

WHITE PAPER

TRUST & BELONGING

Establishing the Foundations of Sustainable, High Performing Teams

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INTRODUCTION

In the whitepaper *The Leader, Communication & High Performance*,¹ we identified the crucial role of the leader in building trust between team members and the leader. Trust is iterative and slow building, and we discovered the important role of the *in-between moments*² in creating trust. Additionally, we argued that leaders create a positive, attractive future workplace climate which resonates with team members. In doing so they utilise human motivation and organisation to fashion a collective environment of belonging which is highly attractive to team members.

*While few leaders would argue against the idea that trust is necessary for building elite performance, not nearly enough realise the height of its importance, and far too many disregard trust-building as a “soft” or “secondary” competency. But in our joint experience, we’ve learned that trust is the one thing that changes everything. It’s not a nice-to-have; it’s a must-have. Without it, every part of your organisation can fall, literally, into disrepair. With trust, all things are possible – most importantly: continuous improvement and sustainable, measurable, tangible results in the marketplace.*³

In NSC Group, not only do we subscribe to this quote from Covey and Conant, but in our work with organisational leaders, we tell them – the development and sustainment of an environment of trust and belonging is the team leader’s #1 job!

This environment is so powerful, so attractive, that it is the foundation of sustainable, high performing teams. Building trust and fostering a sense of belonging within teams is essential for the team’s success and productivity. Trust is the foundation on which teams thrive, while belonging strengthens the bond among team members, leading to increased collaboration, engagement, and innovation.

Trust and belonging are critical to the very fabric of our teams. In this Whitepaper, we will gather and review contemporary research from a range of sources in our quest to better understand trust and belonging. Our hypothesis is that trust and belonging exist within a complex chain of correlations which positively influence employee emotional engagement, organisational commitment, and high performance. Additionally, we posit that vulnerability, wholeheartedness, accountability, psychological safety, and emotional intelligence are significant contributors to the creation and sustainability of trust and belonging.



TRUST

Trust in a person is reliant on the genuineness of the person in the absence of absolute evidence of the truth. When trusting a leader, the follower is acting on their belief in the leader’s words, deeds, and emotions. In doing so, the follower significantly increases their vulnerability to the leader.⁴

*There is scarcely any form of economic activity, from running a dry-cleaning business to fabricating large-scale integrated circuits, that does not require social collaboration. Unless it can be tightly controlled by habit, contract, law, rules, norms, and regulations, such collaboration requires trusting relationships to be effective. Mutual trust is an important outgrowth of the exchange between leader and a member of a group. As leader-member exchanges continue, the leader and the member evaluate each other’s ability, benevolence, and integrity. If the evaluations are positive, trust is built between them.*⁵

Trust and vulnerability are closely intertwined, and both are risk taking activities.

Trust is the bedrock upon which strong teams are built. It is the confidence that team members place in one another’s intentions and actions, knowing that they can rely on each other to achieve common goals. When trust is present, individuals feel safe to take risks, express their opinions, and admit mistakes without fear of judgment or retribution. This, in turn, encourages open and honest communication and constructive feedback, leading to better decision-making and problem-solving. Vulnerability refers to the willingness to show one’s authentic self, admit weaknesses, acknowledge the expertise of team members, accept responsibility, and ask for help when needed. When team members demonstrate vulnerability and witness it in others, it creates a sense of connection and empathy, strengthening the bonds among them.

In many sectors of society, vulnerability is perceived as weakness. For those who hold this perception, in an event where they are faced with the potential of being vulnerable, they act to chase the circumstance and people involved away, or shut down, refusing to engage. When leaders behave in this manner, what little trust team members hold in them is quickly lost to such inappropriate, anti-social, leader behaviour.

To create trust, the leader is required to be brave. Vulnerability is a risky pursuit. This is a risky pursuit for the leader must bravely act on faith that their vulnerability will indeed deliver trust and not ridicule. To be a successful, authentic, people-centred leader, albeit a previous act of vulnerability may have ended badly, they need to continue to step out bravely into vulnerability with reasonable boundaries if genuine trust is to be created. Figure 1 provides a model of the creation of trust from the concepts presented above.^{6,7}

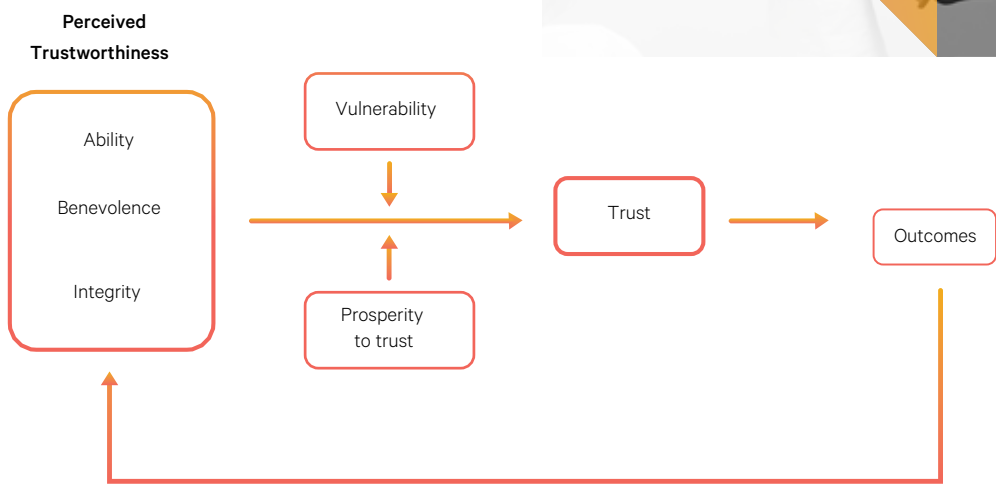


Figure 1. Model of Trust (Adapted from Mayer, et al. 1995)

The likelihood of trust to develop in a relationship is initially based on the trustor's evaluation of the three characteristics of perceived trustworthiness, ability, benevolence, and integrity. The three characteristics are evaluated separately by the trustor and have a cumulative influence on trustworthiness.

Ability is the specific skill or competence of the trustee that is of value to the trustor. For example, in a coaching relationship if the coach appears to have a set of skills and competencies which are valuable to the coachee, it is likely the coachee will find the coach trustworthy. Benevolence is the extent to which the trustee is likely to act in goodwill to the trustor. In the coaching relationship referred to above, the trustor will evaluate the level of goodwill the trustee is likely to demonstrate towards the trustor in the relationship. Integrity is the trustor's evaluation that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor determines are acceptable. The measure of integrity includes adherence and acceptability of the principles.

The perceived trustworthiness measure is then influenced by the level of vulnerability of the trustor and trustee, and the propensity of the trustor to trust the trustee to determine the level of trust in the relationship which will directly impact the outcomes of the relationship.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. Her research has centred on the power of vulnerability in building trust and fostering connections among individuals. Brown has emphasised that vulnerability is not a weakness, rather a source of strength that allows individuals to build authentic relationships. When team members embrace vulnerability within reasonable boundaries and show their genuine selves, it creates a safe space for others to do the same, promoting a culture of trust within the team.^{8,9} Peter Block, a prominent organisational development consultant, focuses on the importance of community and accountability in creating trust within teams. Block argues that trust is built when individuals come together as a community, working towards a common purpose, and supporting each other's growth.

To foster trust and belonging, Block emphasises the need for team members to take ownership of their actions and decisions. This requires the fostering of a culture of accountability where team members are responsible for their contributions and outcomes. When individuals feel a sense of responsibility towards the team's success, they are more likely to invest in building trust and working collaboratively.¹⁰

In NSC Group's experience of assisting organisations to create authentic, people-centred leadership and high performance, we have observed the challenges leaders and teams have in overcoming old, negative habits. We strongly align with Block's concepts of community as positive, transformational change requires discipline. A community of practice focused on building productive leadership behaviours, trust, and accountability which commences within the team and then expands to between teams, overcomes the difficulty of leaders acting in isolation.

NSC Group Enterprise Leaders' Program prizes six principles which create authentic, people-centred leadership. Principle 4, *Resonate with Others* recognises that *emotionally intelligent leaders who are in touch with those around them, interpersonally connected in thought and emotion*.¹¹ Emotional intelligence involves recognising and understanding emotions in oneself and others, and using this awareness to effectively manage relationships.

Teams with high emotional intelligence tend to have strong trust among members. When team members are attuned to each other's emotions and respond with empathy and understanding, it creates a supportive and cohesive environment. Emotional intelligence enables team members to navigate conflicts constructively and resolve issues collaboratively, further strengthening trust.¹²

CULTIVATION OF TRUST

To cultivate trust in teams, leaders must encourage open communication and vulnerability. They should lead by example by admitting their mistakes and seeking help when needed. This creates an environment where team members feel safe taking risks and sharing their ideas without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Kurt Dirks and Donald Ferrin¹³ undertook a significant study of four decades of leadership research to determine the primary relationships between trust in leadership and antecedents, outcomes, and correlated behaviours. They proposed the model below in Figure 2 to explain the development of trust between leaders and team members.

The findings suggest that leadership style, particularly authentic, people-centred leadership styles, and several management practices, including fair procedures and interactional processes; using participative decision making; providing organisational support; and ensuring expectations are fulfilled, act to increase trust in leadership.

This research reinforces the findings put forward by Covey & Conant³; Brower, Schoorman, & Tan⁵; Brown^{8,9}; Block¹⁰; and Goldman, et al¹² who have confirmed that trust is built through vulnerable, open interactions between the leader and team members which in turn creates quantum increases in organisational commitment, employee engagement, and higher performance.

One practical way to promote trust in teams is through team-building exercises that encourage the sharing of personal experiences and storytelling. These exercises help team members to see each other as whole individuals, fostering empathy and understanding. As trust is created in the in-between moments, the significance of regular face-to-face meetings and conversations to deepen relationships and enhance trust among team members cannot be over emphasised. Creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue allows team members to understand each other's perspectives and challenges, thereby strengthening the collective sense of belonging.

BELONGING

Belonging is the glue that binds a team together. Belonging is the feeling of being part of a team, where individuals feel valued, respected, connected, and appreciated for their unique yet value-adding contributions. When team members feel a strong sense of belonging, they are more likely to be engaged, committed, and motivated to work toward shared objectives. This sense of belonging also increases loyalty and reduces attrition, as team members are less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere when they feel connected to their team.

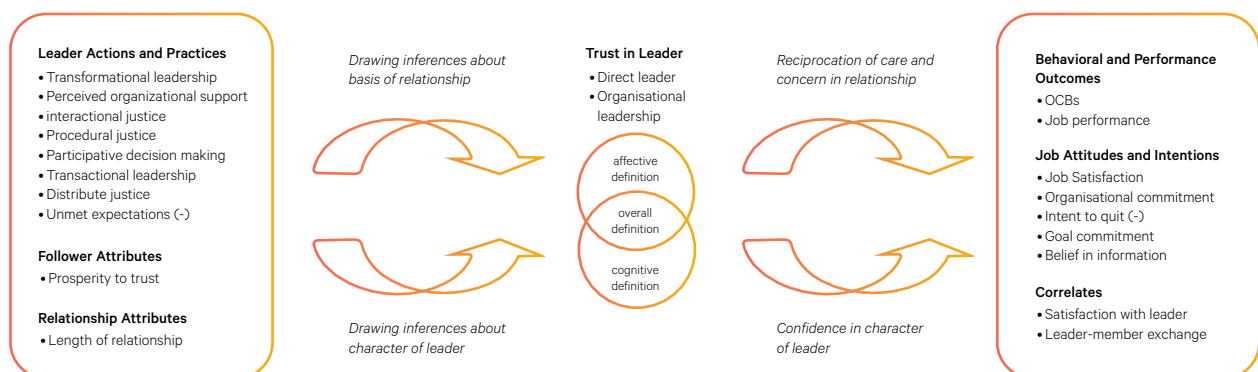


Figure 2. Framework for trust in leadership. Concepts in *italics* represents processes and concepts that are parts of the theoretical model but were not examined empirically because of insufficient data. A minus sign indicates a negative relationship with trust. OCBs = organisational citizenship behaviours.

Belonging is not fitting in. The concept of fitting in is the significant changing of self-identity to align with, and be accepted by the dominant group in the team or organisation. This behaviour is about seeking approval by the stifling of individuality. People have a profound need for connection and to be part of something that is greater than the sum of our individual parts. While the need to organise can have a magnetic attraction for people, the dark side of organisation can be allowance of the formation of negative and often destructive cliques and echo chambers. These formations often demand the down-playing of self and the expected adaption to behavioural norms often in opposition to expectations of the desired official culture. Worthy, positive, high performing teams prize individuality, heterogeneity, and innovation, not sameness.

*True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.*⁹

Brown's work sheds light on the concept of belonging. She suggests that shame, which stems from the fear of not belonging or being unworthy, can be overcome by embracing vulnerability and fostering inclusivity. Creating psychological safety, a safe and supportive environment where team members can express themselves without judgment is crucial in cultivating a strong sense of belonging.⁸

The establishment of quality relationships between team members, psychological safety, and learning specifically from failures has been demonstrated to connect employees, improve coordination between employees, increase learning, and achieve higher performance.^{6, 14} The quality of relationships in a team is the foundation of a high-quality work environment in which relational coordination delivers improved team communication and relationships. Relational coordination conveys a specific environment of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. In particular, it enables the information-processing capacity of the organisation to support the effective coordination of work. It empowers high performance through the platform of high quality relationships.

*When employees who work together have shared goals that transcend their specific roles, when they are connected by shared knowledge of the overall work process and how their roles interrelate, and when they are connected by mutual respect that enables them to carry out their roles in an atmosphere of openness, they are less likely to blame each other for failures and therefore are more likely to experience the psychological safety needed to embrace failure as an occasion for learning.*⁶

Consequently, high-quality interpersonal relationships, specifically relational coordination are the basis of belonging and are the antecedent of psychological safety. Furthermore, when the concept of high quality relationships is mapped to the High Performance Model™, high quality relationships contribute significantly to high performance.

Leaders play a vital role in fostering belonging fueled by relational coordination within teams by creating an environment in which all team members feel valued and included. When individuals feel seen and heard, they are more likely to share their unique insights and actively contribute to the team's success.

Authentic, people-centred leaders create community within the team. Rather than a team brought together through contract and organisational expectation, it is a community of individuals that choose to team together in the possibility of creating better outcomes through open communication, difference, and the sum of individual contributions.

CULTIVATION OF BELONGING

By establishing mutually respectful relationships; living a shared vision and setting clear expectations; validating every member of the team; encouraging learning from failures; providing encouragement of team member effort and recognition of accomplishments; and encouraging diverse perspectives, leaders create a community of practice which attains synergy of effort and achieves high performance.

Trust and belonging do not exist in isolation to each other. For belonging to exist, trust is a required antecedent. Consequently, strategies to create trust and belonging are synchronous.

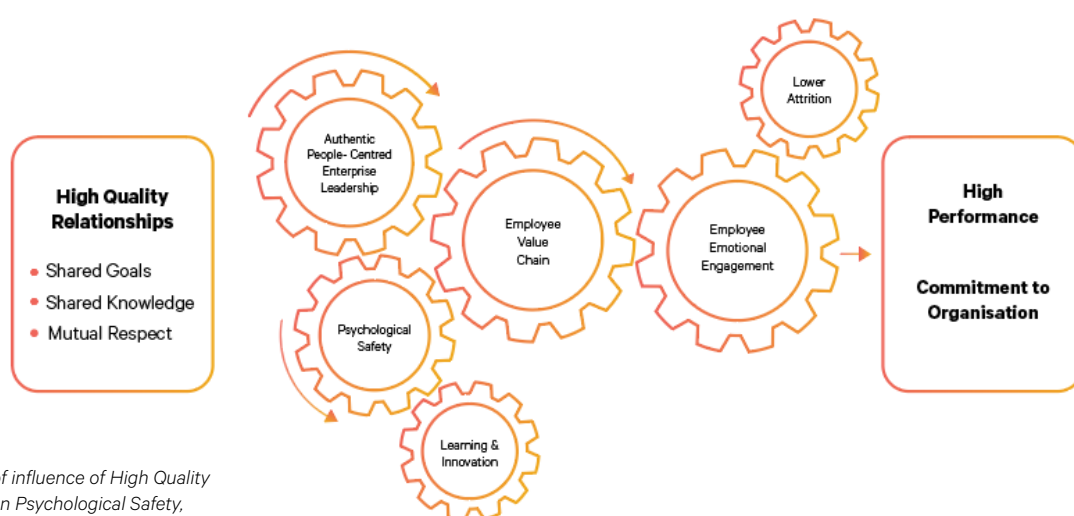


Figure 3. Map of influence of High Quality Relationships on Psychological Safety, Enterprise Leadership, Employee Engagement and Commitment to the organisation.

Strategies for Leaders:

To achieve trust and belonging, leaders should consider the following strategies:

1. **Promote Vulnerability and Openness:** Encourage team members to be vulnerable and share their thoughts and feelings. Foster an environment where team members are encouraged to share their ideas, concerns, and feedback openly. This can be facilitated through team-building exercises that encourage storytelling and the sharing of personal experiences, and through regular team meetings, one-on-one conversations, and creating channels for anonymous feedback if necessary.
2. **Lead by Example:** Leaders should model vulnerability and openness, showcasing that it is okay to admit mistakes and seek help. When leaders demonstrate trust in their team members, it models the values, and sets the tone for a trusting and inclusive team culture.
3. **Establish Clear Expectations:** Ensure that team members have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Clarity in expectations reduces misunderstandings and fosters a sense of accountability.
4. **Encourage Regular Check-ins:** Regular one-on-one check-ins and team meetings provide opportunities for open communication and foster deeper connections among team members.
5. **Promote Psychological Safety:** Encourage a culture of psychological safety by establishing a no blame approach, responding to failures with curiosity and using them as learning opportunities. Foster teaming to discuss failures and innovate solutions.
6. **Celebrate Diversity:** Embrace and celebrate the diversity of the team. Recognise and value cultural and gender diversity; and prize the unique skills and perspectives that each team member brings to the table.
7. **Invest in Team-Building Activities and Development:** These activities can help build stronger connections and trust among team members. Provide opportunities for team members to attend workshops and training on emotional intelligence, communication, and conflict resolution.
8. **Provide Feedback and Recognition:** Regularly provide constructive feedback and acknowledge the contributions of team members. Encourage team members to recognise and report the contributions of others. This helps to boost morale and reinforce a sense of belonging.
9. **Encourage Collaboration:** Foster a collaborative environment where teamwork is valued over individual competition. This helps in breaking down silos, promotes a collective sense of purpose, and a shared sense of achievement.



CONCLUSION

Trust and belonging fulfil critical roles in the development of a sustainable, high performing team. They are synchronous in nature, meaning they exist in the same timeframe and environment; however, trust is an antecedent of belonging. Trust is the bedrock of an effective team, whereas belonging is the glue that binds the team members together. Leadership through quality relationships is the catalyst which promotes the development of trust and belonging.

This analysis and discussion about trust and belonging has highlighted a critical antecedent of the NSC Group High Performance Model™ and high quality relationships between team members. In particular, a specific form of high quality relationship found in relational coordination⁶ which includes shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. Relational coordination enables the information-processing capacity of the organisation to support the effective coordination of work. It empowers high performance through the platform of high quality relationships.

Leadership continues to be identified as a critical lever in the achievement of employee emotional engagement, organisational commitment, and delivery of high performance. This whitepaper has reaffirmed the existence of the chain of positive correlations embedded in the High Performance Model™ necessary to the creation of high performance. It also highlights the significant status of authentic, people-centred leadership in the correlational chain, as well as the importance of leadership education and development in the effective implementation of the High Performance Model™ to establish high performing teams.

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