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# TRUST

*the wellspring  
of effective teamwork*

Performance, performance, performance – that's the mantra of many managers. Granted, performance matters, but not to the exclusion of all else. We see this in sports, where team spirit often prevails over individual performance. With an unshakeable belief in teammates, the coach and the strategy, a group of less gifted players can outshine all-star lineups. This trust is the cornerstone of consistent performance as a collective. A lack of it will erode every organization's value – in sports and in business.

## Many tools, one truth

As countless articles and blogs would have it, the key to success in the face of disruption and digitalization is... fill in the blank. Some authors say it's agility. Others believe it to be skills. Still others swear by the ability to learn, change and grow. They all have a point. But even the most agile, skilled and adaptable organization simply cannot do without that old human motivator, trust.

A closer look at the tools businesses need to compete in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous markets reveals why trust is a topical rather than a historical imperative: Professor-philosopher Frithjof Bergmann's predictions about the advent of 'new work' have come true. Fresh styles of leadership have emerged to better manage a workforce motivated perhaps more by purpose than profit. Cross-functional teams are experimenting more – and in more collaborative, virtual ways. All these tools keep the wheels turning so organizations can roll with change. None work without trust.

## The glue of life

In biology and in business, organisms trend towards growing complexity. So what holds our increasingly labyrinthine organizations together? It is who we open up to; who we clue in on what matters. It is the people we trust. This willingness to communicate, apprise and share knowledge is the fuel that stokes the fires of continuous team learning.

The observation that trust is like money is nothing new, but it still rings true. Both are hard earned and easily spent. Unlike money, though, trust is nonnegotiable. There can be no teamwork without it. If collaboration is to flourish, it must be rooted in a working environment rich in trust. Why, then, do so many captains of industry spend so much time talking about performance without considering the wellspring of all team performance – trust?



Steven Covey, the author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, famously opined that “trust is the glue of life.” He thought it to be the highest form of human motivation and the key to creating high-performance organizations.

Trust is indeed a powerful impetus. Peer or mentor, only a trusted party can inspire us to adopt new practices, to unlearn old habits. That makes it an invaluable asset to change management.

With cross-functional, team-driven collaboration in the digital realm figuring more and more prominently in business these days, managers would be wise to foster a culture of trust. Salvatore Belardo and Anthony W. Belardo drew up a roadmap to this destination in their aptly titled book Trust. In it, they posit that most ethical systems serve to build trust mainly to enable cooperation and efficient societal and organizational transactions.

Building a temple of trust

This temple of trust foots on four pillars – inclusiveness, consistency, truth-telling and discipline. It is no coincidence that these are the very values that underpin the cooperation and communication necessary to actuate and negotiate change.

Some welcome the fresh start that comes with change. Others are wary of it, particularly when it threatens the established order or vested interests. More traditional organizations are territorial by nature, with specialized departments jealously guarding their domains like so many medieval craft guilds. That is hardly conducive to the kind of collaboration it takes to achieve true customer centricity.

Businesses have to make this transition. The only way to do that is by understanding how Jack’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors affects Jill; by creating conditions to improve communication and problem-solving within and between teams; by listening actively; by instilling a shared sense of purpose. Guess what – that takes trust.

Trust me, we got this

Trust is too important to be left to chance. It’s all well and good hoping that people will come to trust on their own, but hope is not a strategy. Trust-building has to be part of every transformational process in organizations – especially when making major changes such as adopting new tech.

Transitioning to something like agile practices can be painful – if not outright traumatic. Deep, cutting change can take a toll on trust. Organizations have to arrest this erosion of trust for the workforce to embrace and make the most of new practices and tools.



Change management centers on trust,

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Spelling out a trusted work environment with five Scrum values,

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## The to-dos of building trust

Organizations have to manage change proactively and productively, rather than reactively. To this end, their leaders must cultivate a culture of trust. How do they do that?

Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman summed up the fundamentals of trust with elegant simplicity in their book *The Three Elements of Trust* – positive relationships, good judgement/expertise and consistency.

The gist of this book is that leaders must nurture relationships by keeping up with others' concerns and pursuing results with these concerns in mind, by fostering cooperation and resolving conflicts between others, and by providing candid yet constructive feedback.

Its authors believe a leader has to be well-informed. Technical skills; sound judgement, ideas, opinions and decisions; enough experience to be able to anticipate and quickly troubleshoot issues – this is what instills trust.

Their third element, consistency, is something even small children can sense in authority figures: Does he walk the talk; does she do what she says she is going to do? Leaders seeking to earn trust have to make good on their commitments.

## Nurture your best nature

An organization can do much to cultivate a culture of trust. They can start by taking to heart the subline to *The Fearless Organization* by Amy C. Edmondson – Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth. This book explores the psychological aspects of trust in great depth. One of the main takeaways

is that giving others the benefit of the doubt builds trust. Psychological safety – a key team performance enabler – comes when others give the benefit of the doubt to those who ask for help or own up to mistakes.

A culture of trust flourishes in an inclusive environment driven by values and underpinned by mutual respect. It wilts in teams that waste time and resources on self-protection and retaliation and have few incentives to take risks and innovate.

Teams can start building a trusted environment by first describing how they want to cooperate. A Tioni intervention kicks off by bringing everyone on board to develop these principles as a collective and foster a community of respect, openness, focus, commitment and courage. Teams end up working in agile ways, but with some routines and ceremonies to provide structure.



Once everyone endorses the agreed principles, they have a clear blueprint for championing the consistent actions and behaviors required to reinforce relationships. We encourage team members to recognize the expertise, knowledge and strengths of others, but we also use tools such as the delegation matrix, routines such as feedback rounds and decision committees, and ceremonies such as regular sprint events to ingrain good habits and promote responsibility.

Giving everyone a stake and a say puts team members on an equal footing to create the credibility many top-down change schemes lack. Performance is measured via KPIs using ENPS, NPS, scaling questions about emotions, and the BELIEFS Team Maturity Check by Tioni. The results tell us what to do next. We tweak our mindset coaching to emphasize whatever goal needs more attention – continuous learning, active listening, clear and open communication and feedback even in uncomfortable situations, servant leadership, bolder decision-making, and more.

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## The upshot

Leaders should want to be trusted. With good reason: Perhaps the most important lesson we have learned coaching leaders is that the workforce assesses a manager's performance through the lens of trust!

The real-world benefits of a trusted workplace are many: A sense of psychological safety dispels the fear of making mistakes and emboldens innovation. An open, honest and inclusive culture encourages feedback that helps root out repetitive defects and bugs to improve products and services.

People who can count on and confide in their coworkers are more productive. Trust empowers people to be themselves, stand up for one another and do what they promise to do. It gives them license to tell the truth. It encourages experimentation.

Teams get better as their members share information and learn from one another. Organizations win because a more resilient workforce is more amenable to new structures, processes and cultures. Entrusting teams with greater responsibility is rewarded with a more accountable mindset that benefits the bottom line.

It takes days, weeks, months or even years to rebuild trust lost in an instant. Goethe could have been talking about trust when he said, "the things that matter most must never be at the mercy of the things that matter least." Trust matters. Build it and invest it wisely to tap that wellspring of effective teamwork. Sustainable business success will surely follow.