a blog post from 08/29/23 by New Leaders <https://www.newleaders.org/>

Below readers will find five ideas to consider for building trust in schools.

## 1. Share Your Decision-Making Process

Decisions are made in your school every day, both large and small. While you can't involve your staff in every decision you make, find ways to involve them in the decisions that affect them. Even better—ask for their help in finding solutions.

Think through the decisions that impact your educators and staff. How can your team be part of early conversations around curriculum decisions, or have more ownership over their own professional development? Think about it for the seemingly small things, too: how can you create more co-ownership over the school lunch schedule? Who's outside welcoming students and parents at the beginning and end of every day?

This decision-making also works the other way around. When teachers or staff present you with a problem or challenge, give them the space to find the answers and move forward on their own. A great question to ask is, "if you had a magic wand, how would you solve the problem?" If their decision makes sense, tell them to go for it!

This transparency and collaboration not only empower both the new and tenured members of your team, but it shows you trust their expertise—creating the basis of impactful change.

## 2. Prioritize Coaching and Impactful Feedback

Ah, feedback. It's a word that conjures up both positive and negative connotations, depending on the way it's given—and which side of the feedback you're on. At the same time, it's a necessary part of your role as a school leader. When school leaders take the time to give intentional, impactful feedback to their staff, they're sending two very clear messages: they believe in their abilities, and they want to help them shine even brighter.

Ensuring quality feedback begins with you and your team co-developing a definition of what makes it effective, including the delivery, expectations, and timing. That way, there's less risk that the feedback gets misinterpreted or takes someone by surprise—that's an instant trust-eroder.

In addition, focus on timely feedback so that your teachers can use the feedback to improve student learning. Feedback without any time or space to implement the changes can lead to unnecessary anxiety, especially for your newest team members, who are already juggling a lot of emotions and a desire to excel in their roles.

### 3. Listen to Learn, Not Problem-Solve

As school leaders, we think we need to have all the answers. After all, that's why we're in the role, right?

In reality, the qualities that make a great principal or school leader aren't about knowing everything. It's about noticing and understanding—and listening makes that possible.

But not all listening is created equal. The Co-Active Training Institute (CTI), one of the pioneers of the coaching industry, has identified three levels of listening. When used in the right time and place, these levels allow us to get the most out of our conversations and build relational trust:

- **Level 1: Internal Listening.** At the Internal Listening level, we focus mainly on ourselves—determining what our reactions will be to what's being said, and what we want to say in response. It's at this level that we're often “half-listening.”
- **Level 2: Focused Listening.** This is the type of deep, active listening that helps us to understand someone else's motivations and perspectives. At this level, we're giving undivided attention to what's being said.
- **Level 3: Global Listening.** Not only are you hearing what's being said at this level, but you're also paying attention to what's *not* being said through body language, changes in tone and voice, and eye contact.

The third level is the level that builds the highest level of relational trust—especially for your teachers and staff who are new to the fold. As you find yourself in meetings or one-on-ones with your teachers, practice asking them “Global Listening” questions. *“I noticed you paused before giving your answer. Is there something you're unsure about?” “You seem concerned. Is there something you're not saying?”* By paying attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues, you're showing your team that you truly see them.

#### **4. Continue to Create Psychological Safety**

As education leaders, we want our schools to be safe spaces, but we also need them to be brave spaces for both the students and adults in our care. This is where psychological safety is paramount.

Creating brave spaces means fostering an environment with a high level of openness and honesty—and it's not something that should be reserved for specific spaces, groups, or meetings at your school. It needs to be embedded in its daily pulse. This is especially important when it comes to your newest team members, who are just getting immersed in the school culture and might be unsure of how to express concerns and differing opinions, or offer new ideas.

Of course, psychological safety doesn't happen overnight. It comes as you continue to focus on clarity and transparency in team interactions and create the space to be honest and self-reflective about your own mistakes and learning moments. It's something that can also be woven into the ongoing professional learning that your staff and teachers will take part in this year. When you concentrate on these behaviors, psychological safety will soon feel like an unspoken but powerful part of your school climate.

#### **5. Trust is a Process, Not an Activity**

As you're considering all the ways to build trust, it's good to keep in mind that this kind of work is never complete. Each time you bring something or someone new into your school, it's another opportunity to recalibrate and maintain that solid trust foundation.

When you view the goal of your school's culture as exactly that—building and maintaining trust—you'll be able to capture (and continue!) the momentum created by your initial onboarding and achieve your school goals together.

