

8 Ways to Build a Culture of Trust Based on Harvard's Neuroscience Research

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By Marissa Levin Marissa Levin is the founder and CEO of Successful Culture, which helps CEOs and leadership teams master the three most critical aspects of business growth: leadership development, strategy... Full bio @ marissalevin Founder and CEO, Successful Culture @ marissalevin

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[PWC's 2016 Global CEO Survey](#) revealed that 50% of CEOs worldwide consider lack of trust to be a major threat to their organizational growth.

[Paul J. Zak](#), Harvard researcher, Founding Director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and Professor of Economics, Psychology and Management at Claremont Graduate University, and author of "[The Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High Performing Companies](#)," has invested decades researching the neurological connection between trust, leadership, and organizational performance.

Over his 2 decades of research, Zak discovered that "compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, and 40% less burnout."

In a recent [Harvard Business Research journal](#), Zak shared that there is a direct correlation between the amount of oxytocin a person's brain produces and the level of trust they feel in any given situation.

From 10 years of research, he found that oxytocin levels significantly decrease when we feel stress. He also found a direct link between oxytocin levels and empathy which is essential for creating trust-based relationships and trust-based organizations. The higher the oxytocin, the higher the empathy. The higher the empathy, the deeper the connection.

While team-building exercises may temporarily bring employees together, to create lasting trust, leaders must get to

the heart (or rather brain) of true connection, and that is through an employee's oxytocin levels.

Here are Zak's [8 strategies for creating cultures of trust](#), which will in turn raise oxytocin levels, create greater empathy among employees, and improve organizational behavior and performance.

Recognize excellence.

Do you recognize a job well done immediately after it happens? Neuroscience proves that public recognition has the largest effect on trust when it occurs immediately after an employee meets a goal. Public recognition inspires others to try harder as well.

Induce "challenge stress."

Moderate stress caused by difficult but attainable goals releases oxytocin and adrenocorticotropin. This chemical change results in greater focus and deeper collaboration. Challenges must be follow the SMART model: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-Sensitive with a deadline.

Empower employees to choose their work patterns and habits.

Autonomy over work conditions communicates to employees that their leadership trusts them. A [Citigroup and LinkedIn survey](#) found that nearly half of employees would forfeit a 20% raise for greater control over their work environment.

Give employees a voice in their own job design.

Employees welcome the opportunity to have input into the projects they work on, who they work with, and how they work. This freedom allows them to select projects that most closely align with their strongest skillsets and professional passions.

Communicate often.

Thorough and frequent communication is one of the easiest ways to gain employee loyalty and trust. People want to know what the company is doing, where it is going, and how they are impacted. Gallup polled 2.5 million manager-led teams in 195 countries and found that daily communication with direct reports measurably improved workforce engagement.

Intentionally build relationships.

Gallup has found that [having a best friend at work significantly increases workplace engagement](#). The study revealed that those that felt they had friends at work were 43% more likely to report having received recognition for their work, which we know stimulates more oxytocin and drives more happiness.

A [LinkedIn study](#) revealed that almost 50% of professionals believe that having work-friends are critical to their overall happiness.

Facilitate whole-person growth.

Employers who recognize that employees are multi-dimensional and are interested in comprehensive personal and professional development beyond technical development will have a competitive advantage over those that don't.

The [Bersin by Deloitte Future of Corporate Learning Report](#) revealed that millennials are "desperate for learning" and rank training and development as the #1 desired job benefit, above flexible schedules and money.

Show vulnerability.

One of my favorite TED Talks is Simon Sinek's "[Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe.](#)" I incorporate it into our leadership development training programs because the messages about leadership, vulnerability, and safety are so compelling.

The organizations with the highest trust recognize that asking for help is a two-way street. The most emotionally connected leaders let their employees know that they need their help to build the best organizations possible.

Zak's research found that this level of vulnerability increases trust and cooperation in others because it stimulates oxytocin production.

The Impact of Trust on the Bottom Line

The quantitative results of a trust-based culture were remarkable. Zak concluded that those working in high-trust cultures:

- Enjoyed their jobs 60% more
- Were 70% more aligned with their companies' purpose
- Felt 66% closer to their colleagues
- Had 11% more empathy for their workmates,
- Experienced 40% less burnout from their work
- Earn an additional \$6,450 a year, or 17% more than those working at low-trust organizations

Science has spoken. Trust is no longer optional for organizations that want to attract and retain the best people and want to achieve the best results.