

TRUST

If the boss is away ...

Leaving workers to their own devices has its benefits and pitfalls, writes **Sue White**.

When small-business owner Dani Lombard is away for the day, there's plenty of scope for her team to run amok.

"There is a company key card that staff can use for company or client purchases," the public relations specialist says.

"They could take the card and run away to Mexico!"

They don't, though. And Lombard rarely checks up to see if protocol has been breached; for her, it's a matter of trust.

"Trust is something my employees start with until they prove otherwise," Lombard says.

She knows firsthand what it's like when trust is absent from the workplace. "I had a boss who left early to pick her kids up from school, then called every day at 5.30pm and asked to speak to every person to check they were there," she says. "It created a yucky culture."

It seems she wasn't alone in having an untrusting boss. Recruitment director Vanessa Hall has re-engineered her career to help companies embrace the issue of trust at work. "For many years I worked in compliance and legislation," she says. "A lot of legislation I was dealing with revolved around breakdowns of trust that had happened along the line. The way we [typically] deal with that at work is to create more legislation and policies."

Hall got tired of being on the reactive end of the issue.

"I wondered what would happen if we applied those resources into a concentrated effort on building trust with clients and customers," she says. "I interviewed hundreds of CEOs and asked how important trust is in their business. Most said critical but less than 5 per cent said they were doing anything about it."

The result was International Day of Trust (May 3). Spearheaded by Hall and started in 2010, this year's events will see dialogues on trust happening in six countries.

'Good people will value trust and not want to jeopardise it.' Dani Lombard

"We have key groups meeting to talk about the role trust is playing in their organisation and we'll be asking each person to make one promise they will actively see through," she says.

The challenge, of course, is that while it sounds simple to trust, the reality can be quite different.

"It's hard partly because we've not been taught before," Hall says.

She says those wanting to build more trusting environments need to consider three things: our expectations, people's needs and the promises we make.

"Being able to trust is based on our belief that our expectations will



Can the carry-on ... mucking up while the boss is away doesn't breed trust. Photo: iStock

be met or managed, our needs will be met and the promises made to us will be kept. Every time we get frustrated something has gone wrong with one or more of those three things."

In the Victorian headquarters of Carman's Fine Foods, expectations are clear. But rather than being handed a list of do's and don'ts, all 14 employees are trusted to make their own decisions on issues relating to their role, rather than relying on the boss to give the go-ahead.

"The philosophy is go forth and do it, just weigh up the consequences," founder Carolyn Creswell says.

"Trust is about believing that people are innately good; trusting them to be responsible in their role is part of that."

Creswell's trusting philosophy extends far beyond job decisions. Staff are given free rein in the office fridge, where wine and food are always available; anyone can access company files (including financial information); and perks such as the popular "POQ" – where every second worker can "piss off quick" by leaving early on a Friday if they have tackled their inbox – all add up to an environment where trust is an

intrinsic part of the operating environment. Perks like these apparently take getting used to but once they do, the benefits roll in.

"I think it makes people perform at a higher level," Creswell says. "Because they are heard and appreciated, they start treating the business like it's their own," she says. It's a two-way street.

Both Lombard and Creswell have been burned occasionally by their trusting philosophy, although not by their regular employees. As a result, Lombard now has interns sign a contract outlining expectations and Creswell stands by her decision to fire an employee on flexible hours who regularly lied about his start time. Nonetheless, both point to trust as an integral part of their success.

"Good people will value trust and not want to do anything to jeopardise it," Lombard says.

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