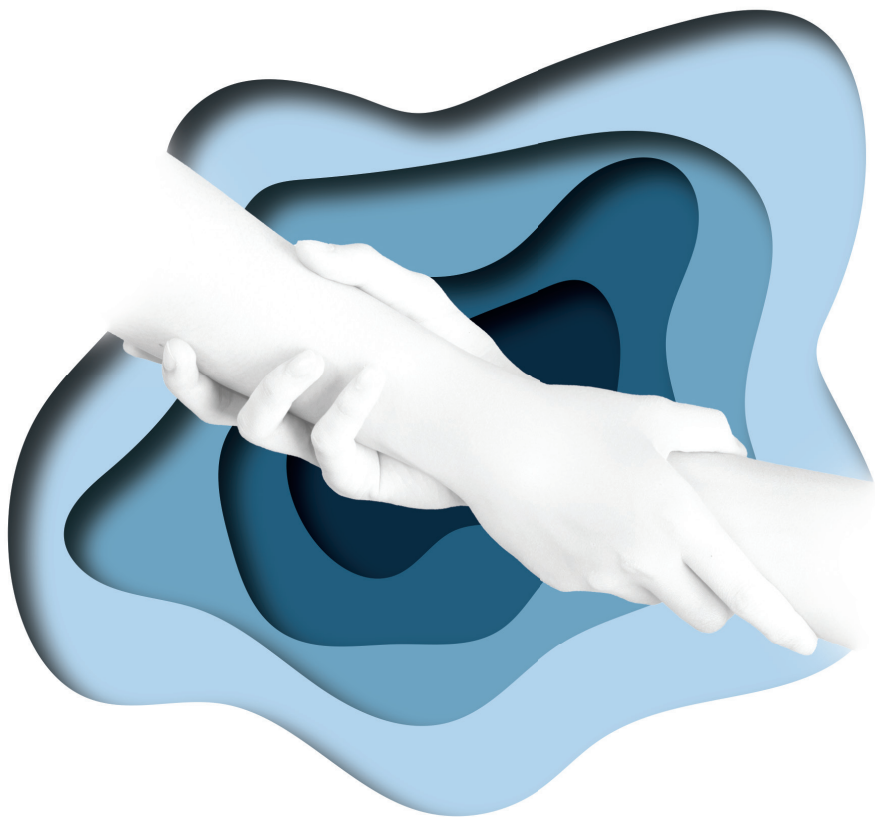# TRUST

The Foundation for Healthy Organisations and Teams

Melanie Marshall

ORGANISATIONAL DISTRUST

'All leadership is a transfer of trust. It stays with no man or woman but is in a constant state of forward movement, into the future, for the best.'

– Robin Dreeke

Trust is the firm belief in the reliability, truth or strength of a person or thing. It can also be a confident expectation.[1] It is the non-negotiable element of our most valued relationships, leadership, and high performing teams.

Given that work consumes so much of our lives, we must trust the people we spend most of our days with.

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Many years of reforms, transformations, and change programs across the public and private industry have resulted in varying levels of success and failure, so you can't blame people for being cynical.

A special report by The Oxford Review revealed that cultural cynicism or distrust toward organisational strategy was a major factor in whether executives and managers could successfully lead and achieve desired organisational and business changes.[2]

Understanding and addressing the reasons for distrust is vital. Lack of trust between those designing the strategy and the people responsible for executing it has 'direct negative motivational impact on employees to engage in change projects and may even extend to the extent of sabotaging change programmes.'[3]

Over the years, I've witnessed firsthand this exact disengagement and sabotage of improvement efforts across multiple government departments and private industries. For example:

- Service design and reforms that suit senior executive egos and personalities create and embed siloed organisations not designed for functional needs.

- Strategic recommendations are cherry-picked to focus on and adopt quick wins because there is no faith or trust in people's ability to deliver better operational outcomes.

- Refusal to provide requested access to people, information, and resources to support business improvement. Reluctance to give a complete picture of challenges and opportunities to facilitate genuine consultation and co-design of solutions.

- Routine overuse of consultants and contractors instead of higher value leadership and management functions performed internally.

- Reporting that reflects what people want to hear rather than what needs to be heard.

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We'll look deeper into the challenges of trust in Chapter Three. For now, know that when we delve into the root causes, it becomes clear that people don't generally set out to create unproductive and harmful workplaces. Most have lost their way and need guidance and support to get back on track.

More personally, no one wants to be labelled unable to work

with others, or worse, be considered dishonest, self-serving, incompetent, excluding, or over-controlling. These behaviours often happen unconsciously, covertly, and slowly over time. If left unchecked, moments of distrust can become culturally and psychologically embedded.

Accepting the reality that nothing is perfect, we choose or remain in organisations because we believe and hope that what we're working on does, can, or will make a difference.

In a formal sense, there is also a contractual and assumed level of trust in organisations, as recruitment is based on the agreed value that individual contribution can provide what the business wants to achieve.

Even with the best intentions, this is often not respected when consulting companies and external resources design transformation strategies and solutions for the way forward. Intent and capability are there, but what's missing is feeling and connection to those who own the responsibility and actions.

To build trust, you need to know what's broken, who you need to partner with, what needs to be done to fix things, and how you're going to work through things together.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES – HEALTHY OR HARMFUL?

At different points in my career, I've been entrenched in toxic, low-trust cultures. Despite success with people committed to fully transforming how they worked and served others, we

often needed a more holistic approach to establishing better relationships across the organisation or enterprise.

This was noticeably clear in one company.

A revolving office door of managers kept asking for help to address behaviours that were highly disturbing and ingrained, stemming from the top down and leaking across multiple areas. The organisation was far from healthy.

The draining nature of continually putting out spot fires and resolving conflicts was exhausting, and I questioned whether it was time to leave. I was so low that if it were financially possible to quit work, I would have.

I wanted to believe that I could make a difference, but deep down, I felt like a total fraud as the Organisational Development lead. The results of the culture survey had come in, and they were horrible. It was no surprise given the amount of intervention work the broader Human Resources team and I had been doing.

Over the twelve months prior, we'd tried raising issues and suggested solutions with the senior executive team on numerous occasions. These were also identified immediately before the survey, but other leaders and my colleagues who shared the concerns could never get traction.

Eventually, we were told that the National Office had engaged a consulting firm to create a new leadership and performance framework for middle managers. But we had no visibility of what this was or how it would resolve the issues employees

and customers experienced. The shared experiences of a trusted few made it obvious that the proposed roadmap wasn't going to address the issues or causes of the toxic enterprise-wide culture.

Despite support from those who often volunteered internal services and my particular interest in partnering, we were consistently denied permission to be involved with the external consulting team.

On a personal level, I had lost my sparkle, I felt utterly undervalued, and despite a mostly brave and smiling face, had zero confidence. It was a miserable time; my head was a mess, and I began thinking that the problem was me. I began a daily and automatic ritual of questioning whether I was the right fit for work I cared about and had been been recruited for.

In privately discussing my feelings of insecurity and wanting to leave, I received multiple assurances that my experience would be missed and that I should stay. But I didn't feel it, as I'd lost hope, was burnt out, and couldn't walk the party line anymore. My work performance and mental health were suffering, and I didn't like the person I'd become.

Stepping up and leaning in

In a last attempt to turn things around, I requested a one-on-one meeting with the CEO to discuss the recent culture survey and address the findings.

Employee feedback had confirmed what my colleagues and I

already knew – that the organisation was in complete turmoil and spiralling down at a rapid pace.

The co-designed recommendations from internal subject matter experts aligned with the survey provider. There was real concern that the senior executive team's heavy focus on middle management leadership development meant they'd missed developing themselves.

A primary finding highlighted the need for leadership cohesion and trust-building between the senior executive and middle managers. The driver was a 20 per cent disconnect between employee trust in direct line managers over their trust in senior leaders. The organisation was ripe for mutiny.

Further developing middle managers was the wrong way to address the survey findings, as it ignored the incredibly positive leadership ratings given to these managers. This was in complete contrast with the senior executive team, who were not respected by most employees. From my colleagues' and my perspective, the decision to focus again on middle managers rather than respond directly to employee concerns placed the organisation and its services at even greater risk.

It was time for a one-on-one meeting with the CEO, and I was nervous. The message I needed to deliver was tough, regardless of the evidence, how prepared I was, or the support behind me.

Ouch, that hurts!

Despite what I thought was careful language and empathic

delivery of the cultural concern, the CEO's emotional response was far more than I bargained for.

Her words were something like, 'How dare you come in here and tell me what I can and can't do!' Given I was already fragile, her rage ripped through me as I struggled to hold back tears and maintain composure.

Trusted colleagues had warned me that the CEO viewed me as a young upstart. Even though I was employed as the company's organisational culture specialist, her opinion of me was far from glowing. Hence, it took much courage to put myself into such a risky position. In hindsight, I should have thought more deeply before the conversation, but I did what I thought was right at the time, based on my experience.

External consultants had been paid to provide a high-level strategy for what team members and I had successfully delivered previously to middle managers for similar organisations.

The CEO appeared not to know that the lessons we'd learnt, combined with our cultural knowledge of what did and didn't work, had already been applied to develop and support middle managers and – as the survey demonstrated – it was working.

We had worked through days, weeks, and months of conflict mediation, holding back tidal waves of a systemically toxic culture of bullying, harassment, underperformance, and unsafe work practices. In a high-pressure service organisation where someone's bad day could result in harm or death to an employee or member of the community, it was worth the effort.

As the lead mediator and coach, I'd become a go-to person for many areas, but really all I was providing was a quiet, safe space away from the crazy so they could gather their thoughts, test out ideas, and get a pep talk before going back into battle.

Every day felt like an organisational war zone. With each story entrusted to us, it became clear that the problem was not middle managers; it was the siloed and fractured relationships among the senior executive team.

After nearly two years in the organisation, coaching managers on how to move from technical roles and adapt to people leadership and management pressures, the culture at middle-manager level had improved. The evidence was validating, and it was comforting to know that our team had made a significant difference.

Unfortunately, the lack of senior executive accountability or leadership skills was significantly driving organisational culture, performance, and people's mental health into the ground. Employees could see and feel it, and now independently backed evidence (via the survey) proved that things needed to change.

Good intentions

My conversation with the CEO was in her office, and given the sensitivity, I went in alone. I felt vulnerable, knowing that by sharing an alternative perspective, I was at considerable intrinsic risk.

Yet, I hoped for clarification that the culture survey's central

recommendation was addressed as a priority. I also sought direction on how to support her and the organisation more broadly.

Desperate to connect with the CEO and her executive team, I wanted to provide assurance for my colleagues and the next wave of managers and staff that would come through my office. I wanted to let them know their voices were heard, and there was a combined senior leadership commitment to change.

My expectations were embarrassingly way out of sync. The CEO was furious, and I received a significant dressing down that let me know it was none of my business. It took all my energy to manage a full range of diverging and colliding emotions through the meeting.

With all my interpersonal conflict experience put to the test, I calmly waited out the anger, and the CEO finally became more conversational and open. It was a relief when the conversation ended better than it started, but her initial response left me feeling raw and defeated, with nothing left to give.

I cried all the way home, replaying the meeting in my head, wondering whether I had been disrespectful or whether I was just on the receiving end of the CEO having a horrendous day, month, or year.

Thankfully, it was Friday, and over the weekend, I had time to lick my wounds, decompress, go for a run, and get clarity on what I needed.

To my surprise, the CEO was happy when she came into my

office mid-Monday morning announcing that she wanted me to implement a glossy high-level middle management leadership program. Sadly, it was confirmation that I had failed to deliver the message she needed to hear. I thanked her for the offer and politely told her I had resigned earlier that morning. She appeared shocked but said it was important to follow what was right for me and wished me all the best. When asked where I was going, I replied, 'I don't know, I don't have a job yet'.

It was a huge decision. As a single mum with two kids, a new mortgage, and no immediate job to go to, I was scared but had enough in the bank for a couple of months without work. I would take any other job to keep a roof overhead and food on the table. Despite my very reasonable fear, I was living my values, and at that moment, I felt like the most powerful woman alive!

With relief and a weight off my shoulders, I was thrilled to secure another role quickly. Walking away felt light, and my head was filled with the excitement of another opportunity.

Sadly, a few months later, the toxic, low-trust culture and predicted mutiny were broadcast across local television and newspapers. The CEO moved on shortly after.

My intentions were good, and overall, I believe the CEO's were too. Like all of us, she was human. I had seen her genuine care for others, but she was getting smashed across a range of fronts, and I knew she was coming from a place of real pain.

From the CEO's perspective, I was probably just another person throwing rocks at already broken windows. I wish I knew then

what I know now, and I'm grateful for the reflections and lessons I've learned since.

The problem with assumptions

Heading into that fateful meeting with the CEO, I was confident because I had the trust of the people I worked with and understood the organisational context. I felt responsible for advocating for employees at a time where things were horrid for everyone.

The independent evidence and support for how the CEO and her team needed to respond to the survey findings gave credibility to the conversation. I knew my communication was well-intended, and in wanting to be part of the solution, I was also putting my hand up to share the accountability.

But in the CEO's eyes, I did not have credibility, trust or permission to discuss what I could offer her and the senior executive team. I had not prioritised the need to understand her perspective first and had provided unsolicited advice that was not wanted or respected.

In hindsight, as much as I thought my approach was good at the time, I delivered it in a way that did not first serve the very person with whom I sought a trusting relationship.

As an accountability freak, I had also fallen into the dangerous state of taking on more than my fair share of the blame. I doubted everything I knew and felt hopeless, as all my previous attempts to support the organisation strategically had failed. I had not been allowed to participate in big picture discussions

or engagements, and rightly or wrongly, I had taken this very personally.

Freedom came when I realised and accepted that regardless of title, no individual is responsible for leading a cultural shift alone. Thinking otherwise is harmful.

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Thinking it's all on us is like playing a team sport and forgetting that victory or defeat are determined by the collective efforts of our teammates and the way we play together.

Sure we have individual accountabilities, but if you know you're doing the best you can with what you have, it is useful to remember the adage, 'There is no 'I' in team'.

From that experience, I took on roles in different fields, industries, and sectors, recharged my energies, checked more of my assumptions, and dropped my 'I can save the world' attitude and ego. When I did so, work became less stressful and failure less personal.

It's fair to say that if you've ever managed teams or an organisation, you've spent plenty of time de-escalating, investigating, resolving workplace conflicts, and addressing unacceptable work behaviours as part of everyday business.

These have likely ranged from the subversive sabotage of organisational change efforts, embedded bullying and

harassment cultures, employees yelling and screaming at each other, physical attacks, unions threatening stop-work action, to illegal activities. Sadly, little surprises anyone who has ever worked in employee relations or as a people manager.

We all have limits, and depending on what is going on in our lives, our ability to manage our emotions and behave in ways that serve us professionally and personally can sometimes falter.

Life experience, interpersonal issues, moral and ethical boundaries, as well as contextual factors such as situational trauma, mental health, drugs, and alcohol can have a massive impact on our ability to manage what we feel and how we express it.

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In short, we can all act out in ways that aren't congruent with our values or the relationships we want with others.

When it comes to change, it's the behaviour, not the person or people, that is the problem.

Seeing through unacceptable and toxic behaviour to connect with the people behind it can be challenging and tiring work. It becomes even harder if we're personally under pressure and ultimately accountable for what is delivered.

Throughout this book, I'll offer an approach that better serves us for providing and building trust. For now, understanding

the context in which you operate and considering a broader perspective will be more useful.

THE APS PICTURE

There continues to be a plethora of Whole of Government reviews, audits, and ministerial enquiries on Australian Public Service (APS) operations.

As a typical response, multiple high-level and high-cost strategic plans are developed and agreed upon. Although these can result in some change, many fail to produce meaningful, long-term benefits. This is evident when further reviews recommend the same types of solutions as those before them.

The most recent independent review of the Australian Public Service (APS)[4] stated that the APS is not ready for the significant changes and challenges Australia will face between now and 2030. Key findings reflected historical challenges in addressing known issues involving people, enabling systems, and culture.

When we think of organisational systems, we need to think, plan and act holistically across multiple domains. The foundations for working together need to be stable if we want to deliver services people can trust.

The APS Review found that:

- More than 170 purpose statements reinforced agency priorities rather than those of the broader APS

- There were fundamental failures in managing and investing in employees
- Approximately 40 per cent of APS employee time is spent on automatable tasks
- Seventy per cent of staff reported the APS as too rigid and hierarchical.

That means people aren't supported to produce quality outcomes because agencies generally haven't been designed to run in an integrated way. The impact is that the service experience of delivery teams and their customers (internal and external) can be diabolically confusing and ineffective for meeting people's most basic needs.

At the time of the review, only three in ten Australians trusted government services. The usual recommendations to 'work in partnership', 'operate efficiently' and 'live APS values'[5] were not surprising and similar to the many reviews before them.

Of considerable challenge are the multiple interpretations of what success looks like in practice.

In response, the Government announced that it aspires to provide 'A trusted APS, united in serving all Australians'.[6]

Although the recommendations appeared overly generic, it was heartening that the APS was advised to 'double the trust scores provided by the public'.[7]

We all want to trust.

It's not that APS employees don't want to deliver to organi-

sational plans. Instead, large con-
sulting companies often write
these strategies at incredibly
high levels and frequently lack
any operational perspective on implementing them.

> We all want
> to trust.

The research is solid, and the intentions are great, but those responsible for delivery are put in positions where they:

a. Don't know where to start
b. Aren't permitted to lead or truly leverage their expertise
c. Can't break it down
d. Are working on so many initiatives that the style and pace of change are impractical, unscalable, and unsustainable.

Employee engagement

Employee engagement began in the 1990s from Professor William Khan's work, demonstrating the importance of connecting people's physical, cognitive, and emotional states with organisational goals to achieve higher levels of commitment, drive outcome-focused behaviours, and increase work performance.[8]

A common misconception in organisational practice is that engagement comes from alignment to organisational goals. But we need to be clear that it comes from meaningful work, where we're safe to be ourselves and have the energy and resources to perform at our best.[9]

Instead of focusing on what is going wrong in an organisation, it's far better to focus on what works from various fields such as psychology, human resource management, organisational development, leadership, and business integration.[10]

Since the APS review – and in approaching things more holistically and across multiple disciplines – numerous improvements have increased employee engagement, capability and agency responsiveness to community needs during natural disasters. This has been particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic, where government agencies' responsiveness in pulling together and responding as a unified team was indeed a transformational effort.

A significantly positive side-effect of the pandemic is proof of what is possible on an international scale with connection, clarity, and commitment to a common purpose.

In Australian Government agencies, significant investment continues to streamline internal processes and improve non-crisis ways of working. It is worth noting current efforts to introduce new Enterprise Resource Planning systems to remove duplication, operate more effectively across agencies, re-invest, and re-distribute resources to where they're most needed.

My work is mostly with government clients, and I believe permanent government employees need to be supported and enabled to move beyond crisis and pandemic responses for sustainable community benefits. In improving 'business as usual' practices, it's easier to adapt to the unexpected.

Feelings of overwhelm, burnout, and failure are prevalent among APS clients committed to delivering quality services. It's also important to recognise that Whole of Government transformation work deeply challenges the already tired, and in some cases distrusting, agencies and people within.

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REFLECTION

Do you, and others in your circle of influence, truly feel valued as part of the organisational team?

- Why or why not?

- *If you aren't sure, read through the last employee and customer surveys. Even high-level snapshots can provide intelligence worth more detailed understanding.*

For gaps between aspired and reported organisational performance and values, what might people say behind closed doors?

Do people feel that what they do makes a difference?

- *If you don't know, it's time to build and deepen relationships to find out.*

If you were, or are, the CEO, what would people tell you if they felt they had nothing to lose?

- What would they do if they were the CEO?

Do the 'ways of working' match the espoused values and vision?

- What would your customers say?

Start asking those you serve about ways to create safe opportunities for people to share what they feel, think, and do right now.

Trust is the foundation of organisations and teams. We talk about it, complain when we don't have it, and watch its effect on the bottom line. Its absence makes headlines when organisations and leaders fall from grace, breaking the covenant they hold with clients and staff.

Trust is so important that it appears in our visions and plans as essential for strategic and operational success. But how do we establish cultures of trust when individual interpretations and expectations can be so vastly different?

This book shows how. It is a practical, evidence-based, call to action for positive organisational change and higher performance. Here you will learn about:

- Overcoming the challenges for trust
- Culture as a team sport
- Obtaining freedom to deliver what matters
- Leaving a legacy for sustainable success

If you're seeking a realistic and adaptable approach for leading with trust, then this book is for you.

"Melanie's book offers practical ideas and principles to help build trust in organisations and teams whilst being easy to read and powerful. This is an important subject, and this book deserves to be read in every organisation."
– Dr David Wilkinson, Editor-in-Chief, The Oxford Review

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Marshall believes that everything we do is based on trust. As an organisational trust strategist, she builds bridges between strategy and delivery, enabling leaders and organisations to tackle the tough stuff, create meaningful partnerships, and unlock the magic of people for genuine and lasting benefits.

Renowned for her ability to clear the noise and keep things real, Melanie works with leaders at all levels, in government, hospital, military, and private organisations.

For more information, visit melaniemarshall.com.au