

Forget about Taco Tuesdays or Karaoke Fridays — employees should do trust falls

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Paul Zak's nickname is "Dr. Love" for a reason. The author and neuroscientist enjoys giving out hugs like spare change. In fact, his prescription for those who want to live a happier life is to embrace eight people a day.

For entrepreneurs and CEOs who are struggling to lead high-performing companies, Zak says he also has a cure. He's studied people closely all around the globe, from the forests of Papua New Guinea to Silicon Valley. Instead of analyzing progress reports and growth numbers, Zak prefers needles and a laboratory. He's taken blood samples from employees at companies like Herman Miller and Zappos and conducted controlled studies to measure people's physiological responses to work-relevant tasks to find what spurs on employees to produce their best work.

Zak's answer comes down to a single molecule: oxytocin.

The "love hormone," as it's often dubbed, can facilitate mother-child bonding and lay the foundation for healthy

social interactions. Oxytocin, importantly, also breeds organizational trust—and, ultimately, a more productive workplace, [according to one of Zak's studies](#).

Zak found that employees in the most “high-trust” work environments, based on a survey he administered, emitted 228 percent more oxytocin than workers in the lowest group of trust. Those same employees in the high-trust group were 2 percent more productive than their counterparts in the lowest-trust quartile.

"Trust seems like a squishy notion," Zak told LinkedIn. "But, in fact, we've got 15 years worth of neuroscience research published in the best scientific journals that tells us how people come together to accomplish group goals and how they do that effectively, which requires trust. Once you have this high-trust culture, you can really hit benchmarks you thought you could never hit."

Companies shouldn't focus on making their employees happy, and culture tools like Taco Tuesdays and Karaoke Fridays aren't enough, Zak said. Instead, bosses should create a narrative that illuminates a deeper purpose, as Zak found that "humans will work their butts off for a common purpose."

What should happen when one of your employees botches the code for a new app feature? Wear the failure on your sleeve and throw a party, according to Zak. Many companies in Silicon Valley like [Intuit](#) and [Google](#) have been known to throw "congratulations, you screwed up" celebrations. It's about establishing a deep level of trust among team members and managers so that there's runway for true innovation — and the failure that comes alongside that.

"Sometimes we think, as leaders, we have to have a no mistakes situation. And yet if there are no mistakes, there's no innovation," Zak said. "You definitely want risk management; you don't want it to drive down the company, but you got to trust people enough to give them the tools to do something extraordinary."

Trust, and other feelings which were once considered simply intuitive, are now quantifiable and can be systematically measured, according to Zak. He believes the future of work will increasingly be driven by data taken from a laboratory, verified in the clinic, and then adapted to daily life. He's already helping leaders use these insights in real time—and without taking out a syringe. His startup, [OFactor](#), has adapted his research into a series of questions and surveys that can track organizational trust (which is linked to oxytocin levels) among employees to help build a more productive work environment.

Perhaps more importantly, Zak also says the benefits don't stop when employees leave the office.

"I'm always surprised at how many business leaders have a working knowledge of neuroscience. Important to me, and the world is that people who work in high-trust organizations are actually more satisfied outside of work, so they're better parents and spouses and citizens. When that time at work is valuable...then I feel great about myself and I'm actually a better human being," Zak said.