TRUST AT WORK

Trust Is Shifting

Trust has always been part of work. What may have changed is what we are asked to trust, and whether we can still see it being built.

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THE PROBLEM

TRUST, IN THIS CONTEXT

Willingness to rely on someone, or something, when we cannot check everything ourselves.

Trust, but to do what?

The coffee run used to be where we worked out what was really going on. Who was worried, who had heard something, who we could be straight with. For plenty of teams it is now a Teams or WhatsApp message, or it does not happen at all.

The big surveys say most of us trust our own employer. Edelman's 2026 Trust Barometer has it at 79% for Australians. Fair enough, but to do what? Edelman asks how much people trust an organisation "to do what is right", and leaves each of us to fill in the rest. We would trust a mate to mind the kids and check the house while we are away, and still not leave them alone with the last Guinness.

Trust depends on the job. Academic research says the same. We tend to judge whether someone can do the task, whether their intentions towards us are good, and whether they keep to principles we accept (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). We arrived at the same place from the practice side. Our Trust Effect™ has Care, Competence and Consistency, and adds Communication and Candour. What the five add up to is credibility: what people give us when they see all of them.

That gives trust three sides, and most conversations only cover the first.

Being trustworthy	Being trusting	Feeling trusted
Giving other people reasons to rely on us.	Extending trust to others, often before we have proof.	Whether the person on the receiving end believes we trust them.

A system can be logical, safe and legal and still leave the person on the receiving end feeling watched. We can be trusting and trustworthy and miss the third one completely.

> **Trusting someone and them feeling trusted are different things.**

THREE SIDES OF TRUST

Trustworthy, trusting and trusted

1 Being trustworthy: what people look for, and when

Early on, we watch for integrity. Care counts for more as we get to know each other (Schoorman, Mayer and Davis, 2007). In teams that only met online, a teammate's integrity predicted trust early on more than their goodwill did (Jarvenpaa, Knoll and Leidner, 1998). Competence, care and consistency show up over time, in small things done the way we said we would.

2 Being trusting: do we need to go first?

Partly. Psychologists have studied this with a game called the prisoner's dilemma. The UK TV show Golden Balls ran a version of it as "split or steal", where two players each choose to share a jackpot or grab it. About half shared, and they shared less with someone who had voted against them earlier in the show. What people had done to them counted for more than what they promised (van den Assem, van Dolder and Thaler, 2012). Real workplaces are untidier. In one study of managers and their staff, how much a manager trusted an employee and how much the employee trusted the manager were only loosely linked. About a quarter of pairs trusted each other highly, about a fifth trusted each other little, and half were mismatched (Brower et al., 2009). The manager's trust mattered in its own right, regardless of how the employee felt back. Trust often comes back, it just does not come back reliably.

3 Feeling trusted: how do I know?

Bus drivers in one study said they knew they were trusted when they were asked to mentor newer drivers, asked for advice, handed some of their supervisor's tasks, told about sensitive changes early, and not watched all the time (Baer et al., 2015). Feeling trusted brought pride, and it also brought extra pressure. The net effect was small.

Leaders are only moderately good at knowing how much each person trusts them, and tend to assume that if they trust you, you trust them (Campagna et al., 2020). In another study most staff got less trust than they wanted, and fairness was highest where what they wanted and what they got matched. So it is worth asking people what trust looks like to them.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HOW WE USE CONTROLS

Controls are not the enemy. In a survey of 582 European professionals, controls were linked with more trust in the employer when people saw them as fair. They undermined trust when they were inconsistent, rigid, or rewarded the wrong behaviour (Weibel et al., 2016). Controls can also get cooperation without trust (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). Relying on someone because we know what they will do, or what they can do, is a different thing from trusting them. We are relying on their ability, not necessarily on them as a person, and plenty of working relationships run on that. The system is only half of it. How it feels to the person is the other half.

Ask people what trust looks like to them.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

Why trust is harder to build than it looks

1 Some of us trust more than others

People differ in how readily they trust. It is a fairly stable trait that sets our starting point before we know anyone (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995).

2 Fewer coffee runs

Trust grows from seeing someone be reliable, and distance means fewer chances to see it. Inside established teams it seems to matter less. Google's Project Aristotle, which studied 180 teams, reported little to no effect of location on how well a team worked. New relationships and links between teams are different. After Microsoft moved to remote work, collaboration between teams became more siloed and shifted to messaging (Yang et al., 2021), and groups that only used text chat built trust slowest and it was more fragile (Bos et al., 2002). We found no workplace study that puts the coffee run against trust. We have a hunch, and we are sticking with it.

3 Silence read as character

In dispersed teams, people tend to blame a colleague's character for a delay or a silence, when the cause was their circumstances (Cramton, 2001). A slow reply from home is easy to read as "can't be bothered".

4 First impressions and introductions

We can decide in a fraction of a second whether a stranger looks trustworthy, and other people reach the same verdict (Willis and Todorov, 2006). Introductions count too. We call it borrowed trust, and researchers call it trust transfer: when someone we trust vouches for a person, our trust in that person rises (Ferrin, Dirks and Shah, 2006). In an experiment about buying concert tickets from a stranger online, a friend's good word raised trust a lot, a stranger's did nothing, and a warning cut trust whoever it came from (Bozoyan and Vogt, 2016). We see it in how we are read ourselves. Walk into some rooms in China with grey hair and a grey beard and people tend to listen, because age reads as respect. In some rooms here, I have to earn the right to be heard. Same person, different room.

5 Us and them

We trust people in our own group more, because we expect fair treatment from them (Foddy, Platow and Yamagishi, 2009). More powerful people also tend to place less trust in others (Schilke, Reimann and Cook, 2015).

6 Tools that sound sure

We cover this in our Critical Thinking paper. A confident answer is easy to trust. Only 36% of Australians say they are willing to trust AI, yet 57% of employees who use it have relied on its output without checking (KPMG and University of Melbourne, 2025).

WHEN IT BREAKS

Lost fast, rebuilt slowly, and sometimes not at all

Everyone knows trust is lost fast and rebuilt slowly. What the research adds is why.

In one experiment, people passed money to a partner who could keep it or send some back. A partner who simply returned nothing at first, then behaved fairly, largely won trust back. One who had promised to return money and then returned nothing did not, even after fair play in the later rounds (Schweitzer, Hershey and Bradlow, 2006).

Nobody has published a timetable for getting trust back. Anyone quoting months or years is guessing.

WHAT IT COSTS THE PEOPLE WHO STAY

1. **They do less, and care less**

   After layoffs, the people who remain tend to become less committed. Feeling some control softens it (Brockner et al., 2004).

2. **How it was done counts for more than what was done**

   For people who stay, a fair process matters more than a fair outcome (van Dierendonck and Jacobs, 2012).

3. **A broken unwritten deal travels a long way**

   An unwritten deal is what people believe they were promised without anyone writing it down. Think of "hard work earns security" or "we hear big news from our own manager first". When people feel it has been broken, trust, satisfaction and intention to stay fall, and more of them leave (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994).

4. **Silence arrives before anyone tells us**

   People keep quiet because of unspoken rules, formed early (Detert and Edmondson, 2011).

EVEN THROUGH LAYOFFS AND RESTRUCTURES

Trust in management seems to cushion the hardest stretches. At a university that had been through repeated budget cuts, staff who trusted management were less burnt out and more committed (Jiang and Probst, 2019). A UK survey of more than 16,000 employees showed the same pattern (Wang, Mather and Seifert, 2018). The one layoff study we found that measured performance did not link trust to supervisor ratings six months later (Brockner et al., 2004).

INTENTION COUNTS

Whenever something changes, whether it is a restructure, a new tool or a new way of working, people ask what the intention is, and whether it is being done fairly, before they ask about the plan. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman call the first benevolence, the belief that someone wants to do good by us (1995). Our intention can be sound and still not be seen. When Paul O'Neill took over Alcoa in 1987 he made worker safety the first priority and kept acting on it, so people could see his intention in what he did next. It is a case, not a study (Duhigg, 2012).

WHAT WE CAN DO

Five behaviours, and three places they show up

The Trust Effect™ is the framework we use in our programs. It treats trust as five behaviours other people can see. We put Care first, and Care starts with our intention: what is in this for them?

Care	Competence	Candour	Communication	Consistency
Make our intention clear: what is in it for them. Ask about their context, not only their content. Protect their outcome when it costs us.	Simplify without dumbing down. Share the implications early. Say when something is outside our expertise.	Say the true thing to the person, not around them. Share certainty and doubt openly. Own our mistakes first.	Say it early, with no surprises. Big news comes from their own manager first. Listen to understand.	Do what we say, even in small things. Be the same under pressure as in calm. Close the loop.

IN A TEAM

Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* puts trust at the base, and says that where trust is present we are more willing to have the hard conversation. It is a business fable rather than a tested model, so we treat it as one useful example among many. A habit that helps in any team: ask people what they expect, set the limits, and say why.

IN CHANGE

Our change curve is adapted from Kübler-Ross. Before shock there is a stretch of anticipation and rumour, and we have added it as its own stage. What does that stretch do to trust? We could not find a study that measured it. What we do know is that rumour and uncertainty begin before a change is confirmed (Bordia et al., 2006), and that honest information only cut belief in a rumour when the source was seen as honest (Bordia, DiFonzo and Schulz, 2000). So whether the truth lands depends on whether we are believed. Our working view is that trust is already being spent or banked in that stretch.

IN THE SALE

Most companies assume the buyer will trust them. We talk about budget, timing and brand, and brands spend a great deal building trust, not only the wish to buy, because trust is what turns into loyalty. Trust can sometimes sit somewhere other than where we have been building it. In 2013 I was working with a company providing remote support services to law firms. A law firm could see the server unit in the corner of the office, with its fan and cooling. Few knew what was in it, but they knew their data was there. A cloud they could not see felt riskier, and people pointed at the sky. It was also a loss of control. They could check the server unit, and a cloud asked them to rely on something they could not check (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). Logically the cloud was cheaper, more flexible and probably safer because it was backed up. The doubt came from not understanding it, so it had to be explained. We had been building trust in the wrong place. Researchers treat trust in a technology as separate from trust in people (McKnight et al., 2011), and AI shows the same pattern. So the question is: where does the doubt sit, with us, with the product, or with what it asks us to change?

ABOUT DALE CARNEGIE

Who wrote this, and what it was built from

We work with HR, people and commercial leaders to turn frameworks into behaviour that shows up in the actual work, in the week after the training.

114
years globally

85+
countries, in 35 languages

430+
of the Global Fortune 500

Top 20
leadership training company every year since 2016

SOME OF THE ORGANISATIONS WE WORK WITH

AWARDS

HOW WE WORK

Everything in context
The situations worked through are the organisation's own. Nothing gets taught against a generic case study about somebody else's business.

Simulation and practice
People rehearse the hard conversation before they have to have it for real, on the pressures they are actually facing.

Feedback in real time
Coaching in the room while it still counts, so the practical version is the one that gets remembered.

Trust sits in different places for different people.

Where it sits in your business is worth a conversation. Happy to have a chat, or to send through the rest of the series.

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Scan to take the Trust Pulse Check

Want a quick read on your own five Cs, or your team's? The Trust Pulse Check takes about four minutes. Ten statements, and you'll see your shape straight away.

SOURCES AND EVIDENCE

Sources

Each figure traces to the publisher's own release or paper. Where a sample size or geography is not published, we say so rather than fill the gap. How we read research: we lean on peer-reviewed work for anything about cause and effect, and use surveys for scale. Edelman is a communications firm that publishes the Trust Barometer. KPMG is one of the big four and ran its AI study with the University of Melbourne. Google's own write-up of Project Aristotle was not available to us when we checked, so its findings are as reported by others.

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Every one of these papers started as a question from an HR, OD or L&D leader, in a consultation or a five-minute conversation.

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