



Developing Trust Within a Team

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As executive coaches, we are often hired to help teams become more effective in communication and performance. We always first ask the leader to describe the level of trust present among team members. The quick response is often, “We absolutely trust each other.” However, when we ask for examples of trust, or the lack thereof, to support their response and help us understand the current team dynamic, the leader struggles to give specific examples.

A team leader we were working with shared that his team got along really well. “We never argue or have conflict,” he said, seeming to consider that a badge of honor and a sign his team was highly aligned and trusted one another. However, he was frustrated by the team’s performance results. “They are all talented, they all get along—why isn’t their performance better?” he asked.

While helping the leader put together a development program, we found reasons for the team’s lack of arguments and conflict—despite what the leader thought, they did not trust one another or their leader enough to share any dissenting opinions. Instead, they would stay silent and appear to agree with his decisions, only to go back to their offices and not make the agreed-upon changes to behavior or work process. What looked like getting along was actually a hollow politeness that masked their distrust and lack of desire to work together as a team. Author Patrick Lencioni describes this situation as *faux harmony*.¹ Despite the talent of each individual member, lack of trust was holding back the performance of the team as a whole.

The Business Case for Building Trust

Trust is the cornerstone of team effectiveness, and making a conscious effort to build team trust is key for business leaders’ success. A leader sets the tone for the team’s culture, behaviors, and expectations.

When team trust is high, team performance and engagement are accelerated, whereas low trust limits team effectiveness and morale. Members of teams that trust each other do not want to let one another down. In our experience, members of trusting, high-performing teams understand that challenging each other and holding each other accountable is their responsibility, not just the leader’s.

Trust reciprocity (ie, feeling empowered by the leader to do the work required) is another key. Teams with a highly developed trust level adopt the powerful mindset of “we” instead of “me,” and exhibit behaviors that reflect recognition of the value of every team member’s contribution versus individual importance. This is imperative to break down silos and get a team to commit to collective goals more than individual goals.

Silos develop when individual team members are focused only on their own goals and work roles, which can be counterproductive to team performance by breeding unhealthy competition, task redundancy, inefficient work processes (eg, each team member doing tasks differently), and lack of recognition and collaboration around problem-solving. Research shows a high-functioning team with a mediocre strategy is better than a low-functioning team with a top-notch plan.²

According to one specific research study, “Culture matters, enormously. Studies have shown again and again that there may be no more critical source of business success or failure than a company’s culture—it trumps strategy and leadership. That isn’t to say strategy doesn’t matter, but rather that the particular strategy a company employs will succeed only if it is supported by the appropriate cultural attributes.”³

How Team Trust Looks & Sounds

Trusting teams feel secure. In turn, team members in a safe environment will likely share more deeply, even following a mistake or failure that they might normally find difficult to talk

about. Team members who can readily say I made a mistake—I’m sorry or I need help send a strong signal the team has evolved in the area of trust.

When we see our clients’ teams adopt this vulnerability mindset, we are amazed at team members’ positive reactions to the authentic sharing of apologies and failures. We recently witnessed a team’s reaction to a member who came forward about making a decision without consulting other team members who would be affected by its outcome. She realized she had let her sense of urgency take over and she had rushed into a decision that was in her best interest without fully considering how others would be impacted. Her genuine apology for her mistake became a learning opportunity for the entire team, many of whom admitted they had been guilty of similar mistakes. This led to a greater team commitment to inclusive decision-making and created a decision-making protocol the organization is still using.

TAKE ACTION ✓

- 1 Practice leaders must lead the way in building team trust by being role models and using trust-building exercises, and they must be able to say specifically how they know their team members do trust each other.
- 2 Team members must look for opportunities to get to know each other, share their backgrounds and experiences, and develop the “we” mindset to make the workplace more secure, productive, and enjoyable.

Additionally, team members who look for opportunities to call out their teammates’ good work or behavior are exhibiting trust because trusting teams usually do not engage in negative politics or say something disingenuous to gain favor or mask what may be unpopular but true. A high-trust environment empowers team members to be genuine, share more of themselves, and strive to give each other the benefit of the doubt. One study showed that 99% of team members think trust in the workplace is a vital necessity.⁴⁻⁶ (See **Trust versus Lack of Trust.**)

How Leaders Can Deepen Team Trust

Stephen Covey, in *The Speed of Trust*, writes, “The really good news is that developing trust is a learnable skill. Too many leaders are woefully unaware that trust is an asset that can be consciously increased and developed. All leaders should consider the trust-building competency as the central focus of their leadership work.”⁸

Developing team trust takes time, but leaders can speed up the process. (See **Exercising Trust**.) These exercises foster conversations that grow knowledge and understanding of team members’ experiences, thoughts, and backgrounds. We have found the more team members know about one another, the more likely they will find common areas that will help them understand, and ultimately celebrate, their differences.

Conclusion

“Most organizational performance issues are actually trust issues in disguise,” Covey and Douglas Conant wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*.⁹

“Often, in poor-performing cultures, the virus that is infecting the organization is low trust and the symptoms are wide-ranging dysfunction, redundancy, turnover, bureaucracy, disengagement, and fraud. It’s not that leaders aren’t smart or don’t care; they’re just focused on the wrong cause and they mistakenly underplay trust-building as soft or secondary, when it should actually be the primary focus.

“Embody behaviors that enable people to trust you. When you stop underestimating the crucial skill of trust, you are poised to activate the virtuous circle that comes with a high-trust, high-performance culture—and all things become possible.”

Great leaders and teams regularly invest in trust-building opportunities. The return on investment is worth it because the result is a team that feels more deeply invested in each other as well as their collective success.⁹

Trust versus Lack of Trust^a

INDIVIDUALS ON TRUSTING TEAMS

- Ask for help, which is usually appreciated and often returned
- Ask others what is important to them (eg, values, hobbies) and share freely
- Feel accountable for their commitments and do not want to let teammates down
- Genuinely apologize when necessary and take steps to make things right
- Seek counsel and coaching on work challenges
- Share their mistakes and failures, allowing others to learn and accelerating progress
- Tend to have better culture/engagement/satisfaction scores, leading to greater job retention
- Understand that conflict can be healthy conflict (eg, debating to decide on best solutions)

INDIVIDUALS ON TEAMS THAT LACK TRUST

- Distance themselves and their work challenges from other team members and other departments
- Do not ask for help, which may stall progress or create inefficiencies
- Do not follow through on their commitments because they do not necessarily care about letting teammates down
- Do not use healthy conflict or always avoid any conflict, which may result in poor decision-making
- Hide their weaknesses and failures, potentially impeding learning or slowing progress
- Lack ownership and make excuses or blame others for their own actions
- Tend to have lower culture/engagement/satisfaction scores, which puts their job retention at risk
- Tend to hold back personal information, fearing it may be used against them

^a Adapted from *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*⁷

Exercising Trust

Following are some trust-building exercises practice leaders can use.

PERSONAL HISTORIES

Ask questions that provide fodder for deepening relationships. Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*,¹ suggests:

- Where did you grow up?
- How many siblings do you have and where do you fall in the sibling order?
- What was the most difficult, important, or unique challenge of your childhood—of being a kid?

TRUST-BUILDING QUESTIONS WE USE

- What was your first—or worst—job and why?
- What is a favorite hobby or passion outside of work?
- If you could have any job in the world, what would it be?
- When was a time you were most frightened, and why?
- When was the last time you cried, and why?

TEAM MEETINGS, DINNERS, OR RETREATS

Leaders can come up with their own questions or use tools such as Table Topics and Visual Explorer Playing Cards. (See Resources.)

- Table Topics uses questions that create engaging conversations and in turn help build connections and foster camaraderie. We recommend the leader go first, modeling how the team should engage in the activity by communicating the purpose and value of the exercise and offering more than cursory answers. When team members see their leader opening up, they may feel empowered to do the same.
- With Visual Explorer Playing Cards, teams respond to trust-building questions using a picture or image to help form their answers.

PERSONALITY PROFILES

Online Personality Profile assessments (eg, Myers Briggs Type Indicator, DiSC Behavior Assessment) can be an effective way of learning more about one another. (See Resources.)

References

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Resources

BOOKS

- *The Advantage*. Lencioni PM. Jossey-Bass; 2012.
- *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Lencioni PM. Jossey-Bass; 2002.
- *The Speed of Trust*. Covey SMR. Free Press; 2006.

TOOLS

- DiSC Behavior Assessment. thediscpersonalitytest.com
- My MBTI Personality Type. myersbriggs.org
- Table Topics. tabletopics.com
- Visual Explorer Playing Cards. Center for Creative Leadership: Results That Matter. ccl.org