

# CHAMBERS AND TRUST



By Lisa Itamura

Trust is important to any relationship. For chambers and other business-civic groups, cultivating trust within their regional relationships can pay huge dividends, to the organizations themselves, and the region as a whole.

In Des Moines, IA, trust was critical in helping the Chamber transition to a regional chamber model. The **Greater Des Moines Partnership** and more than 20 other chambers in the region were stepping on each other's toes and competing with each other for private dollars. The Partnership knew the region needed a unified vision for growth which could only be achieved by working together.

One of the keys to creating enough trust to start working together was using a bottom-up approach to draft an affiliate agreement between the Partnership and other chambers. By letting other organizations develop the agreement, it was easier to get buy-in from other chambers.

According to **Susan Ramsey, senior vice president of communications and marketing**, the Partnership had to "give up quite a bit of revenue [dues/events]" when they instituted an affiliate fee in which other chambers' members can become a member of the Partnership. But the Partnership gained a bigger voice, growing from 2,400 to 4,400 members virtually overnight, and as other chambers grow, so does the Partnership.

What are some of the other benefits to working together as a region? Ramsey rattles off several, including better access to federal funding for the region, value back to members, and better coordination of public policy by having a unified mission. **Jay Byers, senior vice president, government relations and public policy**, observes, "you give a little and you get a lot" when chambers are willing to trust each other enough to work together as a region.

The **Business Council of Westchester's** president, **Dr. Marsha Gordon**, focused her doctorate research on trust in relationships and now uses what she learned to help her organization serve as a trusted regional partner. She describes the three attributes that constitute trust:

- Ability (competency)
- Benevolence (attachment between partners)
- Integrity (consistency and reliability)

Gordon says, "Chamber executives are going to work with those organizations based on these attributes of trust." This was an important lesson to remember when the Business Council joined planning efforts to address the need to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge and develop a regional mass transit system.

The project brought government, environmental groups, businesses, and a wide variety of other groups to the table for the first time to discuss what to do with the 1950s bridge, which had been built to handle far less traffic than it currently carries. Gordon recalls, "It took months to challenge the pre-conceived ideas that groups had about each other. We needed to get everyone's expectations out there to arrive at a common vision." Over time, the groups came to trust each other enough to move forward together on a recommendation.

"Trust can be managed," says Gordon. "You need to make clear what everyone's expected returns are and what each party's expected outcome is. What do the parties want from the relationship? Will acts of trust be rewarded (reciprocity)? Will the relationship make a difference to the organization (efficacy)? Will the individual feel good about the association (hedonistic)?" Establishing this at the beginning will create better relationships; maintaining these expectations will help keep trusting relationships strong.

Understanding expectations can only happen with clear, upfront communication. Ramsey urges, "Have people put what they are risking on the table, have people acknowledge the financial and political risks, but then you need to agree upon the greater gains." When the rewards of working together outweigh the risks, leaders will be more willing to join forces to create quality growth for the region.

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