

# What Should Pastors Do When They Must Lead People They Don't Trust

*by Sam Rainer*

Pastors must trust their churches for God's mission to be accomplished. And congregants must trust their leaders for church culture to be healthy.

Blind trust is unwise.

Trust is granted more than earned.

When pastors do not grant trust to anyone, they become paranoid tyrants.

Trust between individuals is derived from reliability, confidence, and truthfulness. People become trustworthy when you rely on them confidently because they are honest.

You may not trust someone for several reasons, many of which are rooted in unreliability, betrayal, and dishonesty. In the context of a local church, discipline may be required depending on the severity. However, a lack of trust may exist for reasons that are not negative. For this article, I will focus on the more benign reasons why pastors may not trust people in their church.

They want to teach, but their ability or doctrine is in doubt.

They want to serve children but are brand new to the church.

They are making an odd claim, but it's not corroborated.

They aspire to a leadership position but don't want to go through the normal process.

They consistently complain about other pastors and churches with good reputations.

They are the only ones claiming a crisis exists.

In these examples, someone may have integrity or may not. The unknown produces a level of distrust. As a church leader, you will face situations where you must lead people you can't completely trust. Typically, time will reveal the truth, but it could take a while. How should a pastor operate in the meantime?

Identify the exact source of mistrust. Don't make the mistake of believing trust comes on all-or-nothing terms. Research shows that trust has three components: competency, consistency, and character. You may trust someone's character but have doubts about their competency. Maybe they can do the job well, but you wonder if they will be consistent. If you do not trust someone, it is your responsibility to pinpoint precisely why. Trust cannot be built when the reasons for distrust are vague.

Avoid the temptation to micromanage. Many task-oriented pastors will revert to micromanagement when they do not trust the people around them. Those being micromanaged can respond with their own level of distrust of leadership. A vicious cycle then forms, and distrust unnecessarily grows between both parties.

Give someone a low-risk assignment where trust can be granted. Don't place an unfair burden on people based on your internal perceptions. You must give people opportunities to gain your trust. Your mistrust may be unfounded, and a simple task could reveal your error. In most cases, you don't need to have a serious meeting with them if mistrust is merely based on intuition. A low-risk assignment is a good place to start.

Set clear expectations and guidelines. Trustworthy people honor boundaries. For example, our church campus is a collection of five buildings built over five decades. What we lack in easy navigation, we gain with charm and character. Since the campus has an odd layout, we tell our people certain bathrooms and hallways are designated for children only. Everyone honors the request because they understand child safety is paramount. We know who to trust because we've set clear expectations and

guidelines. It's harder to identify untrustworthy people when lots of exceptions are made and expectations are unclear.

Take the initiative to demonstrate trust. Pastors become more anxious and paranoid when distrust grows. In the church, however, the burden of building trust is first on pastors. Leaders must show the way. You must first demonstrate your own trustworthiness before expecting the trust of others. The more people trust you, the more likely you are to return trust to them.

Trust is one of the most valuable components of relationships. Every pastor will be tasked with leading others when trust is not present, but trust can be granted and built without being overbearing as a leader.