

Building Trust as a Leader

Techniques and behaviours leaders can use to build trust inside and outside their organisation, and how they can lose it.



The trust challenge

Trust is hard to win, easy to lose.

The most valuable currency leaders have, trust has never been more paramount for business performance than in this disrupted time. Even when there's a digital wall between your people, a high-trust culture will allow you move mountains, rather than trip up on molehills.

For leaders looking to build more aligned, focused and productive organisations, taking actions that create higher levels of trust should be a primary goal.

Put trust on the agenda

Trust is seen — rightfully — as an outcome of a set of actions. Leaders though rarely see trust as a goal in and of its own right. Specifically asking the question 'how do we build trust in our organisation?' at senior leadership levels will make those set of actions that produce trust much more likely to occur.

Be transparent

People are excellent at spotting lies, half-truths and pure spin. Leaders that openly reveal their thinking and the context behind their decisions are much more likely to garner the trust of the people around them. What's more, when people are fully armed with the facts, they will make better decisions themselves.

Give away control

Leaders must be seen to empower their employees with decision-rights. While this can be viewed as simply the opposite to micromanaging, in truth it is more about demonstrating to your people that you value their skills and trust their decisions.

Discuss mistakes (and be humble)

Giving away control will come with its own challenges — less experienced people have a tendency to make more mistakes — but organisations will win in the long-term and especially in times of disruption. Leaders should discuss mistakes in an open, empathetic and humble manner, relating their own similar experiences to the individual.

Collaborate across divisions

People working together across divisions and outside their typical business functions will allow for high levels of trust to be built within an organisation. With only digital platforms available to us at present, virtual coffee meetings, brain-storming sessions and working groups will facilitate this collaboration. When a crisis hits, the trust built up will allow people and teams to move more responsively.

Being authentic

Authenticity as a leader is crucial for building trust. Much like spin, people will quickly identify the gap between what you say and what you do. Coaching and self-reflection are excellent ways of exploring who you are as a leader.

Customer centricity as a culture

By putting customer centricity and satisfaction at the heart of your culture you'll empower your people to make decisions that will build trust with your customers. Share customer experiences stories at a company-wide level to embed this mission into the culture. Every day, with each decision that an employee makes to the benefit of the customer, that trust will grow stronger between them.

Building Trust

Losing Trust

Micromanaging

As tempting and destructive in equal measure, micromanaging is a behaviour that will quickly erode trust in people and organisations. For those that are tempted, regular reporting and catch-ups can help, but this requires real leadership skill to not cross lines.

Working without passion

It can be easy, and sometimes helpful, to be healthily cynical when building trust. Passion, however, is a must for any leader wanting to build trust with their followers. If the leader doesn't care, why should they?

Give realistic targets

Giving people 'stretch' targets in name only that are impossible to meet is counter-productive and will lead to a lack of engagement, unhappiness and heighten the risk of burnout. Make targets tough but realistic, with additional incentives for people who can go above and beyond.

Having a bottom-line mentality

Many companies are firmly focused on the bottom-line right now — survival can depend on it. However, a leader that is perceived to be focusing purely on bottom-line results can quickly destroy trust within teams. When bottom-line results are crucial, tell your team that; they will be just as invested as you.

Being too risk averse

Large bureaucratic structures, centralisation of authority and restricting information within an organisation will engender a culture of fear. Allowing people to experiment and take risks, while remaining accountable, will build trust between them and the leader who supported and protected their efforts.

The trust chain

As has been so visibly demonstrated recently, we are all part of a globally, interconnected supply chain. For customers, how much they trust you can also be transposed onto your suppliers, and vice-versa. Creating quality checks for suppliers (and adhering to them yourself) is an essential action and will lead to trust being built in the long-term and you less susceptible to surprises.

Not listening

Customers, employees, shareholders, and stakeholders are telling us things every day — we just have to listen. Proactively listening to the voice of the customer can quickly lead you to great solutions and a trusting relationship. This listening can be informal — picking up the phone to trusted clients — or more formal methods such as focus groups and surveys.

Protecting privacy

Different generations have different opinions on the privacy debate, but organisations should follow one golden rule; treat everybody as if they wished to remain private (unless told otherwise). Data and privacy incidents — both breaches and mishandling — will always have the potential to rapidly erode trust on an organisational level.

The results of trust

Whether it is a cause or an effect, trust can be a key indicator of business performance, pointing to efficient operations, engaged employees and happy customers.

When organisations want to move quickly with purpose, especially in a climate of disruption, it is the trust between people that will smooth the way.

People in high-trust organisations report to be:

70%
More aligned to company's purpose

40%
Likely to suffer burnout

76%
More engaged

106%
More energy

50%
More productive



Sources:

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