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LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

BUILDING LEADERS SINCE 1972



**How you can build trust that
strengthens teams and drives results**

Building Trusted Leaders — A Bell Leadership Resource

**PERSPECTIVES FROM
BELL LEADERSHIP TRAINERS
ON HOW TO BUILD TRUST**

Trust is not simply something we have or lose. It is something we build, protect, and strengthen through the way we work with one another.



Dear Achiever,

If you've attended a leadership conference lately, listened to a podcast, or browsed through leadership articles, you've probably noticed that **trust is everywhere**. While this focus on trust may seem trendy, it's also well deserved.

Leaders today navigate an environment where organizations move faster, teams are more dispersed, uncertainty is greater, and artificial intelligence is reshaping how work gets done. These forces put new pressure on trust, even as leaders are expected to inspire confidence, collaboration, and commitment in the people around them. In this environment, trust becomes one of a leader's greatest advantages.

At Bell Leadership, trust isn't a trend we're responding to. It's something we've been studying and helping leaders build for over fifty years.

One of the clearest lessons from that work is that trust isn't built through a single grand gesture. It's earned gradually through hundreds of everyday interactions, through how leaders listen, communicate, make decisions, handle conflict, and show up for the people around them. And when trust is under pressure, those connections become even more important. They are what allow people to work through differences, face challenges together, and continue bringing their best thinking to the work.

As we reflected on this year's theme, we also found ourselves thinking about the relationships we've built with so many of you over the years. One of the things we value most is the opportunity to serve as a trusted partner, to be invited into your organizations, to work alongside your leadership teams, and to support you through both opportunities and challenges. That trust is something we never take for granted.

The articles that follow explore trust from several perspectives: the behaviors that strengthen it, the habits that quietly erode it, and the role it plays between leaders, teams, and colleagues. Together, they are also a reminder that trust is not simply something we have or lose. It is something we build, protect, and strengthen through the way we work with one another.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your leadership journey. We are grateful for the confidence you've placed in Bell Leadership and look forward to continuing to earn your trust in the years ahead.

With appreciation,

—The Bell Leadership Team




BELL
COMMUNICATIONS





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What Can Achievers™ Teach Us About Trust?

By Jon Player, JD, MSPH / Leadership Trainer, Speaker & Coach

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hy is it that some leaders seem to earn trust almost effortlessly while others, despite having equal intelligence, experience, and good intentions, never quite do? It's a question we've spent a great deal of time thinking about.

It's tempting to outline simple answers — like someone's communication style, charisma, or force of personality. And while those qualities certainly influence leadership, they do not fully explain why some leaders consistently earn the trust of the people around them.

Over the years, I've come to believe the Bell Achievers Model™ offers a unique way of thinking about how leaders build trust.

As an Achievers grad, you know the value of working to strengthen your Core Competencies while reducing the influence of your Extreme Personality Patterns. Interestingly, that work creates a connection between personal growth and inspiring trust as a leader.

Central to Achievers is that **all leaders feel the pull of Extreme Personality Patterns, especially when under pressure.** As we continue building our leadership skills, Extreme Personality Patterns are less likely to become our default behaviors. Our built Core Competencies supplement those tendencies and produce healthier, more successful leadership behaviors.

Instead of allowing our own psychological needs to drive behavior, we become increasingly able to respond to what the situation and the people around us actually need.

Over time, that difference profoundly shapes whether others come to trust us.

The shift from inner to outer focus provides the foundation on which trust can be formed



The Hidden Barrier to Trust

You've probably experienced leaders who allow their extremes to dominate their behaviors:



A leader subtly positions themselves as the driving force behind a successful project. Their recognition quietly becomes more important than making sure everyone else feels valued.



Another leader delays an important performance conversation because avoiding discomfort feels easier than addressing the issue. Their team experiences something very different. They begin wondering whether everyone has the same standard.



A third leader holds tightly to important decisions because maintaining control feels safer than allowing others to take ownership. Before long, initiative disappears as trust erodes.

On the surface, these behaviors look very different. Underneath, they all share a key dynamic. The leader's attention has moved inward, away from what the people around them and the situation requires, toward meeting their own needs.

That is often where trust begins to erode.

Why Achiever Leaders Earn Trust

One of the most important lessons of Achievers is that reducing an Extreme Personality Pattern isn't simply a matter of trying harder not to behave that way. Instead, it comes from intentionally building the Core Competency that compliments and counteracts that tendency.

As that Core Competency develops, your leadership naturally begins to change. The behaviors associated with the Extreme Personality Pattern become less frequent, while the more effective leadership behaviors associated with the Core become more consistent.

Over time, your team witnesses the impact of those changes. They experience a leader who is more consistent, more balanced, and more able to listen well. A leader's focus shifts outwards more naturally putting the needs of the team and the organization ahead of their own immediate needs. This shift from inner to outer focus provides the foundation on which trust can be formed.

One of the insights I appreciate most about the Achiever model is that trust isn't something we build directly. When we build ourselves, trust follows.

Why Trust Deserves Our Attention

Does trust really matter? As the workplace continues to change at a remarkable pace, the answer is resoundingly "yes."

Organizations are flatter. Teams move more quickly. Artificial intelligence is reshaping workflows.



Trust is not something you demand or even deliberately pursue. It is something you earn as a byproduct of building yourself.

Continuing to Build Yourself

If you begin noticing that your team has become quieter, less willing to challenge your thinking, slower to take initiative, or more hesitant to bring forward difficult issues, resist the temptation to focus first on changing your team.

Instead, begin with yourself.

Ask, “How might my own leadership behaviors be contributing to what my team is experiencing?”

That question reflects one of the central ideas of Achievers. Leadership always begins by building yourself.

The work of building yourself creates the conditions that allow trust to grow. It’s as simple, and as difficult, as that. As you continue strengthening your Core Competencies, you’ll naturally become the kind of leader others experience as more balanced, more consistent, and more trustworthy. As trust grows, so does your ability to lead effectively.

Ultimately, trust is not something you demand or even deliberately pursue. It is something you earn as a byproduct of building yourself. 🌟

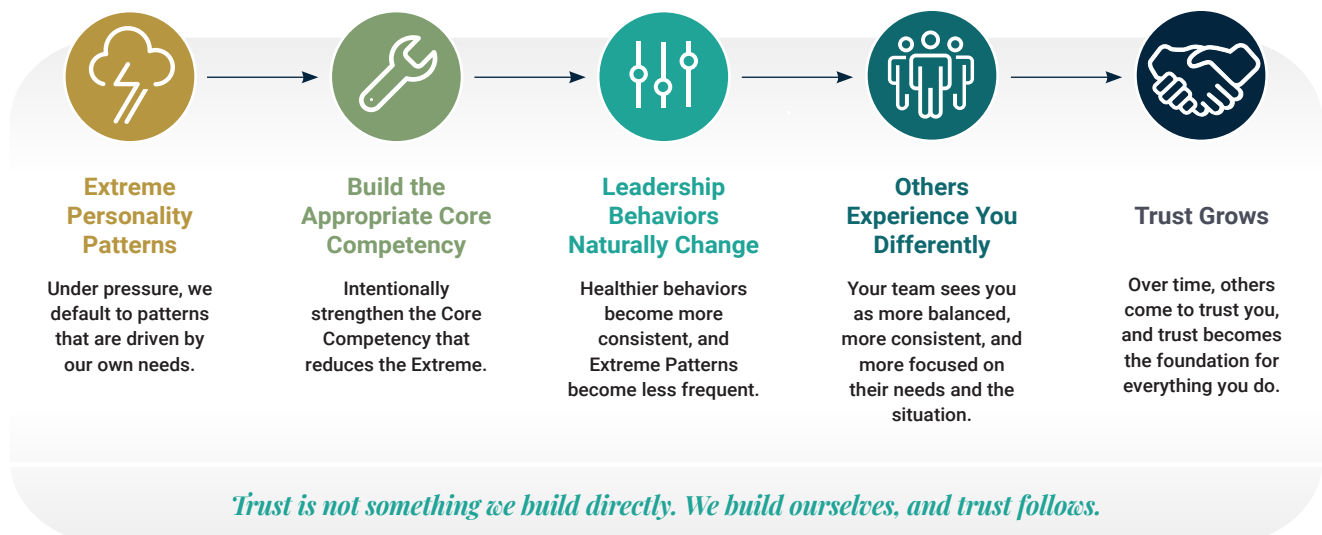
Employees are being asked to adapt continually to new technologies, changing priorities, and greater uncertainty.

Those realities make trust more difficult to build and maintain, and thus, increasingly valuable.

Formal authority can establish accountability, but it cannot create commitment. People are far more willing to embrace change, contribute ideas, collaborate openly, and navigate uncertainty when they trust the person leading them.

Fundamentally, a leader’s job is to help people work hard, work smart, and work together. Trust creates the foundation that makes all three possible.

The Achievers Trust Trajectory



SPECIAL PREVIEW!

A New Signature Offering Available This Fall



The Next Generation of Leaders

Built Around *Your* Table.

Senior executives have come to Chapel Hill for The Leader's Roundtable for more than 30 years. This fall, we're bringing that same experience ***inside your organization***: a cohort of your own next-generation leaders, learning together, building judgement and wisdom, and immediately applying what they learn to the real decisions facing your business.

A deeper bench. A shared language.

A stronger leadership culture, built for your success.

CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE.

The Leader's Roundtable

A Master Class for Senior Executives

It's not a conference. It's not a classroom.

It's a confidential forum where real-world leadership challenges meet time-tested tools, peer wisdom, and experienced instruction and facilitation. In six in-depth sessions spaced across the calendar year, participants engage in a process of learning, applying, reflecting, and growing—both personally and professionally.

Each session is thoughtfully designed to balance deep work, peer learning, and personal insight and explores a specific leadership theme in depth, guided by Bell's expert trainers and supported by your cohort.

A Trusted Peer Network

While the work is serious, the atmosphere is engaging, energizing, and personal. Each session includes dedicated time to connect socially. These moments are often where some of the most valuable conversations happen—relaxed, unfiltered, and meaningful.

Ideal Participants for The Leader's Roundtable

The Leader's Roundtable is designed for senior leaders and rising high-potential executives who are navigating the complex realities of leadership:

- C-suite executives (CEO, COO, CFO, CHRO, etc.)
- General managers and division presidents
- Senior directors or VPs responsible for teams, strategy, and organizational performance
- High-potential leaders being groomed for enterprise-level roles
- Executives preparing for succession or leading through complexity



LEAD WITH IMPACT IN 2027
*Apply now for The Leader's Roundtable—
for yourself or members of your team.*



THE LEADER'S ROUNDTABLE ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

The season I attended The Leader's Roundtable required a shift in how I showed up as a leader. Rather than focusing primarily on execution, I had to operate more as an architect, building the conditions for others to lead effectively. A key decision was promoting an internal candidate to president for a newly acquired organization.

Bell Leadership's emphasis on knowing yourself, engaging others, and driving results shaped how I approached this transition.

- **KNOWING YOURSELF:** I had to recognize my own instincts. In a moment of uncertainty, my default would have been to stay closely involved operationally. Roundtable reinforced that my highest contribution was not to step in, but to step back and lead at a different level.
- **ENGAGING OTHERS:** The promotion was not just about filling a role; it was about investing in a leader. I focused on equipping them for success by clarifying decision rights, providing coaching as they moved from a functional leader to an enterprise leader, and creating space for them to lead in their own voice.
- **DRIVING RESULTS:** We paired the leadership transition with the establishment of a formal board for the acquired organization. The board provided challenge, support, and strategic clarity while helping keep the focus on long-term outcomes.

What made this meaningful was the discipline to lead through others rather than alongside them. Instead of measuring my impact by how directly I influenced outcomes, I measured it by how well I developed the new president and how sustainable the organization became.

Ultimately, the experience reinforced a core takeaway: leadership at scale is less about personal execution and more about building people and systems that can thrive without your constant presence.



Nancy Johns

Chief Operating Officer
Bob Barker Company
The Leader's Roundtable 2021 Graduate

**Leadership at
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About Bob Barker Company: Founded in 1972 and headquartered in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina, Bob Barker Company is the nation's leading provider of products and solutions for correctional, detention, rehabilitation, and mental health facilities. The company is recognized for its commitment to innovation, customer partnership, and developing solutions that promote safer facilities and support successful rehabilitation and reentry.

Built to Lead. Bell Leadership Mastery Programs Built for Impact.

Achievers™

The foundation for effective leadership that builds self-awareness, discretion, and the ability to lead with purpose.

- Self-awareness of leadership strengths and challenges
- Action steps to build effective leadership patterns
- Communication with impact and influence
- Self-confidence and ability to drive team commitment

The Leader's Job

A practical framework for building alignment, making sound decisions, and leading organizations with greater clarity and direction.

- Clear framework to prioritize, delegate, and lead
- Tools to navigate and master the external environment
- Stronger employee commitment to shared goals
- Greater success in leading change with confidence

Achievers II

The relationship skills and interpersonal insight needed to build trust, strengthen influence, and lead others.

- Greater influence and stronger working relationships
- Deeper insight into personal motivations and ability to predict behaviors
- Fewer miscommunications and misunderstandings
- More consistency in leadership and management approach

Advanced Communication

The essential principles and influential tactics to build understanding, strengthen relationships, and drive stronger performance.

- Critical listening skills
- Clear, concise delivery of ideas across audiences
- More confidence and success in managing conflict
- Stronger professional relationships and collaboration
- Productive feedback practices that improve results



Bell Leadership Mastery Programs provide the insight, structure, and tools leaders need to build trust, strengthen relationships, develop talent, and drive results.

Through an in-depth, practice-driven curriculum, your leaders—emerging or experienced—can expand their capabilities, strengthen their judgment, and lead with greater influence and effectiveness. You'll build not only stronger individual leaders, but a leadership culture equipped to elevate performance, inspire growth, and create lasting impact.

Selecting Achievers™

A disciplined approach to building a workforce aligned with your culture, values, and long-term goals.

- Scalable, customizable system for selection
- Clear criteria for job design and role alignment
- Interviews that match skills to business needs
- Smart decisions about promotion, demotion, and deselection

Advanced Teamwork

A proven framework for building cohesive, accountable teams that achieve results together.

- Skills to improve personal influence and team productivity
- Proven strategies for high-performance teams in complex environments
- Fewer behaviors that disrupt collaboration and cohesion

Change Leadership

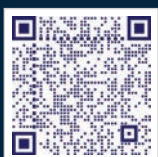
The tools and insight to build commitment, sustain momentum, and lead successful change initiatives.

- Early recognition of common obstacles to change
- Practical strategies to reduce resistance and anxiety
- Stronger trust, buy-in, and engagement in change
- Support systems that help teams grow through transitions

Peak Performance & Complex Lives

Strategies for building the focus, resilience, and balance needed to sustain high performance over time.

- Clarity in goals across work, life, health, and finances
- Awareness of time use and energy anchors
- Tools to sustain peak performance over time
- Personal strategy to guide meaningful growth



*Scan to register
for an upcoming
program.*



Listening: The Skill Behind the Trust You've Earned

By Susan Gisler, PT, DPT, MHA / Leadership Trainer, Speaker & Coach

A couple of years ago, I started working with a senior executive who had just come through a major change initiative. The plan had been solid going in. But the rollout hit roadblock after roadblock with resistance showing up in places she hadn't expected. The initiative ultimately took far longer than it should have. On paper, she knew the plan was solid and should have worked. She suspected the real issue lay somewhere deeper.

The more we talked, the clearer it became that her team had chosen not to bring her information at critical points in the project. It also became evident that they hadn't been hiding things out of carelessness or disengagement. As a new leader to the company, the team had been quietly assessing whether they could trust her. Was she truly capable of hearing hard news? Did she care enough to sit with a problem instead of rushing past it? Would telling her something difficult cost them anything? They never asked those questions explicitly, but their behavior was demonstrated by what they chose to share, what they held back, and how much they revealed in any given conversation.

She wanted to grow as a leader, so instead of starting with the technical side of the next initiative, we took

a hard look at her relationships with her team: what was working and what wasn't. From there, we focused on listening as a skill she could thoughtfully build. She started paying closer attention to what she was hearing and, just as often, to what she wasn't. It turned out that listening, real and practiced, was the thing her relationships had been missing.

The dividends turned out to be bigger than expected. When the next larger initiative came around, the difference showed up early. People raised concerns while there was still room to adjust course. Her team had decided, somewhere along the way, that she had earned their trust.

Trust is earned in dozens of small moments, not one big one

Most leaders readily accept that trust matters. What's less understood is how trust is built. It isn't a single event, a well-timed apology, or a leadership offsite designed to build rapport. Trust accumulates through ordinary interactions, one relationship at a time, built and rebuilt in moments most leaders never think to notice. And the mechanism underneath nearly all of those moments is listening.

This is where many leaders run into trouble. Everyone agrees listening matters. But it is a skill few leaders ever master.

Growing Trust One Layer at a Time

What people are quietly testing before they trust you

Think about how frequently people hand you something true and uncomfortable without first checking, even unconsciously, whether it's worth the risk. **Before someone brings a leader a real concern, an unpopular idea, or an admission of uncertainty, they're internally running through three questions:**

- **Can this person actually hear this?** Some leaders are visibly impatient, distracted, or already forming a response before the other person finishes a sentence. People notice immediately, and they filter what they're willing to say.
- **Do they care enough to hold space?** A leader can hear the words and still communicate, through tone or timing, that the conversation is an interruption rather than something worth their full attention. People feel the difference between being placated and being understood.
- **Can I trust them with it?** Once something difficult has been shared, what happens next typically matters more than the conversation itself. Was it used constructively, or did it quietly become a liability for the person who raised it?



Before someone tells you something of importance, they navigate three levels of trust. Reach the first level, and someone will *begin* to feel comfortable sharing real information. Reach the next level, and they'll start bringing you ideas before they're fully developed or polished. At the final level, you enter a realm of true, deep, and open collaboration. Fail to move through any one of the levels, and the conversation moves back to the surface, which could be a lost opportunity to hear what's really going on, deepen trust, and build a relationship.



Once someone decides a leader isn't fully committed to the conversation, they hesitate to go further. They give the safe answer...

Why most leaders stall at the surface

The challenge is that most leaders are rewarded for solving problems quickly, not for sitting with them. As responsibilities grow, conversations start to feel like something to get through rather than something to be in. None of this looks like poor listening from the outside. It can actually look like decisiveness, efficiency, and even strength.

But the people on the other side of those conversations notice the difference. It's the leader who's already nodding before they've finished a sentence, the quick solution offered before the real problem was fully on the table, and the conversation that feels like it's being managed rather than had.

Once someone decides a leader isn't fully committed to the conversation, they hesitate to go further. They give the safe answer, a polished version, or an update that won't cause trouble, and the leader walks away thinking the conversation went fine.

The real value of better listening

Leaders who master the listening skills necessary to move people to deeper levels of trust get access to information their peers never hear. Not because they're more likable or more senior, but because their teams have decided, through repeated small interactions, that it's safe to bring them the truth. That access shows up as fewer surprises, faster course corrections, and decisions made with better information earlier in the process.

The executive I mentioned at the start invested significant time and effort into building her relationships with her team through better listening. And when the next change initiative came around, her team brought her better information, earlier, vastly improving the project's timeline and outcomes.

Your people decide whether to trust you with the truth long before you ever start to speak. Leaders who understand this, and who put in the quiet, steady work of building their ability to truly listen, see that investment pay off with an outsized return: a team willing to tell them what they most need to know. 🌟

How to Listen to Build Trust



Stay Curious

Moves beyond surface trust

- Ask open-ended questions
- Resist the urge to solve too quickly
- Explore before you respond



Show You Care

Deepens trust

- Be fully present
- Reflect back what you hear
- Acknowledge feelings and impact



Follow Through Consistently

Validates full trust

- Close the loop on conversations
- Take action on meaningful insights
- Maintain continuity between words and actions



The Trust You're Not a Part Of: Why the most important trust on your team may be the trust that has nothing to do with you.

By Bill Sanford, MS / Senior Executive Leadership Trainer

A few years ago, I began working with a senior leader (call him Mark) whose team looked, by most measures, like a success. His people respected him. They came to him readily, brought him their problems, and took his counsel seriously. If you had asked Mark whether he had a high-trust team, he would have said yes without hesitating, and for good reason.

But the team had been siloed for years. Not because people distrusted each other, exactly, and not because Mark was hoarding control; he wasn't. The real issue was more subtle. His people had come up through very different paths, with uneven histories of working shoulder-to-shoulder to solve hard problems. Some of them had built real trust with one another. Many of them hadn't and had never been given a reason to. So, when friction arose between two of them, they didn't work it out between themselves. They brought it to Mark. Each of them, in effect, lobbied him to intervene on their behalf, and Mark—capable, trusted, willing—obliged.

Here is the uncomfortable question this case raises, and it is the question this article is about: **What if the trust your people have in you is masking the trust they *don't* have in each other?**

The blind spot in how we think about trust

Most of what gets written about trust in leadership (including, rightly, the other articles in this collection) is about the vertical relationship: how you, the leader, earn the trust of the people who work for or with you. That work is foundational, and none of what follows is meant to diminish it. Being trustworthy is necessary.

But it is not sufficient. And when it comes to how a team actually performs, a great deal of what determines whether they succeed is trust you are not a party to at all. It is the trust your people extend, or fail to extend, to *each other*.

This is easy to miss precisely because you can't see it from where you sit. You experience the trust people have in you directly, in every one-on-one and every hallway conversation. The trust they have in one another happens in rooms you're not in or fails to happen in silences you never hear. A leader can preside over a team of individuals who each trust the leader completely and trust one another hardly at all, and, from the center of it, feel that everything is fine.

Why high vertical trust can suppress lateral trust

It gets more counterintuitive still. In some cases, the very strength of a leader's relationships with their people can hold back the trust those people need to build with each other. There are two common versions of this, and they can operate separately or together.

The first is the one Mark's team didn't have but many teams do: **the leader is the preferred bridge**. When you are the most capable, most trusted person in the group, the most efficient path for everything (every question, every disagreement, every decision) runs through you. It feels like good leadership, and in the moment it often is. But if every connection on the team has to cross the same bridge, the members never build direct spans to one another. Your competence becomes a substitute for their relationships. And a team with only one bridge has a dangerous property. When that bridge is unavailable—you're traveling, you're pulled into a crisis, you leave—the team is suddenly stranded. Trust that runs through a single point isn't resilient; it's a single point of failure.

The second version is Mark's: **the trust was never deliberately built**. Here the leader isn't a bottleneck by ego or design; the lateral trust is simply thin because the people were never given enough shared, real work to build it. They have varying tenure, different arrival points, and no accumulated experience of relying on each other and finding that reliance rewarded. Left alone, this doesn't fix itself. People default to the safe move, which is to route around each other... through the leader.

Note that a team can have neither problem in the obvious sense (no tyrant at the hub, no obvious dysfunction) and still be starved of the lateral trust that performance depends on. That's what makes this so easy to overlook.

What the research says

The research is unusually clear for a topic this human. The most rigorous study is a large meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, which pooled 112 studies covering nearly 8,000 teams. Researchers found that trust among team members

A great deal of what determines whether a team succeeds is trust you are not party to at all. It is the trust your people extend, or fail to extend, to *each other*.

has a robust, above-average relationship with team performance¹. Two findings matter especially for our purposes.

First, that relationship held even after the researchers statistically accounted for how much the team trusted its leader², which means member-to-member trust is doing true, independent work that trust in the leader does not explain away. This is the empirical basis for a claim some researchers now make directly: when it comes to team performance, how much your people trust each other may matter as much as, or more than, how much they trust you.

Second, the effect was strongest on teams whose members were highly interdependent, teams whose work genuinely requires them to rely on one another. Which is to say that lateral trust matters most exactly where real teamwork is required: where team members are highly interdependent, and least where a "team" is really just a set of individuals reporting to the same boss.

It's worth adding the concept most people now associate with this territory: psychological safety, the shared sense on a team that it's safe to take interpersonal risks, admit a mistake, ask an obvious question, or raise a hard problem without being punished for it. When Google set out to discover what made its most effective teams effective, psychological safety was the factor that rose to the top.³ That study was observational (it shows association, not proof of cause) so we shouldn't rely too heavily on it. But it points in the same direction as everything else: what most determines a team's effectiveness is less *who* is on the team than *how the members relate to one another*.

¹ Bart A. de Jong, Kurt T. Dirks, and Nicole Gillespie, "Trust and Team Performance: A Meta-Analysis of Main Effects, Moderators, and Covariates," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 101, no. 8 (2016): 1134–1150. The pooled sample was 112 studies / 7,763 teams; intrateam trust showed an above-average relationship with performance ($p = .30$) that held after controlling for team trust in the leader, and was stronger under high task interdependence.

² For the broader "trust in the leader" literature this contrasts with, see Kurt T. Dirks and Donald L. Ferrin, "Trust in Leadership: Meta-Analytic Findings and Implications for Research and Practice," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87, no. 4 (2002): 611–628.

³ The construct originates with Amy C. Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1999): 350–383. Google's Project Aristotle identified it as the most important of five dynamics of its effective teams; see Google re:Work, "Understand Team Effectiveness." Note that Project Aristotle was observational and identifies association rather than proving causation.

What most determines a team's effectiveness is less *who* is on the team than *how* the members relate to one another.

Why this matters most at the top

This trust gap exists on teams of every kind. It shows up most consequentially, and most invisibly, on executive teams, which is precisely where we at Bell Leadership tend to spend a lot of our time, and where the stakes are highest.

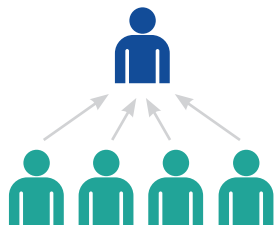
Executive teams are unusually prone to the single-bridge problem for a structural reason. Each member arrives as the leader of their own function or region, carrying a natural loyalty downward, to their own people, and often a natural rivalry sideways, toward peers competing for resources and standing. The one relationship each of them is sure to invest in is the one upward, to the chief executive. The predictable result is a top team where every spoke trusts the hub and the spokes barely know one another. And because the rest of the organization takes its cues from the top, a fragmented executive team reproduces a fragmented company beneath it.

The correction is a shift in how each executive understands the job. **A senior leader's first responsibility is not to their function, their region, or their number. It is to the enterprise as a whole and, concretely, to being a genuine peer to the other people at the table.** This is a defining part of what it means to be an executive. When members of a top team come to see "being a good teammate to my fellow executives" as part of the actual job rather than a nicety layered on top of it, the sideways trust starts to have somewhere to grow.

Both Types of Trust Matter

VERTICAL TRUST Team to Leader

Provides a Critical Foundation

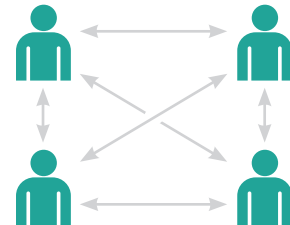


Your **team trusts you** for support, guidance, and decisions.

A team can trust their leader completely and still underperform if teammates don't trust each other.

LATERAL TRUST Peer to Peer

Multiplies Team Performance



Your **team trusts and relies on each other** to share information, solve problems, and deliver results.

Build both. Lead both.

What the best teams do — and what you can do

If you go looking, the teams that have this right share an unmistakable signature. They have spent real, deliberate time together—not just transacting business, but learning together, wrestling with genuine challenges together, sometimes simply enjoying each other's company. The strongest ones I've watched came up through the ranks together over years, building relationships and even friendships along the way; others engineered on purpose what history didn't hand them. What they have in common is that the trust between members was built, not assumed. So, the practical question for any leader is: how do you build it on purpose?

- **Run the absence test.** Look back honestly at the last dozen significant problems or decisions on your team. How many got resolved between the people involved, and how many routed through you? Then ask the harder question: if you were unavailable for a month, how much of what your team accomplishes would still happen? The count is usually sobering, and it's the fastest way to see whether you've unwittingly become the only bridge.

- **Send them back to each other.** When one of your people comes to you with a frustration about a peer, the reflexive move of hearing them out, weighing in, and smoothing it over yourself may feel like leadership, but it quietly undermines the very trust you want to build. Every time you resolve it, you teach the team to route conflict through you. Often the more valuable response is a question: "Have you talked to her about this?" followed, where it helps, by bringing the two of them into the same room. You're not refusing to help. You're helping them build a span that doesn't cross your bridge.

- **Model the vulnerability you want them to show each other.** Lateral trust needs permission, and a team takes its cues on what's safe from watching the leader. When you name a mistake of your own, or say plainly, "I don't know," in front of the team, you lower the cost of everyone else doing the same with one another. Mark's turning point came, in part, when he acknowledged to the group that he'd gotten an important call wrong, and, without quite announcing it, gave everyone else permission to be that honest, too.



- **Create the conditions for peer trust to build.** Trust between people grows out of shared, somewhat consequential experience, and on most teams that experience won't happen on its own; you have to design it in. Give two people who don't naturally connect a real problem to own together. Rotate who runs the meeting so that the same voices don't dominate. Structure the work so people depend on one another rather than only on you.

And then there's the fuller version of that final principle, which I'll offer as a recommendation rather than a technique, because I've watched it work too many times to leave it out:

- **Bring your team together, genuinely together, on a recurring basis, for more than status updates.** The teams I've seen build the deepest trust invest in real time with one another: gathering in person, learning something new as a group, adding tools to their shared toolkit, and putting those tools to work on the actual business challenges they face. The learning matters, but so does the being-together in sharing meals, solving hard problems side by side, and discovering that the person from the other function is someone they'd choose to rely on. That combination of time, shared learning, and real work, repeated, does something no amount of one-on-one leadership can. It builds the web of trust that holds when you're not in the room. Which is, in the end, the whole point. The question worth carrying out of this isn't the one most leaders instinctively ask: Do my people trust me? The better question, the one that in fact predicts what your team can accomplish, is quieter and harder to answer: **When I'm not in the room, do they trust each other?** 🌟

A Trust Reflection

Practical exercise for building trust for yourself, your team, and your organization.



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for your team.

1 BUILD YOURSELF

Trust isn't built all at once. It grows through hundreds of everyday interactions. Before reflecting on your team, begin by considering your own leadership. Rate yourself honestly on the statements below. The goal isn't perfection. It's awareness.



RATE YOURSELF on the following statements:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
People bring me difficult news early rather than waiting until problems grow.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I listen to fully understand before offering advice or solutions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
People feel comfortable disagreeing with me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I consistently follow through on commitments.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I remain steady and constructive during difficult situations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
People leave conversations with me feeling heard and respected.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I address conflict directly rather than allowing it to linger.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I encourage people to share ideas before they have them fully figured out.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I consistently put the needs of my team ahead of my own personal interests.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I behave consistently enough that people know what to expect from me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



REFLECTION

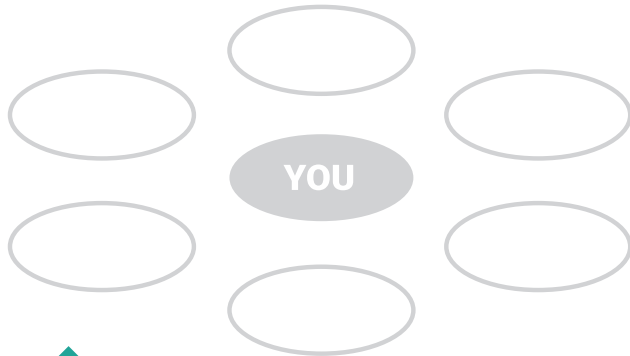
Reflect on the ratings above. What is one behavior you could change that would make the statements true more often?

2 BUILD YOUR TEAM

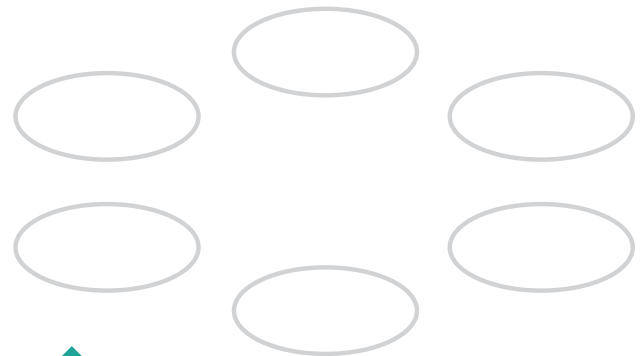
Leaders tend to pay attention to whether people trust them. Great leaders also pay attention to whether their people trust one another. The strongest organizations don't simply have trusted leaders; they have teams whose members communicate openly, solve problems together, and rely on one another even when the leader isn't present.



RELATIONSHIP MAPS: Write the names of your direct reports in the circles on both diagrams.



- ☐ Draw a **SOLID** line to people who consistently trust and collaborate with you.
- ☐ Draw a **DASHED** line where trust exists but could become stronger.
- ☐ Leave spaces blank where trust is limited, underdeveloped, or largely untested.



- ☐ Draw the same types of lines to show the trust **between your team members**, rather than between you and them.

———— Consistent Trust
----- Inconsistent Trust



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Which map has fewer solid lines? What does that reveal about your team's current trust network?

2. Where are you serving as the primary bridge between people? How could you help those relationships become more direct?

3. If you were away for two weeks, where would collaboration continue naturally? Where might it slow or break down?

4. Which two of your team members would benefit most from intentionally strengthening their relationship? List one action you will take in the next month to help make that happen.



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