

High-Performing Teams Start with Trust



Everyone talks about growth. Scaling. Performance. Results. Few talk about what makes those things *possible*. The truth is, growth doesn't come from KPIs or dashboards. It comes from trust.

This is an article about trust: how it builds growth, what breaks it down, and how to fix it when things go wrong.

I've been lucky. I work in an organisation where trust is real, not just a word on a wall. I have a boss I trust implicitly, a leadership team that leads with clarity and care, and colleagues who show up with honesty, even when it's hard. That's rare and it's made me realise just how foundational trust is, not just when it's broken, but when it's strong. This article isn't about where I work now. It's about all the places I've seen (and sometimes been part of) where trust slowly slipped away; it's a reflection on what we can do, wherever we are, to protect it.

Quietly, invisibly, trust creates the conditions for people to do their best work. It shows up in what's *not* said: the honesty in a meeting, the risk someone is willing to take, the way people speak truth to power instead of protecting themselves. When trust is present, growth follows. When it's not, even the most talented teams plateau.

Trust Creates the Conditions for Growth

Trust is what allows people to engage fully, creatively, emotionally, and professionally. Without it, teams stay surface-level, but when it's present something powerful happens, people speak more honestly, take smarter risks, and unlock levels of collaboration that aren't possible in fear-based environments.

In high-trust teams conflict becomes a tool not a threat. Feedback flows more freely. People are more likely to admit mistakes early, ask for help, and challenge the status quo without fearing retaliation or embarrassment.

This isn't just feel-good leadership theory, it's backed by research. Google's landmark *Project Aristotle* found that psychological safety (a byproduct of trust) was the number one predictor of high-performing teams¹. Similarly, Paul Zak's research shows that high-trust companies report 50% higher productivity, 76% more engagement, and 74% less stress².

When trust is embedded in a team's culture, growth becomes a natural outcome not something that has to be forced through metrics and mandates. It's the difference between a team that's running scared and a team that's running smart.

Trust Fuels Psychological Safety and That's Where Teams Thrive

At Google, the most effective teams weren't the ones with the best résumés or the most experience. They were the ones with the strongest *psychological safety*, the sense that people could take risks, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear of judgment or punishment¹.

Psychological safety isn't just "being nice." It's what lets people speak up when something's unclear, call out problems early, and bring new ideas to the table without worrying they'll be shut down. Trust is the condition that makes psychological safety possible. Without trust, people stay quiet. With it, they show up fully.

In fact, Google's research found psychological safety was the single most important factor in high-performing teams. Other benefits followed (better dependability, clearer structure, more meaning) but safety was the foundation. Teams with high psychological safety were less likely to lose employees, more likely to generate strong ideas, and consistently outperformed their peers.

When leaders focus on building trust, they're not just making people feel better. They're creating the safety net teams need to perform at their best.

What Erodes Trust (and Why It's Often Invisible)

Trust doesn't usually collapse in one dramatic moment. It erodes slowly, quietly until teams notice something has shifted, but no one can quite say why.

Common everyday drains include:

- Mixed or conflicting messages from leadership
- Questions left unanswered
- Promises made and forgotten
- Shifts in direction without explanation

Even while the team seems “on track,” internally people begin hedging, avoiding risk, and holding conversations in smaller, trusted circles.

Without trust, safety vanishes and self-protection takes its place.

What makes this even more insidious is that the erosion often goes unnoticed by those causing it. Leaders might assume their decisions are transparent, but employees hear confusion. Intentional pauses for reflection might seem like indecision. Without regular feedback mechanisms, what leaders see as measured decision-making can be experienced as uncertainty or even mistrust.

Organisation Size Matters: Silos Grow in the Dark

While trust breakdown can happen anywhere, it’s more likely in larger organisations. As companies expand, formal structures, communication layers, and bureaucracy multiply creating fertile ground for silos and “us vs them” thinking.

- Research from SME Business News indicates that trust tends to decline as organisational size increases: employees in smaller companies report significantly higher trust in leadership and peers compared to those in larger firms².
- Gliffy’s analysis echoes this: “Silos are more common in large companies because the larger the company, the harder it is to communicate”³.
- Document360 adds that larger firms “with layered hierarchies and complex structures are more prone to silos,” though even small organisations aren’t immune⁴.

As trust erodes in distant corners, employees naturally gravitate toward the people they still trust forming tight-knit clusters. This is both natural

and dangerous: silos close communication loops and create blind spots enabling further erosion of trust.

As trust fades, people retreat to the relationships they can still rely on. They huddle into teams, functions, or departments where there's still a sense of shared understanding. Instead of strengthening the organisation, this fragmentation leads to something far more damaging: silos.

Once silos set in, it's only a matter of time before collaboration turns into competition.

The “Us and Them” Trap

One of the most corrosive forms of trust breakdown isn't personal, it's structural. It happens when departments start seeing each other as obstacles rather than partners.

You hear it in the language:

- “That's just typical of Sales.”
- “Legal's going to kill this anyway.”
- “If Ops had talked to us first, this wouldn't be a mess.”

This is the “us and them” trap. It's not just a cultural issue it's a performance one. When departments become factions, collaboration suffers. Information stops flowing. People hoard resources, protect territory, and work toward their team's goals instead of the organisation's.

It's especially common in larger organisations where distance (both literal and hierarchical) makes empathy harder. It rarely starts with bad intentions, most silos form because people are trying to solve problems

within their own world, but without shared context or aligned incentives trust doesn't scale.

Leaders often try to fix this with structure (matrix models, dotted-line reporting, new collaboration tools) but none of that works without rebuilding cross-functional trust. That means:

- Shared goals that span departments.
- Joint problem-solving, not just joint reporting lines.
- Leaders modelling curiosity, not defensiveness.

The longer the “us and them” mindset persists, the harder it becomes to reset. Because at its core, it’s not about disagreement, it’s about disconnection.

Rebuilding Trust (Even After It Breaks)

The good news? Trust is resilient.

It doesn’t have to be perfect. It just has to be tended and even when it breaks after a restructure, a missed promise, or a season of silence it can be rebuilt.

It’s not about one-off gestures rebuilding trust takes time, consistency, and a willingness to lead differently.

Here’s where to start:

- **Consistency over charisma.**

Big announcements and motivational speeches don’t rebuild trust. Small, repeatable behaviours do. Follow through on what you say. Be predictable in the best way.

- **Transparency, even when the answer is “I don’t know.”**

People don’t expect perfection. But they do expect honesty. The moment you name the thing that’s been left unspoken, trust begins to repair.

- **Make accountability human.**

When trust is broken, people look for signs that things will be different. That means clear ownership, not blame. A leader saying “We missed the mark and here’s how

“we’re fixing it” carries more weight than a performance review ever could.

- **Rebuild trust out loud.**

Talk about trust explicitly. Invite feedback. Acknowledge the gap between intention and impact. Give people the words to describe what they need and the safety to say it.

Most importantly don’t delegate it away. Rebuilding trust is leadership work. It can’t be outsourced to HR or pinned to a new emoji in Teams.

When done well, it has a ripple effect. People start engaging again, collaboration rebounds and the organisation stops bracing and starts building.

Trust Isn’t a Given, It’s a Choice

Trust doesn’t arrive with a job title. It doesn’t come bundled with a mission statement or a reorg plan. It’s built, choice by choice, conversation by conversation, in the quiet moments where people decide whether to engage or hold back.

The truth is, most of us don’t set out to break trust we just forget to protect it.

So now that you’ve read this, take a moment to reflect:

- Where is trust already strong in your team?
- Where is it quietly eroding?
- Where have you assumed trust, but not earned it?

You don’t need a five-point plan. Just start by noticing. Ask one better question. Name one invisible tension. Follow through on one small promise. Trust grows in those moments.

Whether you’re a team lead, a line manager, or a CEO, how you show up matters. You set the tone.

So the question is:

What will you do to build trust in your organisation today, this week, this year?

References

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3. Gliffy. (n.d.). *How to break down silos and boost collaboration*. [gliffy.com](#)
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