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SUCCESS

Jeff Bezos on his 4-step method for building trust and reputation: ‘It’s really that simple’—and research backs it up

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Saul Loeb | AFP | Getty Images

What does it take to achieve great success in your career?

According to Jeff Bezos, one of the most important things you need to do is to build trust and maintain a good reputation. But it isn’t easy.

In a fireside chat at the Reagan National Defense Forum in 2019, Bezos laid out the four things he does to earn people’s trust:

1. Do hard things

“The way you earn trust, the way you develop a reputation,” Bezos said, “is by doing hard things well over and over again.”

Bezos, who plans to step down as Amazon CEO on July 5, used the U.S. military as an example. Although the American public’s trust and confidence in the military has fallen since 2018, it still remains one of the most trusted institutions in the country “by a large margin,” according to the Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute.

“The reason that the military has such high credibility and reputation is because, over and over again, decade after decade, it has done hard things well.”

2. If you say you’re going to do something, do it

“It really is that simple. It’s also that complicated,” Bezos said. “Because in order to do hard things well, you must have integrity and competence. That means doing what you said you were going to do — and delivering.”

Amazon, he said, delivers more than a billion packages a year: “We say we’re going to do that, and then we actually do it.”

3. Take controversial stances

While one could argue that people who are agreeable tend to be trustworthy and have good intentions, Bezos doesn’t believe that’s always the case.

“People like it when you say, ‘No, we’re not going to do it that way. I know you want us to do it that way, but we’re not going to,’” the Amazon founder said. “And even if they disagree, they might say, ‘We kind of respect that, though. They know who they are.’”

4. Have clarity

When taking controversial stances, Bezos says it’s helpful to have clarity.

“If we are clear that we’re going to do this and we aren’t going to do that, then people can opt in or out,” he explained. “They can say, ‘Well, if that’s Amazon’s position or Blue Origin’s position or [Amazon Web Services]’s position on something, then I don’t want to be part of that.’”

And that’s something Bezos is okay with.

“We live in a big democracy with lots of opinions,” he added. “I want to live in a place where people can disagree and can still work together. I don’t want to lose that. People are entitled to their opinions, but it is the job of a senior leadership team to say no.”

Research agrees: Consistency and following through is vital

Several studies back up Bezos’ strategy for building trust.

According to two experiments published in a 2000 study, researchers found three factors for establishing trust: “It’s the frequency in which the trustee and trustor interact, the competence of the trustee and the consistency of the trustee’s previous behavior.”

Another study, published in the *Academy of Management Review*, also noted that in numerous “trust-modeling” experiments, “both consistency and integrity” were considered fundamental necessities.

“Repeatedly following through,” the researchers noted, “is the most important element in engendering cognitive-based trust.”

Tom Popomaronis is a leadership expert and vice president of innovation at Massive Alliance. His work has been featured in *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, and *The Washington Post*. In 2014, Tom was named one of the “40 Under 40” by the *Baltimore Business Journal*. Follow him on LinkedIn.