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Building trust at work:
An ongoing journey

> "Trust is not a matter of technique, but of character; we are trusted because of our way of being, not because of our polished exteriors or our expertly crafted communications."
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> – *Marsha Sinetar*, *corporate psychologist and author*

Trust is the foundational piece of any well-run organization. Without it, employees are more likely to be disengaged, and effective communication and teamwork won't happen. Luckily, there are plenty of strategies for building trust. Whether you are a CEO or a line employee, you play a role in creating and maintaining trust within your organization.

What is trust?

There are two types of trust. The first is "common trust," which is how we operate every day. This is the trust that others aren't going to break socially accepted rules or cultural norms. We trust that others aren't going to steal the furniture at work, or that drivers will stop their cars when the light turns red. This trust is freely given and it isn't taken away unless it's violated.

The other type, "vulnerability-based trust," is a trust that is earned and it is the focus for this handout. It is about feeling safe at an organization, that you can ask for help if you need it, admit if you make a mistake, and aren't afraid of negative consequences.

High performing organizations all have a high level of vulnerability-based trust because it allows them to take risks that can pay off in a big way.

How do you build trust?

First, it's important to know that this is an ongoing effort; you must continually strive to build and maintain trust. It is built by every action and communication. In short, what you do and say are your trust building blocks.

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Here are a few tips for building trust for all employees, whether they are leaders by title or not:

- **Hire good leaders**. If someone is in a supervisory role, they should have strong skills at relating to others, which includes the ability to build trust through their words and actions. If hiring from outside, check references. Internal candidates will have a track record available for review from past performance evaluations and feedback solicited from their co-workers.

- **Train staff**. Ensure you provide soft skills training to employees so they develop the interpersonal skills needed to build and maintain trust.

- **Be honest**. Always be willing to tell the truth, even if it's uncomfortable. If an employee requires performance feedback, provide it in a timely fashion and be prepared to offer the reasons why it's important. This builds trust for everyone, including other employees who can take you at your word and who observe your actions with others.

- **Keep commitments**. If you make a promise, make sure you follow through. Few things violate trust more than failing to do what you said you were going to do. If it's not possible, communicate quickly the reasons why. Provide as much information as you can so employees understand.

- **Model trustworthy behavior**. Remember that leaders, both formal and informal, are always being watched. You set the example for others, so make sure it's a good one. Avoid gossip, stay fully present when communicating with others, and take the time to listen.

- **Admit if you're wrong**. It sounds easy, but many leaders struggle with this idea as they have the mistaken perception that it makes them appear weak. When managers admit they don't know about something, they are being vulnerable and that builds trust. The outcome is far worse if a leader pretends to know and gives the wrong information. That violates trust.

- **Be willing to take risks**. If you can take risks to benefit customers or improve operations, it sends the message that taking risks is acceptable. This conveys and builds trust.

Trust is the foundation

Patrick Lencioni's book the *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* spells out the importance of trust. The five dysfunctions, according to Lencioni, are all related to trust:

- The absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to results

At the end of the day, it falls to all employees of an organization to build and maintain trust. Remember trust is based on what you actually say and do, not just on a message or vision you promote. Work on it every day and see how your workplace improves.

Activity ideas

- Conduct an employee perception survey to evaluate trust. It's best to contract with a reputable third party for accurate results. Were the results surprising? Can you learn from the feedback?
- Start a book club, meet regularly, and trade learning stories. Here's a list of suggested books:
  - **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team** by Patrick Lencioni: High trust = team building
  - **Trust Works!** by Ken Blanchard: High trust = lasting relationships
  - **The Speed of Trust** by Stephen M.R. Covey: High trust = high-performance
  - **The Trust Edge** by David Horsager: High trust = foundation for genuine success
  - **Leaders Eat Last** by Simon Sinek: High trust = Circle of Safety