

PART ONE:

Building Trust One Experience at a Time



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Yesterday I spent the morning coaching two experienced middle managers.

Both were intelligent, capable and deeply committed to their work. Both had impressive track records and a genuine desire to do a good job. Yet they had reached a point where working together had become increasingly difficult. Their organisation, which places a high value on trust-based leadership, had asked me to help rebuild the relationship.

As we explored what had happened, it became clear that there had been no major conflict or defining incident. Neither person had deliberately set out to damage the relationship. Instead, through a series of misunderstandings, assumptions, disappointments and conversations that could have been handled differently, they had inadvertently eroded the trust between them. Neither had fully appreciated the effect their actions were having on the other.

As trust diminished, each began interpreting the other's behaviour through a lens of suspicion rather than goodwill. The relationship became progressively harder to repair.

It reminded me that ***trust rarely disappears overnight. It is built, or lost, one experience at a time.***

Understanding how that process works may be one of the most important lessons any leader can learn.

Why Trust Matters

We are living in a time when trust has become one of society's most valuable commodities.

The Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual study assessing global trust trends across business, government, the media and non-governmental organisations, has consistently reported declining levels of public trust. People have become more cautious about whom they believe and whom they choose to follow.

For leaders, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity. Organisations that deliberately build trust create workplaces where people feel safe to contribute, collaborate and perform. Those that neglect trust inevitably experience friction, disengagement and unnecessary conflict.

- ***Trust has become a competitive advantage.***
- ***Trust Is Not a Feeling - It Is an Assessment***

Many people describe trust as an emotion. I believe it is something different.

Trust is my experience of you.

Every conversation we have, every commitment you keep or fail to keep, every decision you make and every interaction we share is being processed by my subconscious mind. Without me consciously thinking about it, my brain is continuously asking a simple question:

“Based on my experience of this person, can I trust them?”

Stephen M. R. Covey describes this process through the metaphor of an emotional bank account. Every interaction either becomes a deposit or a withdrawal. Keeping promises, listening, acting with integrity and demonstrating genuine care all build the account. Breaking commitments, inconsistency and self-interest make withdrawals.

I find this a helpful picture of how trust develops.

My own view is that our subconscious is constantly maintaining precisely this kind of account. Every interaction becomes another deposit or withdrawal in what I think of as a trust equation. Over time, the balance determines whether we instinctively trust someone or remain guarded.

This process happens quietly and continuously.

Long before we consciously decide whether someone is trustworthy, our subconscious has already been collecting the evidence.

The Three Questions Everyone Is Asking

Research by Zenger Folkman suggests that people are constantly evaluating three things about those they follow.

1. Can you do the job?

Do you demonstrate competence, sound judgement and the ability to deliver results?

2. Will you do what you say?

Are you reliable? Are you consistent? Can I predict your behaviour?

3. Do you genuinely care about me?

Do you have my best interests at heart, or am I simply a means to your own success?

These three dimensions - **competence**, **consistency** and **genuine care**, form the foundation of trust. If any one of them is missing, trust becomes fragile.

The Economics of Trust

Stephen M. R. Covey reminds us that trust is not simply a social virtue; it has measurable organisational consequences.

Where trust is high, communication becomes easier. Decisions are made more quickly. Collaboration improves. Innovation increases because people feel psychologically safe enough to contribute ideas and take considered risks.

As trust increases, speed goes up and cost comes down.

Where trust is low, organisations compensate with additional controls, approvals, meetings, reporting and bureaucracy. Information is withheld. Decisions are questioned. People spend more time protecting themselves than serving the organisation.

Low trust creates friction.

High trust creates flow.

Trust Is Built in Ordinary Moments

Many leaders believe trust is earned through major acts of leadership. More often than not, it is built through ordinary moments.

- Did you listen?
- Did you keep your promise?
- Did you acknowledge your mistake?
- Did you give credit where it was due?
- Did your actions reflect genuine concern for another person?
- Did your behaviour match your words?

Every interaction becomes another experience, every experience becomes another deposit or withdrawal, every deposit or withdrawal shapes the trust others place in us.

Leadership Begins with Trust

Leadership is first a relationship. -> Relationships are built through experiences. -> Trust is the conclusion our subconscious reaches after accumulating those experiences.

It cannot be demanded, it cannot be delegated, it cannot be manufactured through clever communication.

It is earned, one experience at a time.

In the next article, we will explore why trust becomes the leader's greatest source of influence, and how the experiences leaders create determine the willingness of others to follow, contribute and perform.

References

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