# Want Your Employees to Trust You? Show You Trust Them

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Executives and managers invest a lot of effort and time building trust in their teams: both establishing trust in their employees and ensuring that their employees trust them in return. But many employees say they do not feel trusted by their managers. And when employees don't feel trusted, workplace productivity and engagement often suffer. It's up to managers to signal trust in their employees in consistent and thoughtful ways.

We have explored the dynamics of the trusting relationship between managers and their employees for over 10 years in multiple organizations and hundreds of manager-employee pairs. Research that we and others have conducted offers evidence of the ripple effects of a manager-employee trust gap. Employees who are less trusted by their manager exert less effort, are less productive, and are more likely to leave the organization. Employees who do feel trusted are higher performers and exert extra effort, going above and beyond role expectations. Plus, when employees feel their supervisors trust them to get key tasks done, they have greater confidence in the workplace and perform at a higher level.

In short, trust begets trust. When people are trusted, they tend to trust in return. But people must *feel* trusted to reciprocate trust. Managers have to do more than trust employees; they need to show it. Based on our research work and time spent in companies studying trust, we've identified some of the most important ways managers erode trust and how they can signal it more clearly to their teams.

## How Managers Chip Away at Trust

Mutual trust requires some degree of risk-taking and reflection. There are at least three reasons why leaders and organizations don't demonstrate their trust in employees:

**Lack of self-awareness.** Managers often lack the self-awareness required to realize that their own actions may communicate a lack of trust. They are likely to think that because they trust an employee, the employee will know it. But even well-intentioned actions, such as providing support or periodic check-ins on a project, may convey to employees that they are not trusted enough to complete the work independently.

**Risk-averse by design.** Organizations often design their structure, policies, and culture in order to minimize risk and optimize efficiency. But organizations that are risk averse may also signal that employees cannot be trusted with resources and information. Centralization of authority, restricted resources and information, and bureaucratic cultures heavy with regulation limit employee initiative. Managers may support their employees taking that initiative — but in a risk-averse organization, such ideas won't likely see the light of day. One company we worked with was seeking to cultivate innovation and creativity, but the approval for new projects involved a 12 -month process requiring endorsement from a C-suite committee. This process was effectively inaccessible to many employees, stifling innovation and leaving employees' feeling untrusted. And even if the fault lies with the organization's policy, employees may still blame their own supervisor, thereby eroding trust.

**"Bottom line" mentality.** Pressure to reach performance targets and control costs sometimes leads managers to do things that unintentionally signal a lack of trust. When these pressures are great, many managers become focused on their own job security and respond by constricting control**.** This can lead to the type of thinking that focuses on only securing bottom-line outcomes, which often come at the expense of other priorities, like developing relationships and empowering employees to make independent decisions.

## What Managers Can Do to Signal Trust

Despite these common obstacles, there are several ways managers can signal trust in an employee:

**Taking stock.** First, don't assume that your employees have high trust in you. Learn to read their trust levels by understanding the risks and vulnerabilities they face. Take an inventory of the practices, policies, and controls found in your organization: Are they risk-tolerant? When you look at policies from the perspective of the employee, are they designed to engage employees or to protect the organization from them?

Take an assessment of your own conduct, too — the list of questions below is a good start. If you've answered "no" to any of these questions, your employees likely do not trust you as much as you would hope.

**Does Your Team Feel Trusted? 7 Questions for Managers**

Do I show my employees that I feel confident in their skills?

Do I show my employees that I care about their welfare?

Do I show my employees that I think they are capable of performing their jobs?

Do I give my employees influence over the things that affect them most on the job?

Do I give my employees the opportunity to take part in making job-related decisions that affect them?

Do I encourage my employees to take risks?

Do my words and deeds convey how much I trust my employees?

**(Carefully) giving up control.** The onus to grow mutual trust is on the manager. That means not only cultivating employees' trust, but conveying prudent, incremental trust in them. Managers need to adequately scope assignments, grant resource authority, and not undermine it later.
Ceding control also requires a certain tolerance for mistakes. Rather than taking harsh corrective action, treat employee mistakes as opportunities to facilitate learning.

**Sharing information.** Another important way leaders take risks is communicating openly and honestly with employees. Managers are often reluctant to share information and explain their decisions for fear of premature leaks, second-guessing, or dissension. Being transparent signals that you trust your employees with the truth, even in difficult circumstances. One manager of public sector employees faced this challenge for several years when making merit pay decisions with an ever-shrinking budget. His solution was to provide a detailed description of the budgetary constraints and how criteria for merit raises would be applied. He provided this explanation before communicating merit decisions. Such openness not only preempted suspicions of bias, it conveyed that the manager trusted employees with sensitive information.

**Pushing for needed change**. Earlier, we mentioned a company whose innovation was constrained by a risk averse culture; one they knew they needed to change. They created a new review committee composed of middle-level managers who allocated smaller sums of capital to projects within 1-2 days. By expanding this authority, the company conveyed trust in employees across ranks. And, in rapidly allocating smaller amounts of capital, management showed a willingness to experiment and learn from potential missteps. In short, the company is more willing to take risks with employees.

**Investing in employee development.** Finally, letting employees know you are willing to invest in their potential and advocate for them conveys confidence and trust. Get to know their career aspirations, then help them reach their goals. After all, as a manager, your own success is dependent on the success of those you develop.

Managers may be unaware of the unintended signals they send regarding how much they trust their employees. To build an environment of sustained mutual trust, learn to read the trust landscape and take care to clearly signal trust and confidence in employees.

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