



# The Science Behind the Way We Work

How to build a culture of trust and trustworthiness in the workplace

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*“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.”*

Ernest Hemingway

## Why trust is indispensable in modern organisations

Trust matters. It is the glue that holds relationships together<sup>1</sup> – in organisations it fosters collaboration and drives productivity.

A strong culture of trust underpins many positive aspects of the workplace, creating environments where individuals feel safe, valued and empowered to contribute their best.

What can science tell us about trust in the workplace? And what evidence-informed practical tips can it give us, to help us build and maintain trust in our teams?

## What do we mean by trust?

The concept of trust seems simple, but it is in fact multi-faceted and explored in various ways across different fields of research. In collaborative settings, trust can be understood as the belief that others will act in good faith and honour their commitments. It includes honesty in negotiation and the expectation that people will not exploit each other when they have the opportunity (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

Trust also involves vulnerability – the willingness to take a risk by relying on others in situations where you cannot fully monitor or control their actions, by counting on their trustworthiness<sup>2</sup>.

## Trust and organisations

Trust is essential to the success of organisations<sup>3</sup>. When employees trust their leaders, colleagues and their organisation, the benefits are far-reaching: they tend to be healthier, more engaged and more motivated.

<sup>1</sup> S.R. Covey (2022)

<sup>2</sup> “Trust and trustworthiness are interrelated but separate constructs. Trust reflects the willingness of a trustor to accept being vulnerable to

another, whereas trustworthiness is a determination that another is worthy of that trust”. C. T. Kwantes & S. McMurphy (2021)

<sup>3</sup> P.J. Zak (2008)

Building trust and ensuring trustworthiness is crucial for all aspects of collaboration. Employees who trust each other and behave in a trustworthy manner are more likely to share information, collaborate on projects and work towards common goals.

Trust directly influences team effectiveness, enabling team members to:

- ask for help
- share feedback openly, and
- engage in constructive discussions and resolve conflicts<sup>4</sup>.

Building mutual trust and personal understanding within teams often matters more than technical expertise, when it comes to successful collaboration.

Context also shapes trust. When team members are faced with uncertain or high-stakes situations, they need to be able to rely on each other to make decisions and take actions.

Trust is also an integral part of the democratic process that the European Commission contributes to. The Commission's goal to earn the trust of Europeans will not succeed unless we build a similarly high-trust culture inside the organisation<sup>5</sup>.

## Building and maintaining trust is challenging

Trust is **complex**. It involves a certain risk: it depends on how vulnerable the person who is trusting is willing to be. Betrayal or broken trust can make it hard to trust again.

Trust is affected by **perceptions and biases**. People sometimes rely on first impressions or superficial cues, leading to misplaced trust or unwarranted distrust. Experiences with one person may influence how we see others who are similar, making it difficult to assess each situation independently<sup>6</sup>. Overcoming these biases requires conscious effort and time.

Trust is closely connected to **reciprocity**. The more you trust someone and act accordingly, the more likely they are to trust you in return<sup>7</sup>.

Trust involves **emotion**. Trust is often a complex interplay between our rational expectations and our emotional states, which can influence trust-related decisions.

Trust is affected by **context**. Organisational culture and leaders' leadership styles can strongly influence the development of trust. For example, team cohesion and transparent communication can foster trust, while environments that are perceived as risky or uncertain can make it more difficult to trust.

## The trust dynamic

The decision to trust (and so make oneself vulnerable) depends upon a series of factors, and how they relate to each other. This 'trust dynamic' includes the characteristics of the person who trusts (the 'trustor'), the person who is trusted (the 'trustee'), their relationship, and the wider context<sup>8</sup>.

The **trustworthiness** of the trustee is essential in trust relationships. This includes their:

- **Competence**. The skills, competencies and expertise needed to produce high-quality work.
- **Benevolence**. A genuine intent to act in the interest of the others, showing care and concern for them, beyond self-interest.
- **Integrity**. Adhering to principles that the trustor respects. These include honesty, fairness and consistency in actions, and alignment with shared values<sup>9</sup>.

For example, when we use our skills to help a colleague meet a deadline, even when we have other commitments, we demonstrate our trustworthiness by showing our competence, benevolence and integrity.

**Characteristics of the trustor** are also important. Some people are more predisposed to trust: this is often shaped by personality traits such

<sup>4</sup> Morrison-Smith & Ruiz (2020)

<sup>5</sup> L. Smilie & M. Scharfbillig (2024)

<sup>6</sup> Farolfi, Chang & Engelmann (2022)

<sup>7</sup> P.J. Zak (2018)

<sup>8</sup> Dietz & Den Hartog (2006)

<sup>9</sup> Mayer & Davies (1999)

as agreeableness or openness<sup>10</sup>. Life experiences, including adversity or betrayal, may also affect trust.

### *Ask yourself: how trusting a person am I, normally?*

**Reputation** influences trust, especially where personal relationships are lacking. We tend to trust people more if we think they have a good reputation, even if their actions are not consistent with this<sup>11</sup>.

**In-group bias** also affects trust. We tend to trust people who seem to belong to our “in” group. Our brains are biased towards people who seem like us, and we may assume that they’ll be more trustworthy. This can lead us to make assumptions based on superficial characteristics, rather than getting to know people as individuals.

Culturally diverse teams may face challenges in building trust. Differences in how team members interpret trust-related cues can create misunderstandings.

**Tip one: trust first.** Be proactive in trusting others. Demonstrating trust can encourage trust in return.

**Tip two: earn trust to get it – show that you are trustworthy.** Demonstrate competence, benevolence and integrity (e.g. make informed decisions, support your colleagues, honour your commitments).

**Tip three: promote a common social identity within newly formed or culturally diverse teams,** by highlighting shared goals and focusing on what group members have in common<sup>12</sup>. **Be aware of in-group bias that can hinder cross-team collaboration.** Get to know colleagues outside of your team to improve cross-team collaboration, focusing on what you have in common (e.g. focus on your shared purpose or the bigger picture).

## Trust and emotion

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Emotions strongly influence decisions around trust. Positive emotions such as happiness are associated

with greater trust. Negative emotions such as fear or anxiety tend to reduce it.

More complex emotions can also affect trust. Guilt and disappointment can lead to more cooperative behaviour, while regret may reduce trust<sup>12</sup>.

**Tip four: harness emotional insights.** Be aware of how your emotional state might be affecting your decision to trust. Foster positive interactions and manage negative emotions constructively. Use emotional check-ins and reflective dialogue to transform complex emotions into opportunities for trust-building and collaboration.

## Trust and remote working

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Trust is harder to establish and maintain in remote or geographically dispersed teams. The lack of face-to-face contact makes it more difficult to develop in-depth personal connections, and to interpret the intentions of other people. Trust also depends on frequency of interactions, which may be less in virtual teams<sup>13</sup>. Virtual interactions tend to be more superficial and uncertain and often feel impersonal<sup>14</sup>.

**Tip five: communicate openly.** Share feedback and concerns. Especially when you’re working remotely, make time to learn about your colleagues as people.

## Trust and leadership

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Trust is central to effective leadership. Employees who trust their leaders are more motivated and engaged, more productive and more committed to the organisation.

Certain leadership behaviours help to build trust. These include<sup>15</sup>:

- showing concern for colleagues
- honouring commitments
- demonstrating capability and persistence
- communicating openly and transparently
- encouraging employees to make their own decisions
- treating people fairly and consistently

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<sup>10</sup> Mikulincer & Shaver (2007); Gillath et al. (2010)

<sup>11</sup> Delgado et al. (2022)

<sup>12</sup> Farolfi, Chang & Engelmann (2022)

<sup>13</sup> Zolin et al. (2004)

<sup>14</sup> Morrison-Smith & Ruiz (2020)

<sup>15</sup> Legood et al. (2021)

- helping colleagues to develop and explore opportunities.

**Tip six: lead with trustworthiness.** Demonstrate capability and decisiveness in your role as a leader: show that you genuinely care about your team's wellbeing and act with honesty, upholding ethical standards.

**Tip seven: create a psychologically safe environment** where colleagues can speak up, and express their opinions without fear of being judged, ignored or rejected. Reinforce the fact that everyone's input is valued, acknowledge mistakes and consider them as opportunities to learn, inviting honest feedback. This will support team-building efforts and team cohesion, especially when working remotely.

**Tip eight: be clear and consistent.** Say what you mean and do what you say.

**Tip nine: practise empowerment.** Encourage autonomy, enabling colleagues to make decisions within their roles. Foster a growth mindset, encouraging learning from mistakes and supporting professional development.

**Tip ten: address trust issues promptly.** When trust is broken, as a leader you need to act quickly to resolve the situation and rebuild trust. Be aware of the leader amplification effect, where a leader's words, actions and emotional tone have a magnified impact on team members<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusion: building trust in the workplace – actionable tips

The science behind trust shows that it is multi-faceted and complex, influenced by interpersonal dynamics, emotions and context. Building and maintaining trust is challenging, requiring conscious effort to overcome biases, manage emotions and adapt to different settings (especially virtually).

By understanding how it works, we can help to build trust in our teams and earn it from those we work with.

## Actionable tips

Here is a summary of the evidence-informed strategies that can increase trust rapidly in your workplace:

**Tip one: Trust first.** Be proactive in extending trust to others. When you show that you trust your colleagues, you create a positive cycle – people are more likely to trust you in return. Start by assuming good intentions and giving others the benefit of the doubt.

**Tip two: Earn trust to get it.** Trust is earned through consistent actions. Show that you are reliable by:

- Making informed, thoughtful decisions
- Supporting your colleagues
- Following-through on your commitments.

Trust grows when people see you as competent, caring and honest.

**Tip three: Promote a common social identity within newly formed or culturally diverse teams,** by highlighting shared goals and focusing on what group members have in common. **However, be aware of in-group bias** that can hinder cross-team collaboration. Get to know colleagues outside of your team, focusing on what you have in common (e.g. on your shared purpose or the bigger picture).

**Tip four: Harness emotional insights.** Your emotional state can influence how much you trust others. Foster positive interactions and manage negative emotions constructively. Use tools such as emotional check-ins or reflective dialogue to turn difficult emotions into opportunities for deeper connection and trust.

**Tip five: communicate openly.** Open communication is key to building trust. Share feedback respectfully, voice concerns early, and listen actively. Especially in remote or hybrid settings, take time to get to know your colleagues as individuals – not just coworkers.

**Tip six: lead with trustworthiness.** If you're in a leadership role, model trustworthiness. Show competence and decisiveness but also demonstrate genuine care for your team's wellbeing. Uphold

<sup>16</sup> A. Galinsky (2025)

ethical standards and be transparent in your actions  
– your behaviour sets the tone for the entire team.

**Tip seven: create a psychologically safe environment.** Foster an environment where everyone feels safe to speak up, share ideas and admit mistakes without fear of judgment or rejection. Reinforce the fact that all voices matter. Acknowledge errors as learning opportunities and invite honest feedback. This is especially important in remote teams, where informal cues are often missing.

**Tip eight: be clear and consistent.** Say what you mean and do what you say. Consistency in your words and actions builds credibility. When people know what to expect from you, they feel more secure and confident in your leadership.

**Tip nine: practise empowerment.** Encourage autonomy by trusting colleagues to make decisions within their roles. Support a growth mindset by allowing space for learning and development, even when mistakes happen. Empowered employees are more engaged and more likely to trust their leaders and peers.

**Tip ten: address trust issues promptly.** When trust is broken, don't ignore it. Act quickly to understand the issue, take responsibility where needed, and work to rebuild trust. Remember the "leader amplification effect": your words, actions, and emotional tone carry extra weight. Use that influence to restore confidence and cohesion.

**Tip for tomorrow...** Start your day by trusting first. Assume good intentions from a colleague, offer your support and watch how this simple act can create a ripple of trust in your working life.

# In a nutshell



*"The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them."*

Ernest Hemingway

## The Challenge

Trust is vital for effective organisations. A strong culture of trust in the workplace helps individuals to feel safe and empowered, and to work at their best.

But building trust is challenging. It involves risk, vulnerability and complex perceptions, biases and emotions.

## The Science

Trust is dynamic, depending upon the traits of the people involved, their relationship and the wider environment.

Trust is affected by emotion. Positive emotions increase trust, but negative emotions reduce it.

Trust is harder to establish in teams working remotely, due to the lack of personal connections and non-verbal cues.

## The Solution

All of us can act to build and maintain trust in the workplace by being proactive in trusting others, working to repair trust when it breaks, and demonstrating our own trustworthiness.

Leaders have a particular role in creating a trust-friendly work environment by leading with integrity, being transparent and consistent, and supporting and empowering colleagues.





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