

Trust



If you ask business people for the essential ingredient that enables teams and organisations to perform excellently, you will often get a one-word answer - 'trust'. Without trust, expensive controls are needed to check on staff, information does not flow freely, and motivation is lower. With trust in place, people have the freedom to fulfil their roles, and to provide the cooperation and support to others to help them to reach their goals too.

In this chapter, we look at some of the key dimensions of trust, using research by the British organisation, WorldWork. We also look at how you can increase trust within your team and organisation. Before reading on, think about these questions:

- 1 What is trust?
- 2 What makes people trust each other?
- 3 Which communication strategies can help to develop trust?

What is trust?

This question is not easy to answer. First, we need to remember that trust is not optional. It is mandatory, and for one simple reason: because we cannot do everything ourselves. I trust others to fly the planes and drive the trains I travel in. I trust my IT department to configure my desktop PC correctly. We have to trust other people.

Fundamentally, trust involves interdependence. It means being confident that other people will meet our positive expectations: to drive our new car carefully, to deliver a work report on time, etc. The downside is that we put ourselves at risk, since someone could betray our trust. The upside is that we can take decisions: to get on the plane, and to plan our working week in the knowledge that the report will be delivered on time. Trust allows us to organise our lives and to get things done.

There are different kinds of trust, which operate at different emotional and intellectual levels. The relationship-based trust we place in family members or partners is very different from the professional trust we may place in colleagues, or the more impersonal trust we may place in institutions such as airlines, banks, governments and religious bodies. Trust is also situational. We may trust a particular person in one situation but not in another. I might trust you to stand in for me in a meeting, but I might not trust you to drive my new car.

Building trust at work

What does all this mean for building trust at work? What factors make us have faith in some people but not in others? If we understand these factors, we may be able to speed up the process of building trust. Here we look at seven factors that can support the development of trust.

1 People trust those who are competent

This is so obvious that we may overlook it, but we are unlikely to trust others unless we believe they have the necessary skills. Estimating someone's competence may sometimes be based on relatively superficial factors. For example, the wearing of a particular uniform - as in the case of pilots, doctors or the police - may be enough in some situations to create trust. At work, a title or job function may be enough. But for our faith in others to continue over time, we normally need proof that someone has the relevant competence and the judgement to use it properly. Trust in the workplace often has to be earned.

Tips for building competence-based trust

- At work, people need to understand and appreciate each other's skills and talents. Some teams create a 'team book', in which they record their backgrounds for everyone to read. Other teams hand round people's CVs or encourage members to discuss their professional experience and skills over dinner.
- Colleagues need to be given a chance to prove themselves and show that they can be trusted. For leaders, this means delegating responsibility. Also, as team members succeed, it is important to celebrate success, so that competence is recognised and higher levels of trust can be developed.
- It is important to communicate your trust in other people's competence. Communicating about trust helps to create a trust culture.

2 People trust those who are similar to them

We tend to instinctively trust what is known and similar, and distrust what is different. We are more likely to have faith in people who have the same background, approaches, values, interests and objectives as us. This is important to recognise when working across cultures. There can be unnecessary levels of suspicion when people with different values and working practices meet.

Tips for building similarity-based trust

- Encourage people to ask questions about each other's backgrounds, interests, CVs and experience in order to find similarities. They can then discuss how these may help to improve the team's performance.
- Deal with any distrust that may arise between individuals from different backgrounds. Encourage a positive attitude to diversity. If you hear negative judgements, challenge these and focus people back towards collaboration based on common experiences and goals.

3 People trust those who show empathy

We are more likely to trust people whom we believe have our best interests at heart. It is much more difficult to trust someone whom we think wants to hurt us in some way.

Tips for building empathy-based trust

- Take an interest in the lives of colleagues. See it as part of your responsibility to understand their professional and personal priorities and the pressures they are under.

- Show them that they are important to you. Communicate your readiness to help them.
- Be an advocate for others. Show understanding when people have problems managing their workload. As a leader, you may be able to take on more yourself, or to delegate to others to reduce the pressure on someone who needs support.

4 People trust those with integrity

We generally respect and trust those who are honest, who keep their promises, and whom we think act according to a just moral code. We trust team-oriented people who work for the group more than those who seem mainly interested in furthering their own careers.

Tips for building integrity-based trust

- Communicate clearly about ethics. If you are a leader, try to build a team culture explicitly around defined values. Make clear when you can and when you cannot be open: some management information will be confidential and cannot be shared with team members. If you discuss openly the question of what you can and cannot tell other people, they will respect your judgement when you do feel the need to hold back information. This helps to build rather than damage trust.
- It is easy to say that you are going to be a fair, honest and team-oriented leader. But you must make sure that you really are all these things and that people recognise this.
- Give positive feedback and / or rewards.
- Encourage those who break the rules to respect the agreed values.

5 People trust those who are reliable

Trusting others, or getting others to trust us, is difficult if people are unreliable. You are more likely to be entrusted with a task if you have always demonstrated your reliability with the same kind of task in the past. People will find you more difficult to trust if you are unpredictable.

Tips for building reliability-based trust

- This dimension of trust takes time to develop. You have to prove through your actions over time that you are reliable. This means that you keep your promises and act consistently. This is particularly important in the early phases of team interaction.
- In other words, practise what you preach.

6 People trust those who involve them

We are unlikely to trust someone whom we believe is not telling us the full story. We are also unlikely to trust someone who seems to be reluctant to share their true feelings.

Tip for building involvement-based trust

- Involvement means circulating and sharing key information openly and proactively. But building trust is an emotional process as well as a rational and logical one. So it may be helpful to be open about your feelings as well as about the facts. Involving others in our feelings and showing an interest in theirs can help to develop greater trust.

7 People trust those who trust them

Trust creates trust. If we want people to trust us, it helps if they believe that we trust them. In other words, one of the best ways to develop trust in a team is to show trust in others, even before you really have enough information to do so. This can be risky, of course. People may let us down. But taking this kind of risk can speed up the process of building trust in a team.

Tips for showing trust

- Communicate often and openly the fact that you trust others, even if you are not 100 per cent confident of their ability.
- Be explicit about the fact that you want people to trust you.

The trust challenge

Creating trust can seem difficult in today's business world. Working virtually, working across cultures, and being involved in complex change processes can all make the task of building trust more challenging than in the past.

Increasingly, employees are sceptical of the word 'trust', especially when the word is used by managers in organisations where there is a lot of internal politics, misinformation and a mentality of self-preservation. But trust is essential. By talking about trust in your team or organisation, and developing a trust strategy, it is possible to achieve not only better relationships but also better performance.

What do you say?

Building competence-based trust

Talking about levels of competence

- *What's your background? Are you a specialist in ... ?*
- *What's your experience of international projects?*

Delegate to allow individuals to prove their competence

- *Could you ... ?*
- *Could you take responsibility for ... ?*

Celebrate high competence levels and excellent performance

- *Manfred did a great job in developing ...*
- *I think the team is working really well together on ...*

Communicate trust in other people's competence

- (More explicit) *No, I don't need to see the report before you send it. I trust your judgement on this.*
- (Less explicit) *Why don't you contact the customer directly, since you are good at doing this kind of job.*
- *I trust you to ...*
- *I'm very happy for you to handle this.*

Building similarity-based trust

Ask questions to discover similarities

- *Have you ever worked in ... ?*
- *Do you think that we should ... ?*

Talk about similarities

- *I've also worked in ...*
- *Me too.*

Encourage a positive attitude to diversity

- *I think we need to see diversity as an opportunity.*
- *We have a good range of skills in the team.*
- *It's good to have different levels of experience and background in the team.*

Act against negativity

- *We need to support each other, not criticise each other.*
- *I don't think it's fair to blame Brian.*
- *This will be a challenge, but it can help us to think more creatively to reach our goal.*