

COLLABORATION

# Do You Really Trust Your Team? (And Do They Trust You?)

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Trust is a frequently used word. Just in the last month, consider how many times you've used it in thinking about your team?

- If I felt more *trust* in her, I'd give her more responsibility.
- One of the goals for our retreat is to build *trust* among employees.
- It's important that other groups in the organization *trust* my team.

While we talk a lot about trust, what do we really mean when we make these statements? Why does building trust matter so much? And what can we do as leaders to increase trust on our teams?

The *why* part may be easier to answer. Much has been written about trust and its importance in determining employee engagement, team alignment, and how comfortable a leader is delegating to others.

As to the *what and how* parts, trust can be a frustrating action to analyze in that it tends to be a gut feeling for us instead of a concrete choice. This makes it difficult to pinpoint the reasons why we trust one person more than another — and easy to believe there is little we can do to change that. But when we assume that trust is dependent entirely on the behavior of other people, as opposed to our own responses and interactions with those behaviors, we end up falling short as leaders.

To create work environments in which trust can flourish, we first need to understand how it really works: the various ways it can be given, built, and broken. Once we do, we can teach ourselves how to act (and react) in ways that help it grow, even in the most challenging situations. The following questions are designed to help you single out the types of trust that are most lacking between you and your team. If you find that certain areas are especially weak, try taking the suggested steps to strengthen them. You might find that you also help your employees build their capabilities and characters along the way.

## **Trust in Performance**

The first three questions address the “harder” aspects of trust: performance-based factors that have a major impact on how you and your team deliver results, make decisions, and show up to the rest of the business.

**1) How much do I trust my team members to follow through?** At its most basic level, trust is about the work that needs to get done. To trust someone means to be confident that they will follow through on their responsibilities. I have seen whole teams fail to gain alignment and come to a screeching halt because there is an unspoken

annoyance towards one person whom others consider unreliable. This typically occurs when that person isn't holding themselves, or being held, accountable, and it can take place at any level, regardless of title.

As someone in a position of power, you can prevent this. If you want your people to be more dependable and trust one another, as well as yourself, create an environment that encourages open communication. Here are a few ways to do that:

- **Hold regular one-on-one meetings.** Ask team members to bring a dashboard/catalog of their work. This ensures that part of the time is spent on the important items and not just on fire drills. If they are falling behind in a way that creates risk, encourage them to tell you (and don't shame them). People need to feel safe telling you about their problems, or you won't be able to help resolve them. Sometimes this may mean taking some things off of their plate or reprioritizing. Other times it may mean clearing obstacles that are holding them back.
- **Be fair when giving feedback.** Set clear standards for assessing performance at the start of a project. When giving feedback during your one-on-ones, make sure you do so equally based on the standards you originally set. This way everyone will know what is expected of them and be held mutually accountable for their actions.
- **Approach those who may be struggling silently.** Some team members may not feel comfortable approaching you with a problem. Signs that someone may be having a hard time include: demotivation, lack of productivity, high stress, or trouble focusing.

**2) How much do I trust my team members to bring good judgment?** When you find yourself getting burned out as a result of over-involvement in other people's projects or because every decision must be approved by you, it's a sign that you need to work on your ability to give trust in this area. By holding trust back, you not only create process restraints for your team, you risk essentially saying to them, "I don't trust you to do good work without me."

There are a few ways you can change your leadership style to rebuild trust in this situation:

- **Good judgment is a muscle — help your team build it.** After making important decisions, talk them through with your team. Explain the subjective and objective criteria you considered, risks and trade-offs you assessed, and stakeholder considerations. This will teach people how and why you make the choices that you do, give them a better understanding of the company's priorities, and demonstrate the factors you would like them to consider when making judgement calls in the future.
- **Acknowledge that failure will happen, and that's okay.** Consider the mistakes you've made in your career and how they've helped you grow into the leader you are today. Give your team that same space. Let them flourish and fail, and when they fail, help them grow from it as opposed to writing them off. This means letting them make big or hard decisions on their own from time to time. Wean yourself out of situations where you can bear a little risk. You can always follow up with people after and highlight areas for improvement.
- **When a team member makes a poor judgment call — be curious, not dismissive.** Ask them guiding questions to push their thinking and deepen your understanding of their thought process: What assumptions or criteria underlie your assessment or decision? What risk framework did you apply to this? How will this impact the budget, timing, or work for another group? If they are unable to answer those questions, ask them to come back to you with more information or data to back their argument. Ultimately, this dialogue will allow you to more accurately assess your team member's judgment capabilities and lead you both to a better solution down the line.

### 3) How much do I trust team members to represent me and the organization?

Your decision to offer team members greater visibility, both internally and externally, is typically drawn from how well you think they will inspire the confidence of key constituencies. This includes showing up with a professional presence, displaying confidence, and being able to engage with others effectively.

If you're hesitant to give certain employees this opportunity, consider why. At the end of the day, your lack of trust could be keeping them from growing and reaching their full potential. To build trust in this area, try doing the following:

- **Set your employees up for success.** Sometimes people don't know the expectations your organization has for engaging professionally with others, and when this happens, it is no wonder they fall short. Prepare them by creating a set of principles outlining the ways in which they should engage with key constituencies within and outside the company. Explain what your function's value proposition is and how that should be communicated to others.
- **Provide coaching and mentoring opportunities to those interested or those who show potential.** One way to do this is to invite team members to observe or participate in executive meetings or presentations with you. As you watch their skills grow, you will not only be building their confidence, but also growing their trust in you as a mentor, and your trust in them as a performer.
- **Be clear about who serves as the point person for important contacts.** The more exposure your team members get, the more opportunity there is for confusion to arise around who owns what relationships. Let your team know whether or not you are delegating full relationship ownership to them. If you're not, then discuss the best ways to tag-team the relationship and keep each other in the loop. This way, you can empower people without feeling like they are stepping on your toes.

## **Trust in Principles**

The second three questions address “softer” aspects of trust: principle-based factors that have real impact on your team's engagement and satisfaction, as well as the perceived integrity of your team by those with whom they work.

**1) How much do I trust my team members to practice an appropriate level of discretion?** Because knowledge sharing and “being in the know” is a powerful way to connect with others, it can be challenging for people to decipher which information is most useful to share and which information is best kept private. More often than not, this is why people unintentionally breach confidences.

But trust in this area is so important. When you start over-editing yourself due to a lack of confidence in your team's discretion, you risk holding back information that will help them do their jobs well, and their performance can suffer as a result. There are some things you can do to build a strong foundation of trust in this case:

- **Educate your team.** Let them know from day one that not everything you share internally is free game, particularly information that is protected by NDA or creates a conflict of interest with another party or key customers. Provide them with examples of exactly what you mean so they can easily recognize and avoid dangerous situations. If you share something sensitive during a meeting and you want it kept private, don't assume people can read your mind. Just say so.
- **Set ground rules.** At the beginning of team retreats let people know that any personal information that is shared should be treated respectfully. By setting these standards from the start, you will be showing your team that you respect their privacy and take it seriously. Further, you will be helping to build a culture of trust, and your team will be more likely to value the privacy of others and the organization at large when necessary.
- **Be an accessible resource.** If your direct reports are unsure about grey areas, especially during times of change or uncertainty, advise them to come to you or HR for counsel. It's important for people to know you are available to support them.

## 2) Do I trust my team members to respect the psychological safety of others?

Our brains are trained to constantly scan for and avoid people who threaten our sense of well-being. When we perceive someone who is a “threat,” we either attack or retreat, and when we retreat, we lose access to important skills such as listening, asking questions, or speaking up about our ideas. This is why it's so important to maintain a positive team culture. If people feel psychologically unsafe due to one bad egg, they likely won't reach their full potential.

If there is a lack of psychological safety on your team, use the following steps to build (or rebuild) it:

- **Model healthy conflict.** When you and a team member have a disagreement, whether in a one-on-one or in a larger meeting, approach it respectfully by giving the other person space to voice their point of view. It's important that you welcome and acknowledge opinions that are different than your own — even if it means engaging in civil debate. Doing so shows the rest of your team that it's possible to share opposing perspectives with a tone and approach that is constructive.

- **Have a zero tolerance for bullying.** If you witness a team member engaging in blatantly rude behavior — such as interrupting, dismissing, steamrolling, condescending, or using derogatory language towards others — address it immediately. Almost every team I have worked with has, at one point or another, had a toxic member who impacts the camaraderie and collaboration of the group. Rather than avoiding the elephant in the room or forcing everyone to work around that person, you, as the leader, must hold them accountable for their behavior, even if they are a strong performer.
- **Create a culture of appreciation.** Reinforce and capitalize on each person's strengths, perspectives, and contributions to the team by calling out their achievements and wins in meetings or group settings. A culture that only focuses on negative feedback or what people are doing wrong can leave your team feeling discouraged or defensive.

**3) How much do I trust my team members' underlying intentions and motivations?** Ultimately, we need our teams to work toward doing what's best for the organization. This can be tricky, as personal motivations are often at play, and our assessment of them can either increase or decrease our trust in others.

While you can't control a person's intentions, there are things you can do to encourage and reward team play:

- **Break down silos.** Try to manage less by “hub and spoke.” Instead, be intentional about activities which build team esprit de corps. Remind people that they are part of a larger collective by creating shared team goals and connecting them to the bigger picture. Explain how each person's work influences the performance of the larger organization.
- **Consider that people may not be the problem.** Sometimes performance management and incentive systems are the real issue. Ask yourself: Do our compensation systems only reward individual contributions? Is there anywhere in the performance management system where we can applaud or address team players?
- **Be willing to have a direct conversation.** Don't reward bad behavior. If someone is overly self-absorbed, explain that they are hurting, not helping, themselves. Remind

them that leadership roles require cross-functional and team collaboration and that their success will be determined, in part, by how well they work with others.

As you continue to think about how to increase trust among your team and the best ways to create an environment in which it can flourish, return to these six questions. In time, you may find that you are able to more quickly identify pain points that you can help resolve or strengthen. When you give trust, you not only empower others, you also develop the individuals on your team into stronger contributors, and in doing so, you empower yourself as a leader.

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