

Focusing on Trust: A Prerequisite for Creating Results¹

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Work is about creating results together. It can be a very complex challenge (both technical and adaptive) to align everyone's contribution so that the work creates the agreed upon result. There are many elements required to create success towards a result. One element – trust – is often overlooked until it is broken or shaken. To be effective at creating results, a leader has to have the ability to generate, maintain and repair trust. *This is because trust is the necessary predisposition for coordinated action.* In other words, trust is required for there to be high alignment among and between groups of people committed to creating a result together.

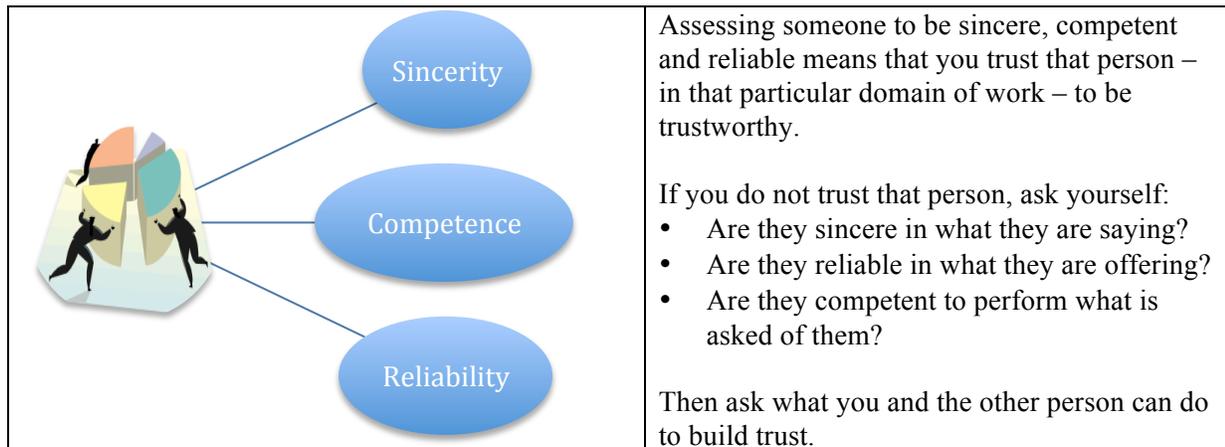
Contents	
I.	How do I Trust?
II.	Trust as a Choice
III.	Trust Breakdowns
IV.	Trust Repair Strategies

I. How do I Trust?

Trust can be understood as believing others to be:

- Sincere – what is said matches what is thought
- Reliable – what is done is dependable and consistent
- Competent – what is delivered reflects the ability and capacity to perform what is promised

If you assess someone to be sincere, reliable and competent in a particular aspect of work, you deem him or her to be trustworthy in that area of work. If one of these three assessments is missing, then there is cause not to trust someone enough to be in high alignment in that area of work.



II. Trust as a Choice

To engage in a trusting relationship with someone, therefore, requires a commitment to the agreed upon result and then reflection, scrutiny and engagement. Without this, you risk either being in simple or blind trust (or mistrust). Trust means choosing to trust knowing that there could be a break in that trust. It is, therefore, a bold act of leadership. This type of trust is based on judgment, constantly nurtured in interactions and words and is particular to each relationship and situation. For example, I may assess someone to be trustworthy in dealing with finances but not competent in working complex negotiations between two adversaries. Or, I may assess someone to be trustworthy in responding to my emails within 24 hours, but not reliable in attending 8 am meetings.

¹ Based on ideas from **Building Trust: In Business, Politics, Relationship and Life** by Solomon and Flores

In any instance where I choose not to trust someone, I have the opportunity to discuss with that person why I don't trust him or her – in that specific area of work. If, for example, I choose not to trust someone to be competent in a particular area, I have a choice of offering training or some support to build his or her competence or not looking to him or her for a contribution in that area.

III. Trust Breakdowns

There are many reasons trust can breakdown on an individual level. For example, breaking a promise or being unreliable in actions or insincere in words can break trust. Broadly speaking, the following are major contributors to organization and/or team breaks in trust.

- Team members and/or leaders do not have a distinction between unfulfilled promises and unfulfilled expectations.
- Leaders spread their assessments of distrust to a whole class of people instead of distinguishing specific individuals.
- Team members and/or leaders exhibit unpredictable moods and behaviors.
- “Cordial hypocrisy” – stating publicly there is trust and knowing there is none – is accepted as an organizational practice.
- Those suffering the impact of unfulfilled promises are not allowed to provide any feedback.

IV. Strategies to Generate, Maintain and Repair Trust

With the result in mind, a powerful leadership move occurs when a leader chooses to act on this issue of trust. Here are a few strategies to inform your actions – what might you choose do?

1. Actions that Generate Trust

- Have open conversations *about* trust
- Tell the truth about actions and events
- Know the difference between *promises* and *expectations*
- Thank and give positive feedback to those who fulfill their promises to you
- Provide constructive feedback to those who do not fulfill their promises to you

2. Actions that Maintain Trust

- Support people to help them fulfill their promises to you
- Be clear on your assessments of others' sincerity, competence and reliability
- Hold yourself to be sincere, reliable and consistent
- Solicit feedback on your impact on others

3. Actions that Repair Trust

- Apologize for your mistakes, inconsistencies and broken promises.
- Learn to forgive the person who caused the break
- Have conversations about the impact of a break in trust on team alignment and the ability to achieve results together
- Move to take actions to repair trust with regular check-ins on progress