

How to be a Trusted Leader

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Fear or love? At the most basic level, these are a leader's choices when seeking to motivate followers. Most managers, perhaps due to some hangover from the eighteenth century, lead by fear because, well, it works. Fear may not be explicit, though some managers still scream and yell, but it is often implicit in the "do this or you're out" approach.

Today, we hear a lot about seemingly squishy leadership approaches like "empathy," "humanity" and even "love." Many business leaders I know would be happy to be Mr. or Ms. Nice at work but they have a feeling that this leadership style is not going to get the job done. Or, at least that has been the prevailing wisdom.

It turns out that extensive research has shown that organizations whose leaders establish caring cultures achieve substantially higher performance. Great, nice wins. But, there is still a seemingly uncrossable canyon between knowing what to do and how to do it. Here's the good news: Recent neuroscience research, much of it from my lab, have shown leaders exactly how to create high-engagement cultures. And, it all comes down to trust.

In the early 2000s, my lab showed that when we are trusted, our brains produce a chemical called oxytocin. This brain signal increases our empathy for others and motivates us to work to help them. My group spent a decade identifying the situations that promote or inhibit oxytocin release thereby improving or impairing cooperative behaviors.

Then businesses started knocking on my lab's door.

Visits by executives convinced me that trust was important at work, so I started measuring oxytocin in employees in order to see how it affected productivity and teamwork. After a decade of studies, I was able to identify the aspects of corporate culture that stimulated oxytocin release among colleagues. Since the blood draws I was doing to measure oxytocin were not going to fly at most companies, I developed a survey that captures the factors my studies had found are necessary to create a culture of trust.

As I discovered, the neuroscience revealed eight sets of policies that leaders can influence to build a culture of trust. I also explain how leaders can adjust these eight building blocks to create the conditions for high engagement and high performance. These changes include setting specific objectives for direct reports and empowering them to execute projects as they see fit. Trust allows employees to take full ownership (and accountability) of outcomes so they act like owners.

At the 30,000 feet level, none of this sounds particularly new, but here's where the science kicks in. For each of the eight building blocks of trust, the neuroscience shows just how to tweak procedures to get the biggest impact on brain and behavior. For example, a trust-builder I call "Ovation" recognizes outstanding performers. The science shows that this recognition is most powerful for both the colleague being recognized and others in the company, when it is based on meeting a stretch goal, occurs within a week of the goal being reached, is personal, public, tangible, unexpected, and comes from peers. The science has similarly specific ways to get the biggest impact from the other seven factors. One must systemically measure and manage culture, making incremental improvements, to achieve high performance.

There is a solid business case for creating a culture of trust in your organization. I uncovered multiple measure of

business-relevant outcomes that improve because of trust. For example, my analysis of a nationally-representative sample of United States adults shows that those working in companies in the top quartile of organizational trust, compared to those in the lowest quartile, had 106% more energy at work, were 76% more engaged, and said they were 50% more productive. High-trust companies had one-half the employee turnover of low-trust companies, with employees at these companies reporting that they enjoyed their jobs 60% more and felt 66% closer to their colleagues. My case studies of businesses who I have helped to increase trust show that they achieve substantially more innovation because colleagues are empowered to try new things.

So is this leading by fear or love? It is actually a little of both. Challenges are important to drive oxytocin release and reach superior performance because the brain needs a pressing reason to synthesize oxytocin and get team members working together effectively. My research also shows that the "challenge stress" of seeking to accomplish difficult goals causes the brain to produce a short-acting stress agent called adrenocorticotropin hormone (ACTH). While oxytocin bonds people together and improves teamwork, ACTH causes them to focus on the task at hand and avoid distractions. The interplay of oxytocin and ACTH is the productivity double-whammy.

Trusting colleagues also means accepting that some of the execution decisions they make will fail. An important part of a leader's job is to help people correct mistakes and to sustain risk-management backstops so failures are not catastrophic. When coaching subordinates is done with genuine care for them, trust increases and performance improves. This means treating others as full human beings, with imperfections, emotions, and a personal life, not as replaceable human capital.

Ultimately, everyone who works for you is a volunteer--they can choose to spend their time, energy and passion helping your company or some other company generate profit. The war for talent is real, and building a culture of trust is an important step in empowering, engaging, and retaining top talent. So, give your people a challenge, train them well, and then get out of the way and let them execute.

What investments are you making in a culture of trust? Now's the time to start, because your competitors are reading this, too.

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About the Author

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