

TRUST: the ultimate dealbreaker

I once asked Greg Fury, an incredibly wise ex-COO at Allan Gray asset management what his approach to leadership was. He said that he tried to hire great people and then he got out of their way and let them do their thing. His leadership style made you never want to lose that trust because of the respect you had for him. As a fledgling HR Manager, his support was



fundamental in what I was able to accomplish in the glare of highly contrarian, sceptical asset managers. This trust also played out in small but meaningful ways in the broader corporate culture. Unlike many of our competitors, we never inspected people's bags as they left the building (and we did not have a problem with shrinkage.) When visiting other, highly monitored institutions you felt like a criminal. I call this the 1% rule, where organisations in response to a negative experience over-compensate and punish the 99% good, trustworthy citizens they employ. Over time these micro-transgressions erode mutual trust.

Trust is THE most valuable commodity we have in relationships, both as a follower and as a leader. If you do not believe me, reflect on your own experiences of what can/cannot be achieved in its absence. Want hard data, then look at Prof. Zak's (Claremont Graduate University) research: people in high-trust companies versus [people in low-trust companies](#) reported:

Employees at high trust companies...



have
50%
higher
productivity

That's like an
extra half a
person's
productivity!



experience
40%
less
burnout

Huge cost
savings due to
less costly
turnover.



have
106%
more
energy
at work

Hence the
productivity
boost!



experience
74%
less
stress

Lower stress
means better
collaboration and
more productivity.



report
29%
higher
life satisfaction

No wonder
they are so
much more
likely to stay!

Neuroscience [corroborates](#) this point. When the amygdala registers a threat to our safety, arteries harden and thicken to handle an increased blood flow to our limbs [in preparation for a fight-or-flight](#) response. In this state, we lose access to the social engagement system of the

limbic brain and the executive function of the prefrontal cortex, inhibiting creativity, and the drive for excellence. From a neuroscience perspective, making sure that people feel safe on a deep level should be job #1 for leaders. [Oxytocin](#), a neurochemical central to trust, is a signalling hormone regulating the golden rule that helps us deal with sea of strangers. It makes us more empathetic, reduces physiological stress and improves our immune function. It is created when we connect with others, we cannot generate it in isolation.

Unfortunately, whilst the neurological impacts of trust are clear, the actual word “trust” becomes nebulous and loses all meaning. A useful way to anchor and assess trust is based on the work of Charles H Green (author of the Trusted Advisor). [His Trust Equation](#), illustrated below uses four variables to measure trustworthiness:



Credibility has to do with the words we speak and the quality of our insights. When we speak, have we done the due diligence research, have we crossed our T&C's? Often organisations ensure this by hiring from top institutions or seeking accredited individuals.

Reliability has to do with actions. This is where the person can be trusted to deliver as result of their actions over time. Organisations institute SLA's and performance management systems to manage this aspect of their internal workings.

Intimacy refers to the safety or security that we feel when entrusting someone with something. We might say, "I can trust her with that information; she's never violated my confidentiality before, and she would never embarrass me." This word often raises alarm due to its personal connotations, but it is not about romance. If you do not know what makes a person tick, they hide behind a poker face veil, how do you really buy-into them? Vulnerability is a sign of strength, not weakness. Knowing when and how to show vulnerability is fundamental to deep relationships.

Self-orientation refers to the person's focus. Whether the person's focus is primarily on him or herself, or do they consider the other person. We might say, "I can't trust him on this deal — I don't think he cares enough about me, he's focused on what he gets out of it." Or more commonly, "I don't trust him — I think he's too concerned about how he's appearing, so he's not really paying attention." This links nicely with a term from psychological safety, [impression management](#) and why we don't always admit mistakes. We all have an element of self-orientation and ambition, that is both natural and useful in propelling ourselves and organisations forward. The danger is when its at the expense of others internally in our organisations. Too often I see toxic dynamics in organisations where the enemy is within, fiefdoms and prima donnas proliferate, and the external competitors and clients are mere afterthoughts. Organisations like these ultimately cannibalise themselves over time, or leave a wake of broken, cynical, and disengaged people behind.

Green put the Trust Equation was put to the test in 2010 through a comprehensive study of 12,000 respondents. This study brought some much-needed definition and texture to the broader dialogue around issues of corporate ethics, integrity, and trust. [Careful analysis of the study](#) results offers some striking, and powerful, implications for any person or organization. Here are a few:

1. Credibility, in the sense of credentials and skill mastery, ironically the factor on which *most* organizations place a premium, is the *least* helpful in building trust. More skills training simply will not build trust relationships.
2. Intimacy skills, however, can be quickly taught and offer the best path forward for most organizations to make a real and sustained impact on the trustworthiness of their people. Most organizations, however, do little to develop the intimacy skills of their people, a missed opportunity. Here, finally, is hard data that proves the relative *ineffectiveness* of hard data. Psychological safety is a key ingredient in building intimacy and authenticity. In workshops that I run with intact teams we take people on a journey in bite sized chunks to build genuine psychological safety by learning how to have conversations that count, establishing trust, creating safe spaces, whilst highlighting prosocial behaviours and toxic detractors.
3. Building a culture that helps individuals lower their self-orientation involves focusing on the long-term and working collaboratively. This also helps in fostering trust relationships, both with external clients and among team members. When I was at Allan Gray, we started a corporate citizenship programme, where people came to understand and own their rights AND responsibilities. This moved beyond clarifying the values and storytelling to upskilling people in how to succeed through living the companies values.

This confidence founded on enhanced personal mastery, responsibility to the collective and our clients resulted in these workshops routinely being rated 95% plus, by attendees. People self-nominated to attend, unusual for a values-centred workshop!!

4. Trust can be taught. Conventional wisdom says to focus on your strengths. While this makes sense in areas of skills mastery, the opposite can be true with trust. By focusing on weaknesses, individuals can make disproportionately large and rapid improvements in their trustworthiness, because improving weaknesses has the effect of lowering standard deviation, thereby increasing perceived congruency.

In work conducted by renowned psychologist [John Gottman](#) with married couples that were arguing, he found that the number one factor in determining if reconciliation would occur, was the strength of their emotional bank account. We all know how our regular bank account works. We make deposits, save up money, and when we need that money later, we withdraw it. An emotional bank account is an account of trust instead of money. It is an account based on how safe you feel with another person. In my opinion what adds or depletes this account the most: trust actions. He also identified 7 strategies that couples initiate to strengthen their relationship and I have mapped them to the Trust Equation. There is significant alignment between these two thought leaders work, with the biggest overlaps in self-orientation and intimacy. As Green sagely notes in a corporate setting, this is where the biggest trust gains are to be made.

1. Build Love Maps (Intimacy)

These maps provide a reference for understanding your partners' world. It answers important questions like: How do they think and feel? What is day-to-day life like for them? What are their values? What are their hopes and aspirations? What stresses them? In the organisational context, well-constructed team sessions that eschew the obligatory Amazing Races superficiality can build real depth of understanding. If we want truly integrated communities, the workplace is one of the most accessible entry points to achieve this.

2. Express Fondness and Admiration (Self-orientation)

Couples who are happy together and able to function well appreciate and enjoy the majority of their partners' behaviours. While there may be differences between the two, partners learn to live with them. Peer based recognition programmes in organisations can help drive this dynamic organically and authentically.

3. Turn Toward One Another (Self-orientation)

Conversational patterns play a big role in a couple's level of happiness. Those that reflect interest and respect, even when the topic of conversation is mundane, enjoy healthy

relationships. Physically turning toward one another produces expressions of interest and acknowledgment that beat out conversational tricks at a ratio of 20:1. Highly successful couples maintain a 5:1 ratio during disagreements and even turn towards one another when they are arguing. By ritualising team debriefs/retrospectives that are not blamestorming in intent, organisations can move beyond Groundhog Day and become real learning environments.

4. Accept Influence (Self-orientation)

Avoiding power struggles is essential to a healthy relationship. Successful couples not only take their partners' preferences into consideration, but they are also open to compromises and will even modify their own preferences. At the same time, a balance of power is vital so that neither person in the relationship feels as though they are always acquiescing.

5. Solve Problems That Are Solvable (Self-orientation)

Dr. Gottman recommended five tactics for couples to use to find a compromise:

- Begin with a soft start, so that the conversation leads to a satisfactory result.
- Offer and respond to attempts at repairing issues or behaviours that preserve the emotional connection and emphasize the "couple" over the single partner.
- Effectively soothe your partner and yourself.
- Utilize negotiation skills and compromises.
- Tolerate your partner's vulnerabilities and conversational habits that are ineffective; keep the focus on shared concerns for the relationship's wellbeing.

6. Manage Conflict and Overcome Gridlock (Reliability)

The Gottman Method focuses on managing conflicts, not resolving them. Conflict is treated as an inherent feature of all relationships and not something that will simply go away. Even happy couples report that upwards of 69% of their conflicts are perpetual, meaning they are never truly resolved for good but are dealt with when necessary. The recurrent themes are kept in perspective as part of the couple's landscape and are not dwelled upon.

7. Create Shared Meaning (Intimacy)

Connections occur as each person in the relationship experiences the multiple ways their partner enhances their life by helping them find meaning, sharing a history with them, and working through challenging times. In organisations that value the power of engaged staff, wise leaders and staff co-create a shared Purpose and seize opportunities to live into this.

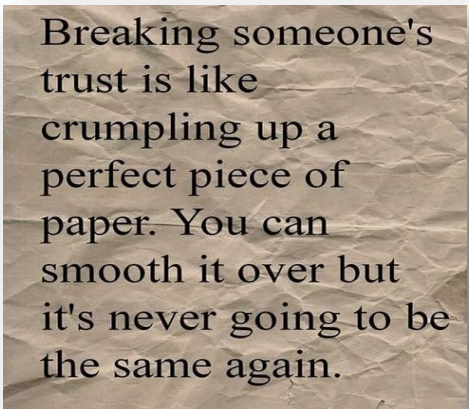
But what if I am too trusting or get hurt?

Most of us at some stage in our lives have experienced the pain of misplaced trust. The answer is not to never trust again, but [recalibrating our trust radar](#). Without trust, we can never experience genuinely deep relationships, rather having to rely on bloated legalese and SLA's.

According to Prof. Roderick Kramer (Stanford Business School) there are [some steps](#) we should embrace in trusting again:

1. Know yourself: if you tend to trust the wrong people you need to learn to interpret the cues better. If you are good at interpreting the cues but do not trust enough, explore the benefits/costs and how you can learn to trust more.
2. Start small. Measured trust begins with small acts that foster reciprocity. (Remember my 1% rule earlier in the article.)
3. Upfront agree to an escape clause. With a clearly articulated plan for disengagement, people can be more fully committed as they are not coerced. Covey talked about the: "No deal, walk-away" principle if you could not get to a win-win outcome.
4. Send strong signals. Most of us mistakenly believe our trustworthiness is obvious. We tend to judge others on their behaviours and ourselves on our intentions. Act transparently and address transgressions otherwise you are more likely to be exploited.
5. Explore the other persons dilemmas. Reality really does depend on where you are standing, and by listening first to understand their context and their concerns before responding, we gain a clearer picture.
6. Remain vigilant and always question. Blind, unquestioning loyalty whilst sometimes demanded is almost always questionable. Keep an open mind and allow others to also question you without going on the defensive.

My closing comment relates to both career and relational success. I often get asked by young people how to get ahead in the corporate world? My response is that it is simultaneously easy and hard. You must become trust-worthy, and with it will flow opportunities, promotions, and the ability to sleep with a clear conscience. The hard part is that you will be tested, often daily to earn this trust. Sometimes you will have to swim against the flow of expediency to be trustworthy. It is your choice.



Breaking someone's trust is like crumpling up a perfect piece of paper. You can smooth it over but it's never going to be the same again.