

PART TWO:

The Gift Of Influence

Dr Charles du Toit



In Part One, I suggested that trust is not an emotion but the conclusion our subconscious reaches after accumulating our experiences of another person.

The obvious question then becomes: So why is that important?

The answer is simple. When people trust us, they give us one of the greatest gifts another human being can offer - ***They allow us to influence them.***

Influence cannot be demanded. It cannot be created by organisational hierarchy. Nor can it be manufactured through charisma or position. Influence is voluntarily given by people who have concluded that we are worthy of their trust.

Without trust, people naturally retain a degree of scepticism. They continue to evaluate our motives, question our decisions and protect themselves from potential disappointment. That is a perfectly natural human response.

When trust develops, something changes. People become:

- More willing to listen.
- More receptive to coaching.
- More open to challenge.
- More accepting of feedback.
- More prepared to contribute their ideas.

Trust changes how people respond to leadership. That is why ***trust is a leadership superpower.***

Leadership Through the Eyes of the Follower

Many leadership programmes teach leaders what they should do. I prefer to ask a different question.

“What experience does my behaviour create for the person following me?”

Followers respond to their experience of us, not to our intentions.

Leader Behaviour	Follower Experience	Likely Response
Keeps promises	“I can rely on my leader.”	Trust grows.
Listens carefully	“My views matter.”	Greater openness.
Publicly criticises	“I need to protect myself.”	Withdrawal and caution.
Gives genuine recognition	“I am valued.”	Greater commitment.
Coaches mistakes, respectfully	“I can learn without fear.”	Increased learning and initiative.
Behaves inconsistently	“I never know where I stand.”	Anxiety and reduced trust.

Every leadership moment creates an experience, every experience shapes trust, trust determines influence.

So Why Is That?

The answer lies partly in how our brains respond to trust.

When people perceive interpersonal threat, uncertainty or fear, the brain rapidly activates the amygdala, preparing us to protect ourselves. This response is essential for survival, but it comes at a cost. As attention shifts towards self-protection, fewer cognitive resources are available to the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for reasoning, creativity, judgement, problem solving and complex decision-making.

In practical terms, people become more cautious, more defensive and less willing to take thoughtful risks. They focus on avoiding mistakes rather than exploring possibilities.

Trusted leaders create a different environment.

When people feel psychologically safe, the brain is freed to engage more fully in higher-order thinking. People think more creatively, collaborate more openly, learn more quickly and contribute more willingly.

The same person. -> The same capability. -> A completely different level of performance.

The difference is often the environment the leader has created.

Psychological Safety

Amy Edmondson's research has demonstrated that psychologically safe teams consistently outperform those in which people are afraid to speak openly, ask questions or admit mistakes.

Psychological safety does not mean lowering standards or avoiding accountability, it means creating an environment where people feel safe enough to contribute honestly, challenge respectfully and learn continuously.

Brené Brown complements this thinking by reminding us that vulnerability is not weakness but courage. In organisations, people are only willing to ask for help, admit mistakes, offer new ideas or respectfully disagree when they believe those moments of vulnerability will not be used against them.

Trust makes vulnerability possible. -> Vulnerability strengthens learning. -> Learning improves performance.

The Best Version of Ourselves

Think about the difference between working for someone you deeply trust and someone you do not.

Under one leader you willingly contribute ideas, you ask questions, admit mistakes quickly, challenge respectfully, you solve problems together, volunteer to help, become more creative, more resilient. You enjoy coming to work.

Under another leader you become cautious, you filter your opinions, avoid risk, say less, you protect yourself, and you do only what is necessary.

The same person. -> The same intelligence. -> The same experience. -> Yet a completely different contribution.

The difference is trust.

The Leader's Greatest Gift

People often ask me what leadership is. My answer becomes simpler every year.

Leadership is intentionally creating experiences that inspire trust.

When people trust us, they give us the gift of influence. That influence allows us to create psychologically safe environments in which people are willing to think, learn, contribute and perform at their very best.

Perhaps that is why trust is not simply another leadership competency. It is the foundation upon which every other leadership competency depends.

References

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