



Eleven Tips for Developing Trust on Your Team

Gone are the days when employees blindly followed a manager. These days it takes a bit more effort to produce a high performing team. As a team manager, you could – although we don't recommend it – manage by walking around and watching each one of your team members like a hawk. You could check up on people, make sure people are following protocol, and force the team to interact through meetings, lunches, etc. But ultimately, that approach is impossibly outdated and counterproductive.

Instead, we suggest you focus on developing a collaborative team that has built trust as the cornerstone of the team's success.

Collaboration does not mean not driving to get things done on time and under budget. It does mean that you encourage participation, which in turn instills among team members a sense of ownership of the project/task/decision and increases your end result.

Trust is essential to collaboration. But it's an elusive thing, easy to talk about with smug overconfidence but far more difficult to actually create and nurture, and the path to building trust is littered with the ruins of many a dysfunctional team.

Following are eleven tips to help you develop trust on your team. As this trust begins to take hold and flourish, you'll find that you've actually established an atmosphere of accountability, motivation, innovation, and even fun. We're confident you'll agree this is a more pleasant and productive way to work. And your team's experience and will be undeniably more fruitful.

Tip Number 1. Communicate openly and frequently.

When Continental Airlines' former chief executive Gordon Bethune was charged with the Herculean task of rebuilding trust in the airline besieged by labor strife, one thing he did that helped significantly was to initiate open and frequent communication. Don't make workers guess what you're thinking. Tell them. Unfortunately, employees – especially those at remote locations – tend to believe that no news is bad news. A lack of interaction across distance erodes trust.

Take the time, up front, to allow your team members to get to know you and each other. In other words, take time to be a team. In fact, if possible, meet face-to-face early in the development of your team. This is particularly important if any team members are



operating remotely. Miscommunication and conflicting expectations often arise from the lack of face-to-face contact time among team members. Face-to-face meetings will allow team members to develop relationships and trust much more quickly.

If face-to-face meetings are impractical or impossible (such as with “virtual” teams where members may be spread across the country or even the world), try to use methods that make communications feel more like a face-to-face interaction. Richard Thier, an organization effectiveness manager at Xerox, suggests embedding pictures of team members into computer technology so that when communicating on the intranet, team members can “see” each other and you. In Thier’s experience, this helps to create social bonding and to eliminate at least one of the barriers to building trust that many teams encounter – not seeing one another face-to-face.

Tip Number 2. To get trust, give trust.

The best way to create an environment of trust is to begin by trusting others. Leaders set the example. Waiting to give trust to employees until they earn it is never as effective as assuming they are trustworthy unless they prove otherwise. As team members come to feel that you trust them, they will find it easier to trust you.

Stand behind your team and your team members. Do not make disparaging remarks about the team’s performance in public. Build the self-esteem of team members by showing respect for their opinions. If you receive negative information about a team member, be sure to investigate it thoroughly before acting upon it.

Tip Number 3. Be honest.

This is perhaps the single most important variable that affects trust. Leaders who demonstrate openness about their actions, intentions, and vision soon find that people respond positively to self-disclosure and sincerity. Share good news and bad news openly. An open and honest business climate is likely to eliminate company gossip, diffuse inappropriate politics, and stifle corporate intrigue. Further, great leaders know that they are not perfect; they make mistakes. What do they do when that happens? It is much better to openly admit your mistakes than to ignore them or cover them up. A cover-up (perceived or real) is probably the greatest single enemy to trust.



Tip Number 4. Establish strong business ethics.

Business ethics is about setting moral values for the workplace. Ethical conduct relies upon the alignment between the human behavior and this set of moral standards. It is important that ethical standards are understood and internalized by each team member.

Teams with common ethics are healthier, more productive, adaptable, responsive, and resourceful because they are united under one common value set. If problems should arise, help team members focus on the problem rather than blaming each other.

Tip Number 5. Do what you say you will do, and make your actions visible.

Visibly keeping commitments increases trust. One of the quickest and most effective ways to build trust is to follow through on your commitments. Team members are more likely to trust one another if they feel team members are competent.

On the other hand, it doesn't take long for team members to pick up on insincere rhetoric or broken promises. Sometimes leaders neglect to make their actions visible to team members, thus creating the perception that they don't follow through. Instead of assuming that team members know you did something, tell them by saying "In response to your suggestions about such and such, I did such and such yesterday. Thanks for the recommendation."

Tip Number 6. Make your interactions with the team consistent and predictable.

The process of building trust is not an event – it is a process. Trust results from consistent and predictable interaction over time. If team members see a leader respond one way this week and another way next week, it becomes harder and harder to trust him or her.

Set up weekly ½ hour 1:1 sessions with yourself and your team members. This will allow them to get to know you (and you them). Help team members understand the mission of the team and allow them to voice their concerns in an open manner.

**Tip Number 7.****From the outset, set the tone for future interaction.**

The initial actions of the leader set the tone and establish norms that can either build trust or detract from establishing trust within the team. Familiarize yourself and team with why trust is important. Leading by example is almost always more powerful than speeches and lectures.

Tip Number 8. Be accessible and responsive.

Find ways to make yourself regularly available to team members. This can be tricky when working across multiple time zones. Establishing a rotating schedule of in-person visits for different sites can help. Likewise, setting regular virtual meeting times (via teleconference, videoconference, etc.) provides team members with the assurance that there will be an opportunity to address questions or problems without a significant waiting period.

You must be action oriented. Instead of saying, "Let's think about it," say, "Let's do this and that." And then do it. For example, a manager that picks up the phone and takes action on an item/idea being discussed is seen as being action oriented and trustworthy.

When employees contact you by e-mail or voice mail, respond within 24 hours, unless it is obviously an emergency - and in that case, respond immediately. If the team members' feet are held to the fire to meet established timelines, they will look to the leader to quickly supply answers, information, or the OK to move ahead with a decision. Lack of timely response can look like sabotage to someone sitting with a customer looking them in the eye, demanding an answer. Establish agreements up front with the team on how you will respond to them and in what time frame. Then honor those agreements throughout the life of the project or relationship.

Tip Number 9. Maintain confidences.

It is imperative that organizations establish a clear policy regarding communications privacy and then strictly adhere to it. Team members need to be able to express concerns, identify problems, share sensitive information, and surface relevant issues. Getting agreements early on as to how confidential or sensitive data will be handled is important.

Tip Number 10. Watch your language.

In subtle ways, a leader can unintentionally erode trust among his/her team members. Try to give each team member the opportunity to contribute.



Working from the home office and referring to team members in satellite offices as “them” or “those people” may send an unintended message. Jacklyn Kostner, in an interview in *Getting Results*, calls these “location-centric words and actions.” As she points out, this can get carried to an extreme when it moves from words to action and you start assigning all the exciting parts of the project to those close to home. Don’t rely more heavily on those team members who happen to be in your location.

Tip Number 11. Create social time for the team.

In co-located teams, much of the trust and confidence that team members have in one another and in the leader comes from informal social interaction. For virtual teams to have this experience requires a little more thought and creativity. Perhaps the easiest way is to build informal socializing time into video or teleconferences. At either the beginning or the end of a call or meeting, lead the way with informal conversation, asking about team members’ outside interests, families, etc.

Where to go from here

This paper merely touches the surface of developing high-performance teams. If you need help improving the effectiveness of your team, department or organization, consider cube 214 consulting. We offer the following services to help you:

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- **Talent Management:** We develop a comprehensive strategy to attract, hire, and retain the very best employees for your organization.
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About the Author

Anil Saxena has more than 17 years of experience in organizational development and talent management. He's helped both Fortune 500 companies and mid-sized firms across industries increase customer and employee engagement while decreasing turnover, improving customer retention, and increasing profitability within organizations. He delivers his creative and enthusiastic approach with a common sense, easy-to-understand style.