



6 Ways Your Leaders Can

Build Trust

And Avoid Breaking It



People matter.

A big part of leadership is inspiring teams to meet performance goals. But what determines whether they respond?

Often, the answer hinges on trust. In organisations where leaders erode trust—intentionally or unintentionally—team members feel too betrayed or demoralised to fully commit to their jobs.

Try these FranklinCovey best practices to build trust, inspiring your teams to meet performance goals while fostering professional growth, productivity, and commitment. To help build a culture of trust, share this guide with leaders throughout your organisation.



How do you become a trusted leader?

6 Ways Leaders Can Build Trust:

1. Be truly open to hearing about and, when appropriate, accommodating your direct reports' lives outside work. →
2. Gracefully step in when direct reports are the target of a client's or another leader's frustrations. →
3. Recognise and appreciate people's work, even in the smallest ways. →
4. Handle conflicts between team members fairly and effectively. →
5. Help set and support realistic career development expectations. →
6. Know when to assist versus coach—and how to do both without making people feel inadequate. →



“Trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don’t; rather, trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create—much faster than you probably think possible.”

— Stephen M. R. Covey

Bestselling author,
The Speed of Trust

1. Be truly open to hearing about and, when appropriate, accommodating your direct reports' lives outside work.



Would you trust someone who made you feel like you're just a worker and not a person?

Listen. Really listen. If you act like people don't have lives outside of work, you'll come across as unrealistic, unhelpful, and unfeeling.

What **high-trust leaders** do:

- **Ask questions about people's outside interests.** Your direct reports will hear, "My manager actually cares about me as a person".
- **Check in when team members are saddled with stress or tragedy.** While you're neither expected nor trained to act as a counselor, it doesn't take much to drop by and ask how someone is doing, express your availability to talk, and listen attentively and compassionately.
- **Make it easy for people to take time off or adjust their work when unexpected hardships hit.** You'll gain trust if you respond compassionately by recalibrating schedules and reallocating work rather than holding a direct report hostage to tie up loose ends.
- **Remind people of their workplace benefits.** Lead the way. Recognise what people are going through and urge them to use the resources available to them.

What **low-trust leaders** do:

- **Ignore or downplay people's stressors and interests, often inadvertently.** When managers avoid discussing hardships or nonwork issues, they signal, "I don't care".
- **Make accommodations grudgingly.** If you show signs of resentment when accommodating reasonable requests, you communicate—and foster—distrust.

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“Listening with empathy is one of the most underrated communication and leadership skills.”

— Sue Dathe-Douglass

*Author, *The Ultimate Competitive Advantage**

2. Gracefully step in when direct reports are the target of a client's or another leader's frustrations.

Your direct reports will rarely feel more professionally vulnerable than when a mistake or accusation gets dragged out in public. They'll also rarely feel more grateful than when you help them weather and resolve a mistake or accusation.

What **high-trust leaders** do:

- **Remain calm.** Focus on understanding what happened and where everyone involved is coming from. Assume good intentions, communicate optimism, and ask clarifying questions.
- **Gather more information instead of jumping to conclusions.** Acknowledge without agreeing, and schedule a follow-up conversation. Take time out to figure out what happened.
- **Shoulder the blame or provide cover.** Sometimes the responsibility that comes with a leadership role means accepting the blame for whatever happens on your team—regardless of the extent to which you were directly involved. Managers who understand and embrace this practice tend to be not only respected but also revered.

What **low-trust leaders** do:

- **Watch from the sidelines.** Allowing public shaming is a surefire way to erode trust.
- **Pile on.** While mistakes may warrant feedback, openly berating direct reports piles on more shame. And observers—other team members—remember well the humiliation. It's a costly behaviour.



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“Effective leaders communicate in a way that leaves people’s dignity and self-esteem intact.”

— Todd Davis

Chief People Officer and bestselling author, *Get Better*

3. Recognise and appreciate people's work, even in the smallest ways.



Extending recognition and appreciation is a simple to-do that results in big dividends.

A scarcity of positive feedback from leaders is a top complaint. Recognition builds trust by signaling validation and respect for other people's work.

What high-trust leaders do:

- **Express appreciation both privately and publicly, even if it's to say you don't do it enough!** Set a weekly quota for the number of times you give feedback to each team member.
- **Recognise big milestones:** work anniversaries, for example.
- **Redirect praise that gets heaped on you.** Willingly acknowledge and attribute the work of team members. Direct reports whose managers credit them when complimented are more inclined to try harder to meet performance goals.

What low-trust leaders do:

- **Signal favoritism by distributing praise unevenly.** People notice—and may resent—lopsided recognition. Consider keeping conversations private between you and your superstar to minimise perceptions of favoritism.
- **Give insincere recognition.** If you have a habit of doing this, team members will question your motivation for praising them.
- **Alter direct reports' work without explanation.** Building trust requires transparency. Knowing why suppresses doubt and fosters trust.

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“Good words have their place. ... And when those words are followed by validating behaviour, they increase trust, sometimes dramatically.”

— Stephen M. R. Covey

Bestselling author,
The Speed of Trust

4. Handle conflicts between team members fairly and effectively.



You can handle conflict by addressing it—fairly and effectively.

Pay close attention and think through your options when direct reports' conflicts threaten performance or job satisfaction.

What **high-trust leaders** do:

- **Create regular opportunities for people to disclose issues about co-workers.** Without a clear venue for sharing these issues—like recurring 1-on-1s in which you make a point of asking how working relationships are going—it's too easy for direct reports to justify keeping unhealthy conflicts to themselves. You need to pave the way for direct reports to speak up when their job satisfaction is compromised. People leave people, not jobs.
- **Find ways, when possible, to observe potentially problematic behaviours firsthand.** Although your direct reports may behave differently when you're in the vicinity, try to see for yourself what's going on. It can help you better understand each person's perspective and calibrate your response accordingly.
- **Signal intentions—and the why behind them—in a transparent way.** If you're upfront, clear, and specific about what you plan to do (and share good reasons for), your direct reports will more likely trust that you take your role as a leader—and their concerns—seriously.

What **low-trust leaders** do:

- **Hastily brush off conflicts that seem trivial or implausible.** What might seem minor or made up to you may be overwhelming and very real to your direct report—who may also be less accustomed to handling workplace conflict than a leader. It's critical to prove to people that they can come to you with any problem.
- **Fail to take action when harassment claims emerge.** There are legal (not to mention moral) hazards of looking the other way. What you do in these situations should be in line with company policy.

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**“When you
defend those who
are absent, you
retain the trust of
those present.”**

— Dr. Stephen R. Covey

5. Help set and support realistic career development expectations.



Confront the reality, not the person. Lead out courageously in conversation.

Although it's up to each individual to work hard and learn the skills that can lead to additional responsibilities, people crave honest appraisals of their options and support in exploring them—and lose trust in leaders who make false promises.

What **high-trust leaders** do:

- **Follow through on what you say you'll do.** Direct reports remember each mention of the possibility of a future raise, a promotion, or a path to learn more and take on new responsibility. While you should be careful not to make overly optimistic predictions, you should still advocate for and guide people on what's required of them to advance.
- **Recognise and honor people's desire for training, knowledge, and new responsibilities.** While raises and promotions are often the end goal, many direct reports are no less appreciative when leaders sponsor, support, and supply opportunities for them to learn and grow.
- **Spot and relay opportunities that might not be visible to direct reports.** When acquisitions, reorganisations, and turnover happen, it's worth spending a moment to ask yourself: Does this present one of your team members with a new opportunity?

What **low-trust leaders** do:

- **Commit errors of omission—even if inadvertently or with the best of intentions.** Avoiding conversations about business realities or hard truths erodes trust. Maybe you don't want to dash people's hopes or look bad in the short term, but failing to see how much people are reading into your vague statements often leads to direct reports blaming you when they are disappointed.
- **Use false promises to keep people engaged.** It can be painful to contemplate the loss of a team member, but stringing a direct report along with the promise of future opportunities and development builds resentment. There are better ways to motivate and retain your best people.

6. Know when to assist versus coach—and how to do both without making people feel inadequate.



Inspire confidence by listening for opportunities to help team members develop their skills.

Trusted leaders know the difference: when to pitch in and when to reassign a task, when to be a sounding board and when to play a supporting role, when to assist and when to coach.

What **high-trust leaders** do:

- **Distinguish between emergencies and reasonable challenges.** Express confidence in team members' abilities to conquer.
- **When assisting the team, act with an individual-contributor mindset.** Play like a peer.
- **Show confidence in the team when direct reports struggle with a new task—especially if reinforcements or reassignment are needed.** Your direct reports will be relieved to learn you're not expecting perfection when they tackle something new and that you'll continue to give them opportunities to stretch their skills, even in challenging situations.

What **low-trust leaders** do:

- **Shrug off questions and requests for information.** Yes, you may not know, but the perception is often that you don't care. Try answering with: "I don't have the answer right now, but I will do my best to find it". And be sure to follow up. "I don't know, but let's explore solutions together" is also a viable approach.
- **Signal frustrations or disappointment when people ask for help.** If you agree to carry the team on your back across the finish line, to provide the instruction people need to excel, do so willingly. Otherwise, the team will likely hesitate to turn to you for help.

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**“The number one job
of any leader is to
inspire trust.”**

— Stephen M. R. Covey

Bestselling author,
The Speed of Trust



“Nothing is as fast as the speed of trust. It’s the one thing that changes everything.”

— Stephen M. R. Covey

Bestselling author,
The Speed of Trust

Team members who trust their leaders communicate with transparency, invest fully, and produce profits. They meet performance goals and enable strategic initiatives. They inspire confidence and extend trust to others.

With leaders who conscientiously build trust, your organisation will collaborate more effectively and drive results.

That matters—because trust is the currency of speed. And navigating a world of shifting terrain, from digital superhighways to global markets, requires speed, hairpin turns included.

FranklinCovey provides leadership development solutions to help leaders at all levels build trust (and avoid breaking it). Our world-class learning solutions—delivered Live-Online, On Demand, or Live In-Person—are designed to build exceptional leadership skills throughout your organisation.

To learn more, email us at info@franklincovey.com.au or visit franklincovey.com.au/build-trust

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