

# Why Trust Matters at Work and What to Do About It

atd td.org/Publications/Blogs/Science-of-Learning-Blog/2017/03/Why-Trust-Matters-at-Work-and-What-to-Do-About-It

Paul J. Zak

Why isn't work an adventure? For many people, work sucks. The polite term for sucky work is that labor generates "disutility." Even that word "labor" conjures fatigue-inducing physical exertion. But still we can ask the question: Why isn't your job making you happy?

## Enter Oxytocin

I spent eight years measuring brain activity while people worked in order to identify the factors that make work an adventure. This was preceded by a decade of doing laboratory studies to understand the brain basis for effective cooperation. This research showed that trust among team members was essential to effective teamwork. What's more, when we are trusted, our brains make a signaling molecule called oxytocin that causes us to put in effort to help others. So, I left my lab to study whether a culture of trust could make work feel less like, well, work.



I discovered that teams whose members stimulate each other's brains to produce the neurochemical oxytocin are more productive and innovative. My laboratory studies had already shown that oxytocin motivates us to be trustworthy by increasing our empathy for others. I found the same held at work: When we are empathically connected to colleagues, we know what they are doing and why. Teams with high trust work like musicians riffing off each other, they intuitively know what their teammates need and deliver it reliably.

My studies showed that there are eight building blocks that leaders can influence to create a culture of trust. I created a handy acronym so they can be remembered: OXYTOCIN. These factors are:

- **O**vation: recognize those who meet or exceed goals
- **eX**pectation: design difficult but achievable challenges and hold colleagues accountable to reach them
- **Y**ield: enable employees to complete their work as they see fit
- **T**ransfer: facilitate self-management in which colleagues choose the work they want to do
- **O**penness: share information broadly
- **C**aring: intentionally build relationships with colleagues
- **I**nvest: promote personal and professional growth
- **N**atural: behave authentically and ask for help.

Each of these factors explains between 45 percent and 72 percent of the variation in organizational trust.

Here's the value-add from my research. Brain science makes specific predictions of how each of these eight factors can be tailored to maximize the impact on brain activity and employee behavior. A culture of trust can be sustained by continuously monitoring the OXYTOCIN building blocks. Culture, I argue in my new book [Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies](#), should be measured and improved like any other business process.

While my original studies involved taking blood samples from employees and having them wear electroencephalogram caps, once I had run enough experiments, I was able to capture the eight OXYTOCIN factors using a survey instrument. Using this tool to measure organizational trust and its components, I have helped many companies reboot their cultures.

To confirm that the impact of trust on business performance generalized beyond the set of companies with whom I have worked, in 2016 I collected a nationally representative sample of more than 1,000 working adults in the United States and queried them about their organizations. My team found that those working in companies in the highest quartile of trust, compared to those in the lowest quartile, had 106 percent more energy at work, were 76 percent more engaged, and said they were 50 percent more productive. High-trust companies had half the employee turnover of low-trust companies, with employees at these companies telling us that they enjoyed their jobs 60 percent more.

## **Bottom Line**

Trust matters. A lot. Analysis of this dataset showed that if a company moved up one quartile in organizational trust, the average employee would produce an additional \$10,185 in revenue. Every year. Because many of the ways to increase trust that I discuss in *Trust Factor* do not cost very much, the return on an investment in trust is often hundreds of dollars for each dollar spent.

Trust is not something that magically arises in companies. Rather, it is a strategic asset that can be measured and managed for high performance. And neuroscience shows how to do this.

**For a deeper dive into the science behind building a culture of trust at work, join me at ATD 2017 Conference & Exposition for the session: [The Neuroscience of Creating High Performance Cultures](#).**