

DECISIONS UNDER PRESSURE

WHY DECISIONS STALL, RISKS
HIDE AND PERFORMANCE
BREAKS DOWN



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A brief for leaders in high-stakes environments

The Hidden Risk Inside Your Decision-Making

Most leadership teams don't lose trust gradually, they lose it under pressure, when communication matters most and misalignment becomes costly.

It shows up in how people behave when pressure hits. Do decisions stall? Do people hesitate? Do meetings multiply and accountability blur?

Leaders assume it's a strategy problem. So they respond with more plans, more communication, more process. They spend millions on consultants producing beautiful PowerPoint decks (I know, because I used to make them).

Yet nothing changes. Because this isn't a strategy problem, it's a performance risk!

It's a trust problem.

In uncertainty, people don't follow strategy. They follow trust.

Imagine you are at home, relaxed, watching your favourite show, when someone starts banging on your front door. You recognise the voice, it's your neighbour shouting for help. You open the door and they say, "Come with me. Something has happened and I need your help right now."


When you ask what's going on, they reply: "There's no time to explain. It's a little dangerous, but it will be worth it if it works. I just need you to come now and



do what I say."

Most people hesitate at that point. Not because they can't think logically, but because logic alone doesn't remove enough uncertainty. What shapes your decision is trust. How well do you know this person? Do you believe their judgement? Do you feel safe enough to act without having the full picture?

This is exactly how decision-making works inside organisations. Under pressure, people are constantly being asked to move without complete certainty. In



those moments, they do not follow strategy alone. They follow trust. If trust is strong, decisions accelerate. If trust is weak, people hesitate, protect themselves and wait for more certainty than the situation can provide.

The neuroscientist Beau Lotto says that this is the major job of your brain; to reduce uncertainty because it is one of the most reliable ways to keep you alive. Asking for more context is a way to gather data. But the neighbour offers just vague points: "a little dangerous", "worth it if it comes off" and you must "do what I say". How did you use these pieces of information?

The relationship you have with the person likely remains the critical factor. What's driving that decision isn't logic, strategy or process. It's something far more subjective, far more human and far more powerful. It's trust.

What this scenario reveals is simple, but often misunderstood. Every decision you make about another person is made under uncertainty. In those moments, you don't rely on logic alone. You can't just rely on logic, this leaves too much uncertainty. You make a call based on trust.

This matters a lot in organisations. One of the most well-documented examples of trust failure in a corporate environment comes from American banking giant, Wells Fargo. At the time, the organisation was pursuing aggressive growth targets. Performance expectations were clear, metrics were defined and initially results appeared strong.

However, beneath that performance sat a very different reality. Frontline employees were under sustained pressure to meet sales quotas. They were given ambitious targets for opening new accounts and cross-selling products which were difficult to achieve within ethical boundaries.

The tension grew and concerns were raised internally. There were complaints, whistle-blowers and other signals that something was wrong. Yet these signals were not escalated effectively, nor addressed with the seriousness required. This is where the issue moves beyond strategy or process and into trust.

Employees understood the expectations and knew the rules. Many knew the pressures were pushing the wrong behaviours, poor decisions and bad outcomes for customers, but speaking didn't feel safe. Rather than escalating issues, individuals adapted their behaviour to meet perceived expectations. In many cases, this resulted in the creation of unauthorised customer accounts.

Over time, this behaviour scaled out of control:

- More than **3.5 million unauthorised accounts** were created
- The organisation incurred over **\$3 billion in fines and settlements**
- Senior leadership, including the **CEO, stepped down**
- The company faced sustained regulatory scrutiny and reputational damage

What makes this case particularly instructive is not the scale of the misconduct, but the mechanism behind it. This was not driven by a lack of capability or a failure of strategy. It was driven by decision-making under conditions of low trust. When individuals do not feel safe to challenge, when transparency is limited and when leadership signals are misaligned, behaviour changes.

In these environments, people do not necessarily follow policy. They follow what appears to be the safest course of action available to them. This case highlights a critical point for leaders; trust is not a cultural abstraction. It is a determining factor in how decisions are made under pressure. We need to push, innovate and strive to win in our hyper-competitive, modern world. But without trust, the ethical safeguards of your people can switch off.

When trust is strong, risks are surfaced early and addressed directly.
When trust is weak, risks become hidden, deferred or worked around.

In complex, high-stakes environments, those small decisions can compound into significant organisational consequences.

The problem is, while trust drives many of our decisions, most leaders don't understand how it actually works. The big question we need to answer is not just of theory but of action: What is trust and how does it shape the decisions people make every day inside your organisation?



The challenge with building Trust

Trust is one of the most overused - and commercially misunderstood concepts in leadership. It's written everywhere in company values, plastered across marketing and repeated in strategy decks. Yet ask most leaders to define it, and the answer quickly becomes circular:: "Trust is... trusting someone?"

The problem is simple. We try to define it logically, but trust isn't logical.



We don't think trust. We feel it.

That's where most organisations get stuck. If you can't clearly define something, you can't deliberately build it.

Think about someone you deeply trust. Now, why do you trust them?

Could you map out the exact steps that got you there? Could someone else follow those same steps and earn your trust in the same way? Feels unlikely, doesn't it.

Trust doesn't behave like a process. It behaves more like a pattern formed through experience, reinforced over time. You know when it's there, you know when it's not. But the space in between is where most leaders lose control. In organisations, that gap has consequences. When trust is low, teams don't sit in a neutral state.

They default to one of two modes: **Bureaucracy** or **Breakdown**

Bureaucracy is the attempt to replace trust with process. More rules. More approvals. More controls. At first, this makes sense, it feels safe. Control has been restored. In simple systems, it works. You don't need to trust every driver on the road, the rules handle that.

However, organisations aren't simple systems. They're complex, fast-moving and full of humans. So over time, bureaucracy creates:

- slower decisions
- diffused accountability
- frustration at rules that don't fit reality

Bureaucracy creates the illusion of control while slowing the decisions that matter most. When bureaucracy fails teams move in the opposite direction:

Breakdown.

Trust erodes, suspicion grows and behaviours shift. People become defensive, disengaged and focused on self-protection.

They stop speaking up. They avoid risk. They focus on 'what's in it for me?'. It's not because they're bad people or incapable, but because it feels safer.

I saw this play out in a virtual team I worked with. Seventy people joined a two-hour session. Once they had all joined, only six had their cameras on. No questions. No interaction. No engagement.

Within minutes, even the six switched their cameras off. That wasn't a technology issue (although many claimed their webcam was mysteriously not working). It was a trust signal: It's safer to stay hidden.

These behaviours might seem small, but they spread quickly. When others stay silent, it feels safer to stay silent. When others disengage, it feels smarter to disengage.

Soon you see, and feel, the signs; accountability weakens, engagement drops and performance stalls.

Not through one big failure but through hundreds of small, protective decisions. This is how teams break down and organisations fade into mediocrity. Not from external pressure alone but from internal fractures. When trust is low, people don't push each other and lean into the challenges.

Nokia is a classic example. The best talent within the mobile giant knew the threat from Apple and Android was real, but leadership was resistant to bad news, challenging was risky and people kept quiet.

Instead of pushing hard conversations, they softened messages. Instead of escalating urgency, they protected themselves. Instead of confronting reality, they worked around it. On the surface, everything looked under control but underneath, alignment had broken down.

Decisions slowed, risks went unchallenged and execution lagged behind the market. By the time leadership fully recognised the scale of the shift, it was too late. Nokia didn't lose because people didn't know what to do.

It lost because people didn't feel safe enough to speak up and act on it.

Creating a Strong Crust - The foundations of trust

Trust isn't random. It is built and broken through five consistent conditions.

I call these conditions the CRUST model: the five factors that determine whether people trust you enough to act.

Because that's what matters. Not whether people like you. Not whether they agree with you, but whether they trust you enough to take action.

The CRUST model identifies the core drivers of trust:

- **Credibility** – Do they believe you can?
- **Reliability** – Do they believe you will?
- **Understanding** – Do they know who you are?
- **Safety** – Can they speak and act without fear?
- **Transparency** – Do they understand what's really going on?

When these are strong, trust accelerates. When they are weak, decisions slow, risk increases and performance suffers. This applies everywhere within teams, across leadership decisions and with clients and stakeholders. Trust isn't a soft concept or motherhood statement, it's a mandatory condition for performance.

Before we break each element down, there's one shift most leaders need to make. When people think about trust, they usually ask: "Who do I trust?" That's the wrong question. **The better question is: "Who trusts me?"**

Your trust in others is shaped by how you feel, but their trust in you shapes how they act. In organisations, how the group acts is what drives outcomes.

I saw this land hard in a recent workshop. One leader paused and said: "Wow, I've never asked myself if others trust me... I'm the boss, I didn't think it mattered."

It does. Trust isn't built through intention or title. It's built through how others experience you and that's the one variable you actually control.



Credibility – Do they believe you can?

Let's start off with a factor that is more objective than some of the others and credibility is often the most tangible of them to build. Credibility is quite simply, our ability to reliably demonstrate our capabilities. For many situations, this might be in the form of certificates, awards or verifiable documents that recognise the expertise you have. When you enter the rooms of a medical professional or lawyer, you might see their certificates framed on the wall.

These pieces of paper are signals, important signals. They provide an initial shortcut for trust. They tell us: this person likely knows what they are doing. If the signal is from a reputable source, they imbue credibility. An MBA from Harvard or an article in the New England Journal of Medicine provides more credibility than a certificate from an online college or a Facebook post (or at least I seriously hope this is true).

However, in most organisational settings, credibility is not built by what's framed on the wall but on experiences. Credibility is not just what you say you can do. It is what you demonstrate. You don't need a certificate to know that Gina is the go-to on tax compliance and Ted is an Excel whiz. These credentials are shared through the work environment based on the experiences others have with you.

In this way, every interaction becomes a data point. Every meeting, decision and conversation either reinforces or erodes your perceived capability in your skillset. Over time, people build a mental model of you: Are they competent? Do they understand this stuff? Can I rely on their judgement?

Importantly, credibility is contextual. You can be highly credible in one domain and have zero in another. A brilliant Accountant might have low credibility in mechanics. A Manager can have leadership credibility in their role but not with frontline teams who believe they don't understand the day-to-day work.

When people are making decisions under uncertainty credibility becomes one of the fastest filters they apply:

- Do I believe this person knows what they're doing?
- Do I trust their judgement in this situation?

If the answer is no, hesitation follows. If the answer is yes, decisions accelerate.

1. Demonstrating Credibility Yourself

Credibility isn't claimed, it's judged and under pressure, it's judged fast. All your credentials, certificates and letters after your name might get you in the room, but real credibility is built through evidence.

Credibility built on overstated capability doesn't erode, it collapses.

Elizabeth Holmes built Theranos on the promise of revolutionary blood-testing technology. She positioned herself as a visionary with breakthrough capabilities. Compared to Steve Jobs, she cultivated credibility through media appearances and bold claims about her technology.

However, the core issue wasn't just the technology failing. It was that Holmes misrepresented what the technology could actually do. Investors, partners and patients were led to believe the product was validated and reliable, but the results were often fraudulent.

When exposed, the company collapsed, Holmes was convicted of fraud and billions in valuation were wiped out.

Here are a few consistent ways to establish and reinforce credibility:

- 1. Be consistently prepared** - Turn up informed signals of respect and competence. When you understand the context, the data and the implications, people appreciate that you know your stuff.
- 2. Speak with clarity, not complexity** - Credible people don't hide behind jargon. They simplify and break down complexity for others. This signals true understanding rather than just surface-level knowledge.
- 3. Ask relevant questions** - Ignorance or dismissal quickly erodes credibility. Ensure you spend time with the experts and appreciate the details with people who are deep in them with relevant questions.
- 4. Admit when you don't know** - This may feel counterintuitive, but false confidence is one of the fastest ways to lose credibility. Saying "I don't know, but I'll find out" is often much more powerful than guessing.
- 5. Make good decisions, especially under pressure** - People don't judge others in easy moments. They judge when things are uncertain and the stakes are high. Step carefully but decisively.

2. Fostering Credibility Within Your Team

Credibility is not just an individual trait, it is also a collective asset for teams. Teams with high credibility move faster, collaborate better and make stronger decisions because people trust each other's capabilities. Leaders play a critical role in shaping this for their teams:

1. Make capability visible - People can't trust what they can't see. Create opportunities for team members to demonstrate their skills, share expertise and contribute meaningfully.

2. Match work to strengths - When people are consistently placed so they can perform well, their credibility grows. Success builds confidence in themselves and from others. Don't throw them in the deep end constantly and wonder why they struggle.

3. Encourage ownership and accountability - Credibility strengthens when individuals take responsibility for outcomes, not just tasks. Ask them to own the results and back them to deliver.

4. Provide feedback for growth - Avoiding difficult conversations can protect feelings in the short term but damages credibility in the long term. Growth requires clarity and direction.

5. Create an environment where learning is the norm - Skills can't stagnate. Even the most incredible skill today will blunt over time, we need to keep striving to improve. Teams that openly learn and develop capability build collective trust.

Credibility is not declared, it's demonstrated through consistent behaviour

Satya Nadella became CEO of a Microsoft struggling with internal silos and slow decision-making. Teams were capable, but leadership credibility across the organisation was low. Leaders didn't trust each other, so decisions were second-guessed, escalated or delayed.

Nadella didn't start with strategy. He focused on behaviour. He shifted the culture from "know-it-all" to "learn-it-all", encouraging leaders to admit what they didn't know, listen more and communicate openly.

As credibility grew, teams began to trust decisions. Collaboration improved, silos reduced and decision-making accelerated. Nadella didn't just change the culture, he unlocked performance, growing from a stagnant giant into one of the most valuable companies in the world.

3. How Credibility Breaks Under Pressure

Like all areas of trust, Credibility is relatively slow to build and very quick to lose. Some of the most common behaviours that erode it include:

- **When language replaces understanding** - People hide behind jargon or complexity to sound credible. Instead, it signals they don't fully understand the issue. Others stop trusting their judgement.
- **When confidence outpaces capability** - Overstating skill or guessing under pressure create doubt. Once people suspect bluffing, they begin to question every decision and conversation.
- **When capability is inflated** - Claiming expertise that isn't consistently demonstrated creates a fragile foundation. When exposed, trust doesn't dip, it collapses completely.

Credibility breaks when perception and reality drift apart.

The Bottom Line on Credibility

Credibility is often the first gateway to trust. It answers the fundamental question: **“Do I believe this person is capable?”**

If that question is not satisfied, trust often struggles to form no matter how strong the other elements are. But credibility alone is not enough.

Credentials don't cement trust, they are simply a component. There are many experts in the world that are highly capable and still not trusted.

The Bottom Line:

Leverage the skills you have built, build the skills you need and embrace the experts in between.



Reliability – Do they believe you will?

While credibility helps people know if you can do something, reliability helps them know if you actually will. Reliability is the repeated demonstration that words and actions align over time. It is built when people feel confident you will do what you said you would, when you said you would and to the standard you implied. It answers the very important question: "Can I count on them?"

This is where many leaders unintentionally destroy trust. Not through dishonesty or incompetence, but through inconsistency of action. Good intentions are often plentiful in workplaces, sadly consistent follow-through is a rarer commodity.

Reliability is less glamorous than credibility. It doesn't come with placards you hang on the wall. But it is often a reputation that elevates leaders who follow through above their inconsistent peers. Those who meet deadlines without drama. Those who show up stronger when things get tough. The leader who owns decisions and is there for their people when the consequences land.

Like credibility, reliability becomes a shortcut in decision-making. When people are uncertain, one of the fastest filters they apply is this: Can I rely on them to do what's needed?

If the answer is yes, it puts people at ease. Coordination improves, decisions are faster and delegation becomes easier. If the answer is even slightly no, people start second guessing. They seek constant updates. They double-check to make sure. They build contingency plans in the background, distracting from the main focus. Work slows not because the job is any harder, but because uncertainty around reliability puts pressure on progress.

Reliability is also strongly shaped by expectations. It is not just about effort, it is about alignment between what was promised and what was delivered. This is why people-pleasing and overcommitting can be so damaging. Many people think they are building trust by saying yes quickly, being agreeable or appearing endlessly capable. In reality, sometimes saying Yes is a lie. The more you overcommit, the more likely you are to underdeliver. While reliability rarely erodes in one dramatic moment, every missed expectation wears it away. We look back through a series of small disappointments and it looks clear.

This makes reliability less about being everything to everyone and more about disciplined consistency. It requires clear commitments, honest boundaries and visible accountability.

1. Demonstrating Reliability Yourself

Reliability is not built by talking a good game, it is built by being dependable.

Reliability is consistency under pressure, even in war.

When General Stanley McChrystal took command of US forces in Iraq, they were losing against a fast-moving, decentralised insurgency. Intelligence was fragmented, teams operated in silos and decision-making was too slow. They were the greatest armed forces on the planet but failing to work together.

McChrystal took action. Daily operations and intelligence briefings connected thousands of personnel across units. Not just updates, but sharing information, setting priorities and taking accountability as a leader and group.

Over time, this built a system where teams could rely on each other. Information flowed, decisions were made with confidence and execution became coordinated rather than fragmented. The result was a significant increase in operational effectiveness against insurgent networks.

Here are a few consistent ways leaders establish and reinforce reliability:

- 1. Own the outcomes attached to your role** - Reliable leaders do not just complete tasks. They stay connected to the result. They understand what they own and do not disappear when accountability becomes uncomfortable.
- 2. Do what you said you would do** - This sounds simple, but it is one of the most powerful trust signals in leadership. Following through on the small things creates confidence in the bigger things.
- 3. Be realistic about timing and capacity** - Overpromising often feels generous in the moment but disappointing later. Reliable leaders are honest about what can be delivered and by when.
- 4. Communicate early when things change** - Reliability does not require perfection. Deadlines move, priorities change and problems emerge. Trust is maintained when you surface this early rather than hiding, hoping or going silent.
- 5. Be careful with your yes** - Reliable people do not agree to everything. They are thoughtful about what they commit to because they understand that every promise becomes a test of trust.

2. Fostering Reliability Within Your Team

Reliability is not just a personal virtue, it is an operating condition for strong teams. When reliability is high, teams coordinate with less friction. People spend less time chasing, checking and second guessing one another. Energy can go into solving problems instead of managing uncertainty.

Leaders can help build this in several ways:

- 1. Set clear expectations** - Reliability becomes difficult when commitments are vague. Be specific about who owns what, what success looks like and when things are due.
- 2. Reward follow-through, not just enthusiasm** - Some people seek attention through energy, exuberance or confidence. Teams must trust those who consistently deliver. Make that visible and valued.
- 3. Normalise honest capacity conversations** - Teams become more reliable when people can say, "I can't do that by Friday" before it's too late. This requires leaders to reward prompt honesty rather than punishing realistic pushback.
- 4. Make accountability visible** - When ownership is blurred, reliability is eroded. Clear accountability helps people know who owns what and reduces the ambiguity that often leads to dropped balls and disappointment.
- 5. Address patterns quickly** - One missed commitment may be understandable. A repeated pattern can quickly become a trust issue. Left unchecked, it spreads frustration and teaches others that commitments are optional.

Setting the expectations for reliability across the organisation

The Commonwealth Bank had a reputation for being large, slow and bureaucratic. Execution was slow, issues were raised but not actioned, people couldn't rely on each other across the business. Incoming CEO Ralph Norris needed to change this culture and implemented two simple rules:

- **The Sundown Rule** - every query, internal or external, should be responded to by the end of the day.
- **The TOFU Rule** - if you come across an issue, regardless if it is on your position description: Take Ownership and Follow Up

I can personally attest, these two rules echoed the halls and meeting rooms of the bank. They weren't new systems or processes, they were simple, yet powerful behavioural standards that created reliability that drove performance.

3. How Reliability Breaks Under Pressure

Reliability doesn't fail in a single moment. It breaks through repeated signals that commitments can't be counted on.

- **When agreement replaces discipline** - Saying yes too quickly feels helpful initially, but creates a pattern of overcommitment. Deadlines slip, expectations aren't met and people stop believing what's promised.
- **When issues are hidden instead of surfaced** - Problems are inevitable. But when not acknowledged early, uncertainty grows. People begin to chase updates, double-check and build contingencies instead of trusting progress.
- **When activity replaces accountability** - Being busy can look like momentum, but without clear outcomes, it creates noise not progress. People don't trust effort, they trust output.

Reliability breaks when people don't believe what's said will actually happen.

The Bottom Line on Reliability

Reliability answers a fundamental trust question: "If this person says they will do something, can I believe them?"

When that answer is yes, teams move with more confidence and less friction. When that answer is no, people begin to look for signs of danger and build costly safeguards. They monitor more closely, commit less freely and trust more cautiously. Reliability does not demand perfection. It demands honesty, consistency and ownership. While credibility may get you in the door, reliability is often what determines if you can stay.

The Bottom Line: **In the face of challenges, mistakes and uncertainty, we need people around us committed to deliver their best and comfortable shouldering the accountability that requires.**



Understanding – Do they know who you are?

Credibility answers “Can they?” and reliability answers “Will they?” The next element, understanding, answers a more human question: “Do I know who they are?”

Understanding in this context is not about technical knowledge or even shared perspectives. It is about knowing the human. Their values, their drivers and their passions. What is their story and what matters to them beyond the work. When we are making decisions under uncertainty, we are not just assessing capability or consistency. We are also assessing their character.

We are asking questions about the things we can't see: What do they care about? What are their motives? What will they prioritise when things get difficult?

This is where understanding becomes a critical driver of trust. When you feel you understand someone as a human, not just their job or role, their behaviour becomes more relatable, more human. Their decisions make more sense, even when we don't fully agree. This is where the context can help us see why they made the call and make our judgements based on richer context which reduces uncertainty and speculation.

In workplaces, many people unintentionally hide behind their role. They present as competent and professional, but cold or distant. Often compartmentalising to leave their emotions at home, communication is polished, but impersonal. Decisions are rational, but not meaningful. Over time, people may respect them, but they struggle to truly trust them.

This is because trust is not built on competence alone, it is built on connection. It isn't just logical, it is emotional. Understanding is built when people can see a person beyond the title. This fosters more nuanced predictability. When they know what drives you, what you stand for and what matters to you when trade-offs are required. It is built in the moments where you choose to show a little more of yourself than the role strictly requires.

Importantly, understanding is not about oversharing or turning the workplace into a therapy session. It is about being human enough to be known.

1. Demonstrating Understanding Yourself

Understanding is not built by telling people who you are once. It is built by consistently showing them who you really are as a person.

When people understand what you value and stand for, they don't wait for direction. They act in alignment with your intent.

After the Christchurch attacks in 2019, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern faced a moment of extreme national trauma and uncertainty. Instead of defaulting to formal, distant leadership, she responded differently.

She met with victims' families in person. She wore a hijab in solidarity and spoke openly about grief, unity and responsibility. She was visible, emotional and focused on compassion, not political rhetoric. It was a human response.

People didn't just hear policy responses. They understood her intent, what she thought mattered most. That clarity reduced uncertainty. This allowed for the decisive action that followed, including rapid gun law policy reform.

This wasn't just about empathy. It was about making values visible enough as a leader so people could align their actions without hesitation.

Here are a few ways leaders can establish and reinforce this:

- 1. Share what matters to you** - Be clear about your values and principles. Share what drives you and what you care about. This gives people greater context for decisions and actions.
- 2. Let people see your story** - You don't need to share everything but giving insight into your background and journey can help people understand how you see the world and the experiences that shape your view.
- 3. Show your human side, not just your professional side** - People don't trust titles, they trust people. Let others see your personality, your passions, your challenges and your perspectives.
- 4. Explain decisions through your values, not just logic** - Calculations are easy but cold. Share what matters to you and the intangible drivers and people will be more likely to accept your decisions.
- 5. Be consistent in what you stand for** - People look for patterns. If you say you care about something, you can't demonstrate it to be false in the next breath. Your actions must consistently reflect your values.

2. Fostering Understanding Within Your Team

Understanding should not be limited to the leader. Strong teams build understanding between each other. When people understand one another as humans, not just job titles, collaboration improves. Assumptions reduce and friction decreases.

Leaders can help create this by:

- 1. Creating space for people to share who they are** - Encourage conversations that go beyond tasks. Help people understand each other's motivations, strengths and backgrounds.
- 2. Building connection into the way the team operates** - Understanding doesn't happen by accident. Tight agendas can leave little time for human engagement. Build time into meetings, projects and interactions.
- 3. Encouraging curiosity about others** - Create a culture where people take an interest in each other as people, not just in the work. Share food, stories and experiences that engage curiosity.
- 4. Making values visible and meaningful** - Move beyond posters on the wall. Help people understand what values look like in action and why they matter. Bring them to life through stories.
- 5. Recognising the individual behind the role** - People are more than their output. Acknowledging this builds deeper connection and trust. Especially recognising people who align with shared values.

Understanding wins when everyone is clear on purpose not just process.

Patagonia was founded on an identity of being deeply environmentally responsible. This isn't a gimmick, it shows up consistently in all its decisions. One Black Friday campaign said: "Don't Buy This Jacket". Instead encouraging people to repair their old gear, buy used clothes and reduce consumption.

They have internal training and policies encouraging employees to peacefully participate in environmental protests. This isn't symbolic. It's a clear signal that the organisation stands behind its beliefs and encourages their people to do the same, even when doing so carries risk or controversy.

Employees bond on their shared values and don't need constant direction because the organisational intent is clear.

When identity is understood, decisions align without friction.

3. How Understanding Breaks Under Pressure

Understanding is lost when leaders retreat into role, process or logic at the expense of human connection.

- **When leaders default to position over person** - Relying on authority instead of connection creates distance. People may comply, but don't fully trust.
- **When communication is technically correct but emotionally empty** - Decisions explained purely through logic feel cold and disconnected. People struggle to relate or align.
- **When values are stated but not lived** - Nothing breaks understanding faster than inconsistency between what leaders say matters and what they actually prioritise.

Understanding breaks when people can't make sense of who you are or what you stand for.

The Bottom Line on Understanding

Understanding answers a fundamental trust question: "Do I know who this person is?"

When the answer is yes, people feel more connected, more aligned and more willing to trust. They don't have to love the person, but understanding reduces uncertainty. When the answer is no however, even capable and reliable leaders can feel distant, hard to read and hard to trust.

Understanding does not require complete openness. It requires enough visibility for people to connect the role to the human behind it.

The Bottom Line: **If people don't know who you are, they will struggle to trust what you do.**



Safety – Can they speak and act without fear?

If understanding helps people feel seen, safety helps them feel secure enough to step up, take risks and fully engage. Safety is the sense that you can speak, contribute, challenge and even make mistakes without fear of unfair punishment, embarrassment or retribution. It is not about comfort or avoiding accountability. It is about creating an environment where people can commit fully without unnecessary fear.

This is often misunderstood. Safety is not about being nice and leaving people in their comfort zones. It is about creating an environment that is more predictable, fair and consistent in the way people are treated, especially when times are hard, pressure mounts or things go wrong.

In environments where safety is low, behaviour changes quickly towards defensiveness and self-preservation. People become cautious, hold back ideas and avoid potentially difficult conversations. They say what is safe, not what is true. Over time, this creates blind spots, missed opportunities and hidden risks. They don't push harder, they retreat to easier work. This creates mediocrity and apathy.

When people are making decisions under uncertainty, they are also checking in: Is it safe for me to speak up here? Is it safe for me to take a risk or will I be punished if it goes wrong?

If the answer is yes, people engage more fully. If the answer is no, they protect themselves. This is normal human behaviour. When protection and self preservation are embedded, performance suffers fast.



1. Demonstrating Safety Yourself

Safety is not created through statements. It starts with consistent behaviours and is stress tested when things get messy. How we respond in these moments of chaos is often the key driver of safety for our people.

Safety isn't built when things are going well. It's founded in how leaders respond when things go wrong.

When Alan Mulally became CEO of Ford, the company was in crisis. Billions were being lost, Mulally implemented weekly status meetings, but every week divisional leaders reported their status as "green."

Leaders didn't feel safe to admit problems, show weakness or ask for help. When one executive finally flagged a major issue as "red," instead of criticism, Mulally responded with gratitude and support. He thanked him and focused the whole team on solving the problem, not blaming the person.

Over time leaders began surfacing issues, discussions became more honest and problems were addressed together. Ford didn't just improve reporting it became a united team again focused on honesty, collaboration and shared performance.

Here are a few ways leaders can establish and reinforce this:

1. Respond constructively when things go wrong - Mistakes are inevitable. How you respond determines whether people speak up next time, so look for lessons not blame.

2. Separate the person from the problem - Challenge ideas and behaviours without attacking individuals. This requires care in speaking and judging to maintain dignity while addressing issues.

3. Be predictable in your reactions - Volatility creates fear. If you are calm sometimes but other times fly off the handle, then there is always a seed of doubt about safety. Consistency builds confidence.

4. Invite input and genuinely consider it - Asking for input without acknowledging or acting on it quickly erodes safety. People notice when their voice matters and when it doesn't. Create engaged conversations.

5. Admit your own mistakes - Leaders who acknowledge their own fallibility create permission for others to do the same. Being vulnerable is an important part of allowing others to do the same.

2. Fostering Safety Within Your Team

Safety around you is important but it is also a shared experience. It exists in how people treat each other, not just when you are present. Safe teams support each other and are more open groups, ready to learn and grow.

Leaders can strengthen this by:

1. Setting clear behavioural expectations - Define what respectful challenge looks like and what crosses the line. Make it clear that disagreement is allowed, but disrespect is not.

2. Encouraging speaking up early - Small issues are easier to address than large ones. Create an environment where people feel comfortable raising concerns quickly and openly without fear.

3. Protecting those who take appropriate risks - If people are punished for stretching and striving, they will stop trying and innovation dies. Reinforce honest effort, appropriate risk taking and people wanting to learn, not just wins.

4. Addressing negative behaviour quickly - Unchecked behaviour that undermines safety spreads fast. We all fear a toxically critical culture, but they build drip by drip. Deal with it early and clearly.

5. Ensure it is safe and encouraged to challenge upwards - Trust grows when people can question decisions respectfully, regardless of hierarchy. Ask for, and reward, feedback and challenge.

Safety isn't comfort. It's the conditions where the truth surfaces fast, especially under pressure.

The US Navy SEAL teams depend on fast, accurate information. In high-risk environments, hesitation or silence can be fatal. Despite the clear hierarchy, team members are expected to speak up if they see something wrong, regardless of rank.

This is reinforced by mandatory **After-Action Reviews**. These demand that mistakes are openly discussed, leaders are challenged and decisions scrutinised. No one is protected by authority. The focus is simple: find the truth of what happened, fix the problems and improve for next time. It's not about them as individuals but about the whole, the team,

The results are faster learning, better decisions and stronger trust. When people can't speak up, organisations don't just slow down, they fail.

3. How Safety Breaks Under Pressure

Safety isn't lost in one dramatic moment. It erodes through repeated signals that speaking up carries risk.

- **When mistakes trigger emotional reactions** - Overreactions—frustration, blame or visible anger—teach people that visibility is dangerous. The next time something goes wrong, they stay quiet instead of surfacing it early.
- **When criticism becomes public or personal** - Calling people out in front of others shifts the focus from solving problems to protecting reputation. People stop contributing openly and start managing perception.
- **When difficult conversations are avoided** - Avoiding tension may feel easier in the moment, but it creates ambiguity. Without clear expectations, people become cautious, unsure where they stand or what's safe to say.

Safety breaks when people believe it's safer to stay silent than to speak up.

The Bottom Line on Safety

Safety answers a critical trust question: "Is it safe for me to contribute honestly, speak up and take appropriate risks here?"

When the answer is yes, people engage more fully and perform at their best. When the answer is no, people withdraw and protect themselves.

Safety is not softness. It is disciplined, consistent support for each other.

The Bottom Line: **Create an environment where people can speak the truth without fear and take action without concern of unfair, personal retributions.**



Transparency – Do they understand what's really going on?

If credibility builds belief, reliability builds confidence, understanding builds connection and safety builds engagement, transparency is the final piece that builds clarity. Transparency is the willingness to be open, clear and honest about information, decisions and intent. It reduces ambiguity, keeps people informed and helps them make sense of what is happening, why it is happening and what it means for them.

In its absence, people fill the gaps. And as humans, we rarely fill those gaps with optimism and good cheer. When information is missing, unclear or deliberately softened, people speculate, often wildly. Rumours form, gossip spreads and assumptions quickly become accepted as fact. Trust erodes quickly in this environment, not necessarily because something has gone wrong, but because people don't really know what is going on. Uncertainty doesn't stay neutral for long. It creates tension, distraction and ultimately, fear.

Transparency is not about sharing everything immediately or removing all filters. It is about sharing what matters, clearly and honestly, in a timely and appropriate way. This requires judgement. It won't always be perfect, and there will always be constraints around what can be shared and when. But withholding too much or waiting too long often creates more risk than it removes.

When people are making decisions in the face of uncertainty, they are not just evaluating the situation. They are asking themselves: Do I have enough information to act confidently? Do I understand what's really going on here? Can I trust the picture I'm being given?

If the answer is yes, alignment improves, decisions accelerate and people move with confidence. If the answer is no, hesitation creeps in. People second-guess, delay action or look for additional signals before committing. Over time, this slows progress, fragments alignment and increases the likelihood of poor decisions.

Transparency doesn't remove uncertainty entirely, but it gives people the confidence to act knowing they have what is available at the time.

1. Demonstrating Transparency Yourself

Transparency is not built by telling everyone, everything or oversharing, it is built by clear and honest communication. You can't break confidentiality or sharing inappropriately. The reality is that when we withhold something from people that we should share, they immediately think: What else are they hiding?

Transparency is about making sure people understand what's really going on, especially when it's uncomfortable.

As far as business models vulnerable to Covid-19 go, Airbnb's exposure was huge. Like many CEOs, Airbnb's Brian Chesky had to make the horrible decision to lay off 25% of his workforce during the pandemic. But he didn't hide behind corporate communications or corporate jargon.

Chesky wrote a detailed, direct letter to employees explaining the impact on the business, how the decision was made and the impact it would have. He didn't soften the reality, laying out who would be impacted, what support would be provided with empathy and care, and the company's path forward.

This communication is now widely shared as a benchmark for how to handle layoffs. Being transparent, clear and human.

Here are a few ways leaders can establish and reinforce this:

1. Explain the why behind decisions - People are more likely to align when they understand the reasoning, not just the outcome. Share the reasons, even if they are uncomfortable at times.

2. Share information early, not perfectly - Waiting for perfect clarity often delays communication. Share what you know, when you know it. Be clear about future changes and updates to build understanding.

3. Be honest about uncertainty - Leaders rarely have all the answers. Admitting uncertainty builds more trust than pretending or filling gaps with guesses.

4. Close the loop - If you commit to providing updates or decisions, follow through. Leaving things unresolved creates confusion. If you can't give updates, share that you can't and give a timeline.

5. Be consistent in your messaging - Mixed messages create doubt. Be transparent with the level of certainty you do have and if things may change, share with them this possibility. Clarity builds confidence.

2. Fostering Transparency Within Your Team

Transparency is amplified when it becomes a team norm, not just a leadership behaviour. Teams that share openly are constantly demonstrating support, trust and a willingness to work together which strengthens engagement.

Leaders can support this by:

- 1. Encouraging open communication** - Create an environment where information flows freely, not selectively. Ask people who else they could share this with and ensure they take action.
- 2. Reducing unnecessary hierarchy in information sharing** - Information bottlenecks slow decision-making and create frustration. Where possible, open the channels freely.
- 3. Making decision processes visible** - Help people understand how decisions are made, not just what was decided. Share the process, the conversations, even the arguments that forged a decision.
- 4. Encouraging clarity over perfection** - People should feel comfortable sharing incomplete information when it is useful. Just make sure the level of certainty is shared in turn.
- 5. Reinforcing honesty, even when it's uncomfortable** - Transparency often requires difficult conversations or disappointing content. Encourage honesty, reward clarity and don't accept avoidance.

Transparency is about making sure people can see through the noise and view reality clearly enough to act.

Bridgewater Associates operates in a high-stakes investment environment where decisions rely on clear, accurate information. In this context, ambiguity and hidden disagreement cost millions. To counter this, the firm built a culture of radical transparency, where ideas, feedback and decisions are made visible across the organisation.

Meetings are recorded, feedback is constant and structured debate mandatory. The reasoning behind decisions is documented and accessible to all. The focus is simple: surface the truth, test ideas rigorously and improve decision-making.

The result is faster learning, clearer alignment and fewer hidden risks. In high-performing organisations, transparency is about making reality visible so better decisions can be made.

3. How Transparency Breaks Under Pressure

Transparency doesn't disappear all at once. It erodes when clarity is replaced with ambiguity and people are left to interpret what's really going on.

- **When information is withheld unnecessarily** - Keeping people in the dark doesn't remove fear, it amplifies it. In the absence of information, people speculate and those assumptions quickly become accepted as reality.
- **When language becomes vague or overly complex** - Jargon and buzzwords create the illusion of clarity while hiding meaning. When people don't fully understand, they lose confidence in both the message and the messenger.
- **When difficult truths are softened or delayed** - Avoiding reality may feel easier in the moment, but it creates a gap between what is said and what is true. When that gap is exposed, trust drops sharply.

Transparency breaks when people don't trust they're getting the full picture.

The Bottom Line on Transparency

Transparency answers a fundamental trust question: "Do I understand what's going on and why?"

When the answer is yes, people align, engage and act with confidence. When the answer is no, they hesitate, speculate and disengage.

Transparency does not mean saying everything or breaking confidences. It means saying what you can clearly and honestly. It is being transparent in ways that help people understand what is really happening.

The Bottom Line: **Clarity builds trust, uncertainty erodes it. Shine a light into the darkness where you can to light the way.**



Time for Action: Trust as a Leadership Choice

Every organisation needs faster decisions, stronger performance and better accountability. They need people who care about the work, the outcomes and each other. Most try to achieve this through strategy, structure and process. But as we've explored, this is not enough.

To access the real driver of performance requires a strong CRUST. Every decision made about another person is made under uncertainty. So in these moments, people can't rely on logic alone. They must rely on trust.

The **CRUST** of Trust gives us a simple way to understand what drives this critical element. This isn't just a nice concept, it is a practical guide to answering the key questions:

- **Credibility** – Can they?
- **Reliability** – Will they?
- **Understanding** – Do I know them?
- **Safety** – Am I safe with them?
- **Transparency** – Do I know what's going on?

When these are strong, trust grows. When they are weak, no amount of strategy or process can compensate.

What This Means And Where To Start

This isn't an organisational issue. It's a leadership issue. It comes down to the actions, priorities and commitments individuals take every single day. Because every day, whether you realise it or not, people are adjusting their level of trust.

These changes can compound minute by minute and shape the performance of your organisation in a far more powerful way than any plan or process ever will.

You don't need a transformation program to begin, you just need awareness, intention and thoughtful action. If you want to apply this immediately, start with three simple questions.



Three Key Questions to ask:

- 1. Where is trust slowing us down right now?** - Look for hesitation, rework, over-checking or silence. These are rarely process problems. They are trust signals. Find them and look to understand them.
- 2. Which part of CRUST is weakest here?** - Next ask, what is the driver? Is it capability (Credibility)? Follow-through (Reliability)? Human connection (Understanding)? Psychological safety (Safety)? Or clarity (Transparency)?
- 3. What is one behaviour you can change this week?** - Not a massive transformation or total change of strategy. Just a simple behaviour to take action. Something actionable, visible and repeatable.

Trust is not just built in big moments. It is built in small, consistent actions over time. But there is no time, nor reason to wait.

A Final Thought

Most leaders spend their time trying to improve performance. The best leaders focus on improving the conditions that make performance possible. Trust is one of those essential conditions. Unlike many other things in organisations, it is something you influence every single day.

If You Want to Go Further

If your team is slow to make decisions, hesitant to speak up or over-reliant on process... You don't have a capability problem. You have a trust problem.

Good news is it's fixable. This is exactly what I help leadership teams solve through keynotes and programs.

For leadership teams navigating change, growth, regulatory pressure or cultural drift, trust under pressure is not a soft skill, it is a business-critical capability.

If this is showing up in your leadership team right now, it is worth addressing before it becomes a bigger performance and risk issue.

WHAT PAST CLIENTS SAID...

"Daniel is an excellent presenter with relevant and interesting stories that highlight his main points. There is much to take away from this course."

- **David Flaxman, Department of Education & Training NSW**

"Fantastic both in content and delivery. I was looking for someone to open up other ways of approaching leadership and looking at our business environment and they delivered!"

- **Michaela Flanagan, Head of Branch Operations, Swiss Re**

"I can honestly say it was one of the best sessions I have been a part of. The content was unique & very interactive. I highly recommend Empathic Consulting to build empathy & understanding to drive performance." - **Daniel Markovski, Group Sales Manager, Nova entertainment**

"This training is fantastic! Common sense, easy to understand and the tips and concepts are real things that I'll be able to implement into my work practice. I highly recommend it to any emerging and established leaders." - **Manager, Australian Federal Police**

"Daniel is a brilliant, engaging presenter. He also provides genuine practical insights & techniques to revitalise and improve teamwork. The 3 sessions were both enjoyable and productive!." - **Senior Leader, ASIC**



ABOUT DANIEL

Daniel Murray (BSc, MBA Exec) helps leadership teams improve decision-making under pressure, strengthen alignment and build the trust required for performance in complex environments.

With a background in mathematics and corporate strategy, Daniel brings a rare blend of analytical rigour and human insight. He helps leaders understand how trust shapes behaviour, why decisions stall and what it takes to create the conditions for people to act with confidence when the stakes are high.

Clients value Daniel for making complex ideas practical, commercially relevant and easy to apply. His style combines sharp thinking, real-world examples and enough humour to challenge leaders without losing the room.

As a speaker, facilitator, coach and consultant, Daniel works with organisations to reduce friction, surface risk earlier and build leadership cultures people can trust. Because in high-stakes environments, performance depends less on what leaders intend and more on how people experience them.



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