



Workplace Satisfaction Project Trust Building Tools

Trust, along with mutual respect and appreciation, is one of the absolute fundamentals of high workplace morale. Employees who trust their managers and coworkers, and trust that they can rely on the workplace system and be their authentic selves, are happier, more productive, and have high retention rates. Conversely, employees in a low trust environment tend to be isolated, suspicious, angry, stressed, defensive, and unproductive. It is arguably the single-most important feature of a workplace from a morale perspective.

Trust does not come with a supervisory title, nor can it be demanded. Trust is a unique workplace feature in that it can only be earned, and employees must give it freely and willingly to each other if it is to exist at all. Trust can only be earned through consistent and authentic demonstration of integrity, principle, wisdom, honesty, and genuine care. It simply cannot be faked; in fact, attempts to develop trust by faking the above qualities will only result in a reduction of trust. It is therefore a workplace feature that managers cannot simulate, and levels of trust in a workplace are very often a direct reflection of the genuine leadership skill of the manager.

- Trust must be built early and maintained often. Welcoming new staff to the team with an activity, such as a group lunch, and showing them genuine value during the activity, will lay the foundation for that new employee to feel trust.
- Consistency is a key feature of trust. Trust can only be built up over time, through repetitive demonstration of integrity, honesty, and skill – but it only takes one inconsistent act to undo much hard work of trust-building. Trust is unforgiving of inconsistencies, shortcuts, laziness, or failure to do ‘the right thing’.
- When employees say positive words, and back them up with positive actions, trust is built. Discord between a person’s words and actions, such as when ‘lip service’ is paid or when promises are not kept, reduces trust in all human relationships.
- Managers can show trust in an individual employee’s skills by increasing the responsibility and scope of the employee’s duties, or by trusting them with a challenge. This directly demonstrates faith and confidence to the employee, which heightens their own trust. Freedom from over-management, also known as ‘micromanagement’, also demonstrates this same confidence and heightens trust.
- All employees should actively solicit the input and feedback of others – whether subordinates, peers, or supervisors – for the purposes of professional growth and trust-building. Failing to value the input and feedback of others demonstrates a lack of trust (and/or a lack of humility, a personal characteristic which is tied both to positive trust and to strong leadership). Managers can and should create ‘safe’ means of feedback being provided and valued, such as mediation or mentoring.
- Direct, honest feedback between employees in a high-trust environment is a sign of a very high-functioning workplace, whereas employees in a low-trust environment will either provide no feedback at all, provide it falsely to avoid conflict, or will provide it in a manner likely to result in unnecessary conflict. Feedback in a low-trust environment should be managed very carefully, so as to slowly grow trust instead of crushing it with impatience. Anonymous feedback is an indicator of a low-trust environment, but it is still a more worthwhile tool for growing trust than no feedback at all.

- Retribution for honest feedback or opinions is a massive cause of low workplace trust. If employees indicate that they are open to receiving feedback and ideas, and then actively mistreat other employees when honest feedback is actually provided, then trust will suffer tremendously. 2020 NPS survey results indicate that many employees do not trust that they can provide honest opinions to their managers, out of a fear of retribution. Inviting opinion, and then punishing the provider of the opinion, is arguably the fastest means of obliterating trust, and must be avoided by all employees at all costs.
- ‘Bottom-up’ evaluations, in which employees provide formal feedback to their supervisors and managers, and action is then taken upon that feedback to improve managerial performance, is one of the fastest means of building trust. They require significant humility by leaders, but they rapidly demonstrate that those leaders are honestly interested in their employees and truly in pursuit of the best for all of them.
- Openness, honesty, and candidness are significant trust factors. Employees are likely to build trust in someone who gives them difficult straight answers, and are likely to lose trust in someone who gives them ‘sanitized’ or half-answers. Trust is built on consistent honesty.
- Transparency is affiliated with honesty. Employees will trust decisions and ideas much more when the reasoning behind them is transparent. We can’t trust what we can’t see.
- Trust can be quickly built when managers demonstrate that they are willing to put the concerns of their employees ahead of their own.
- The more employees understand each other, the more they are likely to trust each other. Social activities, either at work or after hours, go a long way toward accomplishing this, as they give employees a better chance of understanding each other as people. Individual managers should strike a strong balance between encouraging social activities for team growth and respecting work-life balance by not expecting too much from employees on their personal time. Good examples of social activities are:
 - Lunching together
 - Attending a sports event together
 - Team-building events like escape rooms or laser tag
 - Annual picnic for employees and families
- It is highly advisable for managers to get to know their employees personally (within reasonable boundaries, of course); good managers treat their employees like valuable and interesting people, while bad managers show no interest in employees as people and treat them like cogs in a wheel.
- Practicing the other foundations of strong leadership consistently will also help to build employee trust. Showing respect, recognizing accomplishment, investing time, actively listening, demonstrating support and genuine care – each is a significant trust-builder.
- Collaboration in work teams often increases trust, as it demonstrates new ways in which employees can rely upon each other to accomplish work.