

How to Build Trust and Lead Effectively by Knowledge@Wharton

Counterintelligence expert Robin Dreeke and co-author Cameron Stauth talk about their book on building trust.

Building good teams starts with having strong relationships based on a foundation of trust. But how does one develop that trust at work or in life? Counterintelligence expert Robin Dreeke, who spent decades as a senior FBI agent, knows how to make strangers trust him enough to be recruited as spies. And it's not about deception or being a 'yes' man. In the book, *The Code of Trust: An American Counterintelligence Expert's Five Rules to Lead and Succeed*, Dreeke and co-author Cameron Stauth share simple steps to generating trust from all sorts of people. They recently joined the Knowledge@Wharton show, which airs on SiriusXM channel 111, to discuss the concepts in more detail.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Knowledge@Wharton: Robin, give us the background on this book, which is based on what you have tested during your time working in the counterintelligence field.

Robin Dreeke: The real impetus of this book was the fact that I'm not a natural born leader at all, yet I was placed in situations, throughout my life, to lead. When you work in the realm of counterintelligence, the people I sign up to help protect our country are generally not doing anything wrong or illegal. When you work in law enforcement, people [are compelled] to talk to you because they've already done something wrong.

But in my line of work [of cultivating U.S. spies and thwarting foreign ones] ... I've had to think not only in terms of convincing someone to do something, but inspiring them to want to do it. Luckily for me, I was surrounded by some great Jedi masters of interpersonal communication and leadership. I was able to synthesize what they were doing down from a subjective art form to a very cognitive [system].

Knowledge@Wharton: Cameron, is building trust a prevalent problem in business culture today?

Cameron Stauth: Huge. Since the Great Recession alone, trust in America's most fundamental institutions, which are business, government and media, dropped by a combined average of 60%. Right now, [only] 19% of all Americans trust big business and 33% trust banks. [The distrust is] at every level. It's not just the CEOs [suffering from a lack of trust] — only one-third of all people trust store clerks. This has got to change.

“Understand the priorities of others ... and do it with no expectation of reciprocity, which is the real key.” -Robin Dreeke

Knowledge@Wharton: Robin, tell us about how trust works in counterintelligence.

Dreeke: Since there's no real compulsion for any human being to talk to me, it really came down to, 'how could I inspire them to want to talk to me?' A number of years ago, I wound up doing an article on what my team does on the behavioral analysis program. It was the first time I sat down and thought to myself, 'What am I actually doing in all these counterintelligence investigations?' ... [It turns out] what I was actually strategizing in every single engagement [with people] was [developing] trust. ... Whenever there are two human beings interacting and you hope to move forward, you're not going to do it without trust.

Knowledge@Wharton: If you're working with people within an agency, if there's not trust, how can you move forward with these investigations?

Dreeke: You've got to understand what your priorities and goals are. That's what leaders do, they identify them. But as soon as you identify them, just let them go. ... As soon as you label what you're looking for, let go of it because now your job is to understand the priorities of others: their needs, wants, dreams, and aspirations, both professional and personal, long term and short term. Ultimately, if you're talking in terms of what the priorities of others are and you offer resources for them to achieve those things, that's what starts begetting trust. And do it with no expectation of reciprocity, which is the real key. You can't do it for the gain. ... You've got to do it because leaders are about offering their resources for others' success.

Knowledge@Wharton: The results of not having trust in a company is being written about more and more.

Stauth: Yes, probably because this is the worst crisis in trust we've ever had. It's seen in every aspect of life. People have fewer friends than they used to, which just sounds sad. People don't even trust members of their own family. We all need a big dose of a healthy degree of trust, and we need to learn how. The beauty of what Robin did is he created this system. He just lays it out. Do this, do this, do this and it will all come together.

Knowledge@Wharton: Let's go through the five steps. The first one on the list is to suspend your ego.

Dreeke: That's the cornerstone that's really going to enact the code. The code is flawless because the code is about everyone else. The one thing that's going to undermine it is your ego and vanity. In other words, your ego is going to get in the way. It basically overwrites what you want to do in your heart. Your mouth comes out with the wrong words because we get insecure and fearful and resentful. If we can let go of our own ego and vanity in every situation and keep the focus on the other person, it's going to enact the code flawlessly.

Knowledge@Wharton: I would think that might be one of the toughest ones because there are many people who feel that ego is an important component of success.

Dreeke: It is the hardest one to let go of, and a lot of people do think it's the most important thing in the workplace. But how many successful people are successful alone?

You can have all the skills and talents and expertise in the world, but if you're an island, alone, you're useless. You're absolutely ineffective.

"A lot of people like to think that validation is agreeing with someone. It's not." -Robin Dreeke

Knowledge@Wharton: Being nonjudgmental is No. 2 on your list.

Dreeke: It's another cornerstone and also a very hard thing to do. After 20 years at the FBI, I cannot be judgmental of anyone because shields would go up. I had to seek to understand. At our core, we seek to be valued and understood and accepted because that meant our survival genetically. When we are not judging others and demonstrate their value by seeking their thoughts and opinions ... we empower them with choice and validate them.

Knowledge@Wharton: The next is to honor reason. I'll let you get into that one.

Dreeke: One thing that effective and inspirational leaders do really well is that they're a resource for the prosperity of others. The way that leaders are resources for the prosperity of others is they maintain an objectivity so that they can honor reason. In other words, they understand the priorities and goals of those they're leading, and they can ask cognitive questions, such as "how is what you're doing helping or hindering you getting there?" If someone gets emotionally attached to what you're doing and your choices, you start riding that emotional roller coaster and are no longer unbiased. Honoring reason is simply [providing] a lot of clarity of thought without all that emotional hijacking that goes on during stressful moments.

Knowledge@Wharton: Validating others is next. I guess if you're able to validate other people that you work with, you're able to build a better team.

Dreeke: Absolutely. A lot of people like to think that validation is agreeing with someone. It's not. It might be, but validation is the simple task of trying to understand the human being you're interacting with, why they have the thoughts they have, how they came to be the human being they are and how they make the choices they make. Again, you've got to do this without judgment because if you have any tone of voice or nonverbals that indicate judgment, you're going to crash and burn. If you can validate others just by seeking to understand the human being in front of you, you're building that affiliation and demonstrating that value.

Knowledge@Wharton: The final one, which seems very simple, is to be generous.

Dreeke: There are lots of ways to be generous, and the key is to understand how the other person wishes you to demonstrate generosity. [Many] people just want your time, so be generous with your time. Everyone has different resources. Understand what your resources are and be generous with those resources for other people's prosperity. The thing that really makes it work is be generous with no expectation of reciprocity. When you build solid relationships, your network and connections and trust start expanding exponentially.

"Negativity is happening mostly because people are insecure." -Robin Dreeke

Knowledge@Wharton: How much do you think these ideas are impacted by the digital world, where we have less face-to-face interaction with the people we work with?

Stauth: We spend a whole chapter on how to deal with people in the digital world, how to write the correct kinds of emails, how to talk on the phone, which is different than talking in real life because you don't see the body language. That's a problem. We are disconnected, and that's part of the reason we don't trust each other anymore. You can't look somebody in the eye.

Dreeke: I've done a lot of undercover work that was face-to-face. I remember I was tasked [to find the answer to this] question, "How do we do this kind of work in a digital age?" I thought about it, and [I realized that one benefit is that] you have the ability to think about every single line you're writing. When you're going live, you're playing off what the other person's [saying] and thinking about everything you're saying.

When you're writing, you can do one of these four things: You can seek their thoughts and opinions, you can validate them, you can empower them with choice and you can talk in terms of their priorities. When you build that into everything you do in a digital world, I can guarantee you that every statement you make is about them, and it's going to escalate. It's a challenge, but if you build it in there consciously, it will really help a lot.

Knowledge@Wharton: Cameron, I'd be interested to know how these concepts have influenced you personally?

Stauth: Well, I just got married last month. ... We got along a lot better after I met Robin. It actually changed my life. That happens with me sometimes in a book. I wrote the first book about cancer prevention 40 years ago, and it changed my life. I wrote a book, *The Science of Happiness*, about 20 years ago and that changed my life. This one did, too. It teaches you how to get along with people, even though I should have known that at my age. I was trying to win battles, and you can win every battle and lose the war. What do I do now? If my wife [says or does] something that she thinks I don't agree with, I just try to understand her. As Robin was saying, people don't need you to be a 'yes' man, they just want to be understood. That's what I do now. And I tell you, it's working at work, at home, everywhere.

Knowledge@Wharton: Robin, you believe these concepts work in people's lives in general.

Dreeke: Absolutely. As Cam and anyone else who knows me can attest to, what you hear is what you get with me. I am the same person everywhere because I live the code. This is my manual on how not to be the person I was born to be. This is my manual on how to overcome that type A, hard-charger [personality] that just barrels forward and ruins relationships because they think it's all about them.

Knowledge@Wharton: What is it about our society that made people live that type of lifestyle or be that type of employee?

Dreeke: Societies and cultures go through ebbs and flows. One thing that happened in the last 20 or 30 years was that people became very divisive because they were singling out groups. Anytime you single out one group, even if it's in a positive way, everyone else feels ostracized. They start trying to convince themselves that they should be part of that group because, again, our genetic code says we want to belong. Belonging means

survival. Anytime you single out a group or validate someone and not someone else, shields go up and arguments ensue. That's what starts mistrust.

"Since the Great Recession alone, trust in America's most fundamental institutions ... dropped by a combined average of 60%." -Cameron Stauth

Knowledge@Wharton: How has social media affected the loss of trust? People feel like they can say anything at any time online, no matter the impact on a person or a company. That has changed the dynamic of conversation.

Dreeke: It really has. With anonymity, the fear of reciprocity is really low. When there's no social cost to the actions you're taking, people are going to take whatever actions they want.

Knowledge@Wharton: What's the best way to handle negative people in the office?

Dreeke: Negativity is happening mostly because people are insecure. They are trying to demonstrate their own value to other people with inappropriate behavior, whether they're name-dropping, self-promoting and all these things. When I encounter someone who has annoying, negative behaviors, the first thing I try to do is understand them. I try to understand why they are insecure and what are they insecure about. As soon as I can discover those insecurities, I can start validating them and validating other aspects of them. Everyone has something they're working on, and everyone has great strengths. If you take time to focus on the strengths and validate those strengths, the negativity will start flowing away.