

## **White Paper:**

# **What is Credibility and Why Do You NEED to Care**

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When asked about the definition of credibility, you might say, “I know it when I see it,”—like I know friendly or likeable. When pressed, however, do you really know the definition of credibility?

Don’t be fooled into thinking this is an academic or unimportant question. Credibility is positively correlated to success in every sphere of life. If you can’t define credibility or identify its elements, you can’t take advantage of opportunities to boost your credibility and your success.

Unlike height or weight, your measure of credibility isn’t an objective measure. It is not something you either have or you don’t. Credibility is more like a linear scale on which others give you a rating. It is a perceived quality, one that people assign to you based on the interplay of a number of elements.

Identifying the elements of credibility is important because a high score on one or two elements does not guarantee a high credibility rating. It’s the interplay that matters. For example, experts are usually considered highly credible, unless or until they are perceived as biased or self-serving. Lack of integrity can cancel out the positive impact of expertise.

Accordingly, you need to know all five elements of credibility and to examine yourself in light of these elements. Give yourself a score between one and ten on each of these elements—integrity, competence, sound judgment, relational sensitivity, and likeability—but do so from the perspective of others. In other words, rate yourself on what others can observe rather than on what you intend. Once you see your strengths and weakness, you can take positive steps to boost your credibility in the eyes of others.

### **Credibility Element #1: Integrity**

A key element of credibility involves transparency, trustworthiness, and moral predictability. We feel good about people who embody the phrase, “what you see is what you get.”

From Webster’s perspective, integrity is the essential element. The dictionary definition of credibility is *the power to inspire belief*. For example, a credible witness is one whom we have reason to believe. Credibility implies a commitment to truth, fairness, and objectivity. In addition, we assign high credibility to people who have clear moral standards and who are known to stick to them.

Be careful not to underestimate the importance of honesty and integrity in the workplace. People who have a track record of being objective and truthful are perceived as more credible than those who don't. Companies who open their books to union representatives are more credible than those who don't. Conclusions based on scientific or systematic inquiry are more credible than those based on subjective judgments.

According to researchers Kouzes and Posner, the number one trait people are looking for in a leader is honesty. We know from experience that one failure to disclose an important truth can ruin an entire career.

To boost your credibility on this element, consider the following:

- Invest time in clarifying your values and examining your behavior in light of them
- Make a commitment to consistently tell the truth
- Build a reputation for ethical behavior
- If you make a mistake, be truthful about it rather than cover it up
- Give credit to colleagues and subordinates for their work
- When you change your stance on a position, do so for objective rather than political reasons

## **Credibility Element #2: Competence**

Experts enjoy a much higher degree of credibility than those who lack expertise. As society's knowledge expands, we rely more and more on people who can demonstrate deep expertise, often with a narrow focus. We trust experts to understand the scope of an issue or project, to know the right questions to ask, and to know how to find the answers to those questions. In today's world, there is no credibility without expertise.

Perceived expertise comes from a blend of a person's education and experience. People with doctoral degrees in a field obviously have more credibility than those who lack a degree. At the same time, people who have "come up through the ranks" or have worked in diverse jobs within an industry are considered to be experts. These folks usually have more perceived expertise than new college graduates.

Expertise turns into competence when it is put to the test. A person earns her credibility as competent by succeeding at assignments and projects over time. A track record of successfully applying knowledge and a willingness to continue learning increases perceived credibility.

To boost your credibility on this element, take the following actions:

- If needed, complete your degree or consider the next degree
- Obtain a license to practice or a professional certification appropriate to your field
- Request high-visibility projects to establish a track record
- Ask to participate on task forces with key people in your organization so they can see your competence firsthand
- Participate in meetings, asking probing questions and making insightful comments
- Attend conferences in your field and engage in continual learning

### **Credibility Element #3: Sound Judgment**

As a good friend can be counted on to listen well and encourage you to make wise decisions, a credible person can be counted on to analyze complex situations, ask intelligent questions, and make good decisions. A person with sound judgment usually has both cognitive and intuitive gifts. This person takes a big-picture rather than a myopic view and a long-term rather than a short-term perspective.

A savvy CEO, for example, might have a track record of acquiring businesses or creating products just ahead of demand. This person has a track record of correctly anticipating future trends and preparing for them.

To boost your credibility on this element, take the following actions:

- Consider the impact of your decisions on other departments and groups
- Ask others for input into your decisions—especially regarding the impact on them
- Avoid snap judgments
- Be willing to admit mistakes
- Read books and listen to tapes by management and relationship specialists
- Stay current on the trends within your industry and company

### **Credibility Element #4: Relationally Sensitive**

People with high credibility know how to ask questions about our values and interests, to listen intently and with empathy, and to pull people together. These are the people with high emotional intelligence to balance the arrogance sometimes comes with high expertise.

Jay Conger, an expert on persuasion, puts it this way:

On the relationship side, people with high credibility have demonstrated—again, usually over time—that they can be trusted to listen and to work in the best interests of others. They have also consistently shown strong emotional character and integrity; that is, they are not known for mood extremes or inconsistent performance. Indeed, people who are known to be honest, steady, and reliable have an edge when going into any persuasion situation. Because their relationships are robust, they are more apt to be given the benefit of the doubt.

A person develops a track record in relationships in the same way he develops a track record in performance. If he becomes known for building commitment and cooperation, for being level-headed and fair, everyone will want him on their team.

Those who have the most perceived credibility are usually the ones who are relationally sensitive.

To boost your credibility on this element, take the following actions:

- Demonstrate willingness to learn from others and from your own mistakes
- Demonstrate concern for others' values, goals, and objectives
- Cultivate the ability to listen well
- Take time to build relationships with informal conversations
- Don't say something behind a person's back that you wouldn't say to his face
- Be generous with credit to colleagues and subordinates
- Take time to understand another's point of view before refuting or rejecting it

### **Credibility Element #5: Likeable**

Research studies consistently reveal that people respond positively to others whom they like. They trust them, they cooperate with them, they approve their proposals, and they buy from them. Mitch Anthony, author of *Selling with Emotional Intelligence*, puts it succinctly, "Likeability is as important as ability." Successful people balance expertise with likeability. It is a proven formula for success.

After extensive research, Tim Sanders, author of *The Likeability Factor*, claims that there are four ingredients to likeability: friendliness, relevance, empathy, realness. Relevance and empathy are ingredients of relationship sensitivity, described above. Realness, or authenticity, brings us back to integrity, the first

element of credibility described in this paper. Likeability is much more than a feel-good characteristic.

Emotional intelligence guru, Daniel Goleman, and co-authors Boyatzis and McKee, remind us of the importance of optimism and a lighthearted perspective in the workplace, asserting that leaders who have the ability to express enthusiasm and upbeat emotions attract other people. In their book, *Primal Leadership*, these researchers put it succinctly:

Research has proven it: Optimistic, enthusiastic leaders more easily retain their people, compared with those bosses who tend toward negative moods.

Further, the authors remind us a smile (friendliness) is contagious, drawing others to smile in response. A smile, however, can be faked. Laughter is too complex for faking, and, at a deep, non-verbal level, people know this. Accordingly, we trust (assign credibility to) people who laugh with us. Laughing with someone is the quickest way to build trust and rapport.

To boost your credibility on this element, take the following actions:

- Communicate optimistically by describing challenges rather than problems
- Focus on what can be done as opposed to what can't be done
- Go out of your way to be friendly, even if you aren't an extravert
- Practice finding the humor around you, especially in stressful situations
- Express gratitude privately, publicly and in writing
- Demonstrate an interest on matters of personal importance to others
- Congratulate others and celebrate their successes

### **Credibility is a Package Deal**

No single element described here can guarantee high perceived credibility. After all, an expert without integrity might be a dictator. A likeable person who lacks judgment will make stupid decisions.

People assign you a degree of credibility based on how they rate you on the interaction of the elements of credibility: integrity, expertise, sound judgment, relationship sensitivity, and likeability. Perceived credibility is a package deal. Remember, too, that your credibility is based on observed behavior, not on your intentions.

Understanding the elements of credibility provides you with opportunities to boost your perceived credibility and your success. Study the habits and behaviors of those who are well-liked in your workplace. Adopt or adapt those that you can authentically incorporate into your own behavior. Review the elements and action steps in this article, and choose one action to work on at a time. With time and consistency, you can boost your credibility at work and in

your community. You need to know the definition of credibility and you need to care!

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