



The Science of Trust in the Workplace

Introduction: Why Trust Is Foundational

Trust is often called the “social glue” that holds an organization together. In simple terms, trust is the belief in a colleague’s or leader’s integrity and reliability – the sense that “*I can count on you.*” Research in organizational psychology affirms that trust is the foundation of most successful teams and companies [1]. High-trust workplaces empower employees to take risks, communicate openly, and collaborate without fear. In fact, studies find that people at high-trust companies report significantly lower stress and higher productivity – one Harvard Business Review study noted 74% less stress and 50% higher productivity compared to low-trust environments. Conversely, a lack of trust creates silos and hesitation: information is withheld, decisions slow down, and “office politics” thrive.

Trust, transparency, and psychological safety are deeply intertwined. When leaders and team members trust each other, transparency becomes the norm – people share information and candid feedback freely, knowing it won’t be used against them. This openness feeds *psychological safety*, defined by Harvard’s Amy Edmondson as a climate where individuals feel safe to speak up with ideas or mistakes without fear of retribution. Google’s famed *Project Aristotle* on team effectiveness found that psychological safety was the single most important factor in high-performing teams [2]. In teams with high psychological safety (i.e. high interpersonal trust), members feel secure enough to take risks and admit vulnerabilities, leading to better learning and performance. Simply put, *trust breeds transparency, and transparency breeds even more trust*, creating a positive cycle that bolsters team cohesion.

However, trust is also fragile, partly due to our human psychology. Behavioral science shows we have a **negativity bias** – a tendency to remember and weight negative events more strongly than positive ones [3]. One betrayal or overlooked promise can overshadow many good deeds. Our brains, particularly the fear-processing amygdala, are wired to latch onto signs of threat or inconsistency as a survival mechanism. This means building a high-trust culture requires consistency and mindful effort; a single breach of trust or a communication breakdown can spiral into wider distrust if not addressed. Leaders must recognize that trust is not a “one and done” thing but an ongoing **commitment to transparency, fairness, and emotional consistency**.

How Trust Fuels Transparency and Psychological Safety

Trust in the workplace creates conditions for **open communication and psychological safety**, which in turn drive team performance. When employees trust management, they believe leaders will be honest and have their best interests at heart. This encourages upward transparency – employees are more likely to voice concerns, share ideas, or admit mistakes. Leaders who model transparency (sharing information openly and being truthful about challenges) signal that “we’re in this together,” reinforcing trust. A transparent leader who follows through on promises and owns up to errors demonstrates *integrity*, a key component of trust.



Psychological safety thrives in a trusting environment. In high-trust teams, people feel *comfortable being candid*. They know one heated debate or dissenting opinion won't jeopardize their standing. Studies show that **without trust, teams often develop a "fear of conflict," leading to artificial harmony** – members withhold differing opinions to avoid friction. While superficially peaceful, such teams suffer from unspoken frustrations that *fester* and undermine effectiveness. By contrast, when trust is present, teams engage in healthy debate, and conflicts are resolved constructively rather than avoided. This open airing of ideas leads to better decision-making and innovation, since team members aren't "walking on eggshells."

Psychological safety and trust also impact **accountability and learning**. In a trusting team, admitting a mistake isn't seen as shameful but as an opportunity to learn. People trust that their team won't punish or humiliate them for a misstep. This encourages individuals to take ownership of problems early. HR experts note that creating a culture where employees feel safe "*expressing emotions and learning from mistakes*" is key to building trust and psychological safety [4]. When something goes wrong, high-trust teams focus on problem-solving instead of blame. Over time, this *climate of safety* leads to higher engagement and resilience – employees know they can rely on one another and on leadership support.

The payoff of a high-trust, transparent culture is well documented. High-trust organizations have been linked to **better employee engagement, retention, and performance outcomes** [5] [6]. One large-scale analysis of U.S. workplaces found that those in the highest quartile of organizational trust had significantly higher productivity and job satisfaction, less chronic stress, and even 34% less chronic stress-related health issues compared to median-trust companies. Another meta-analysis cited trust as "rocket fuel" for teams – enabling better communication, goal alignment, and on-time project delivery. In short, *trust isn't a "nice to have" – it is a critical driver of team effectiveness*. A foundation of trust gives employees the confidence to be honest and creative, which in turn boosts the organization's agility and performance.

The Affective Neuroscience of Trust: Brains in Sync

Modern neuroscience is shedding light on **why trust feels the way it does** and how our brains respond in high-trust vs low-trust situations. At the chemical level, **oxytocin** – often dubbed the "*bonding hormone*" – plays a starring role. Oxytocin is released during positive social interactions such as friendly touch, cooperative conversations, or expressions of empathy. Neuroscientist Paul Zak's research demonstrated that oxytocin surges can actually make us *more trusting* and generous toward others. In one experiment, people who inhaled synthetic oxytocin showed greater willingness to share money in a trust game, suggesting this neurochemical lowers our social defenses. In workplace contexts, small gestures that trigger oxytocin – a warm handshake, a genuine compliment, team celebrations – may physiologically reinforce trust by making colleagues feel emotionally connected and safe. As one article quipped, oxytocin acts like a biological "*trust me*" sign in the brain, signaling that it's okay to cooperate.

Our brains also evaluate trust through specific neural circuits. Two key regions are the **amygdala** and the **prefrontal cortex**, which perform a sort of "trust radar" function. The amygdala is the brain's threat detector, constantly scanning for signs of danger or betrayal. If someone behaves in an untrustworthy way (e.g. breaking a promise or displaying aggression), the amygdala lights up with alarm, emotional distress, or fear. On



the other hand, when we perceive someone as trustworthy, amygdala activity decreases – our sense of threat subsides. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), especially the frontal lobes right behind the forehead, is involved in complex decision-making and social judgment. The PFC weighs the evidence of someone's reliability and helps regulate the amygdala's emotional responses. In essence, if the logical PFC concludes "this person has good intentions," it can inhibit an overly wary amygdala, allowing us to *relax and trust*. This neural handshake between the emotional brain and the executive brain determines whether we extend trust or withhold it.

Importantly, trust is also reinforced by **neural synchrony and emotional contagion**. Humans are remarkably adept at subconsciously mirroring each other's emotions and physiological states – a phenomenon known as *emotional mimicry*. If a leader comes into a meeting exuding calm confidence, team members often begin to mirror that calm demeanor. This is not just social etiquette; it's rooted in brain mechanisms like the mirror neuron system. Studies even show that people unconsciously mimic each other's **pupil size** and that doing so can increase mutual trust [7]. In one experiment, participants who mirrored a partner's dilating pupils (a sign of positive engagement) were more likely to trust that partner in an investment game. Such findings highlight how *shared emotional states can biologically prime people to trust*. When our internal states are in sync with someone else's – from facial expressions down to heart rate or pupil dilation – our brains receive a signal that "this person is aligned with me," reducing social uncertainty.

Conversely, neuroscience helps explain why **violations of trust hit so hard**. Thanks to negativity bias, negative interactions trigger greater brain activity than positive ones, especially in the amygdala. A harsh public scolding by one's boss, for example, can imprint a strong threat memory, making the employee's brain hyper-vigilant around that boss thereafter. It might take many positive interactions to counteract that one event – studies suggest we need *multiple* positive experiences to outweigh a single negative experience emotionally. Leaders should remember that our brains are "wired to err on the side of safety." If team members detect insincerity or unpredictability, their limbic system (emotional brain) may stay on high alert, preventing real trust from taking root. By understanding these affective neuroscience insights, HR professionals and leaders can appreciate that trust isn't just an abstract value – it's a physiological state of *calm connectivity* between people. Fostering that state requires attending to humans' emotional cues and brain-based needs for security.

Emotional Alignment: The Heart of Team Cohesion and Speed

One of the emerging themes in organizational behavior is **emotional alignment** – ensuring that the emotional tone and signals within a team are consistent and in harmony. Emotional alignment is about everyone "being on the same wavelength" emotionally, which creates a powerful foundation for trust. When leaders and team members exhibit *consistent emotional signaling*, others know what to expect and don't have to second-guess each other's moods or intentions. For example, a leader who maintains a steady, approachable demeanor (rather than alternating between calm and explosive) sends a message of reliability. Team members aligned in a positive, solution-focused mood will likewise trust that interactions are genuine and predictable. Consistency in emotional tone builds trust over time because it reduces uncertainty –



people aren't left wondering "Who is going to show up today? The supportive boss or the angry boss?"

Achieving emotional alignment often starts with **recognition of our default emotional responses**. Humans vary in how we instinctively react under stress – some get anxious or negative (the pessimist's "default"), others get upbeat or problem-solving (the optimist's default). By openly acknowledging these default tendencies, teams can avoid misinterpreting each other. For instance, a project manager might say, "I have a tendency to focus on potential problems (negativity bias) – if I seem critical, it's because I'm trying to safeguard quality, not because I don't trust the team." Such transparency about one's emotional defaults prevents teammates from reading malicious intent where there is none. It also allows colleagues to gently **regulate and balance each other's emotions**, a process known as *co-regulation*. If one person is panicking, another can step in with a calming influence; if one is angry, others can respond with understanding to defuse it. These **socially shared regulation practices** ensure that no single individual's stress derails the group's emotional balance.

When a team achieves emotional alignment through trust, the benefits include **stronger cohesion and faster, more fluid decision-making**. Team cohesion grows because members feel *emotionally attuned* to one another – there's a sense that "we get each other." Research on *relational coherence* (a similar concept) indicates that when team members build emotional alignment and trust, it creates the conditions for clearer communication, increased psychological safety, and even faster conflict resolution^[8]. Small disagreements don't flare up into big fights because the aligned team can address the issue in a calm, understanding manner. This naturally accelerates decision speed. When trust is high and everyone's on the same page emotionally, teams can make decisions *without paralyzing fear* or endless second-guessing. In fact, business experts frequently echo Stephen M.R. Covey's insight that **"speed happens when trust is present."** High-trust organizations tend to have less bureaucracy and indecision; people coordinate quickly since they assume good intent and competence. By contrast, in low-trust environments every decision gets bogged down in double-checking, approvals, and doubt, as if driving with the emergency brake on.

Another reason emotionally aligned teams decide faster is the reduction of defensive behaviors. In a trusting, emotionally open team, members don't waste energy on *defensive routines* – like covering up mistakes or sugarcoating feedback – which can slow down problem-solving. A case study on innovation speed found that trust mechanisms reduced employees' impulses to engage in CYA ("cover your actions") behavior, thereby increasing innovation speed^[9]. Essentially, trust lets the team focus on the task, not on navigating interpersonal minefields. The **"decision velocity"** of a team is greatly enhanced by a climate of trust and shared understanding^[10]. Emotional alignment underlies that climate: when everyone from leadership to front-line employees shares a sense of mutual respect and empathy, decisions can be made with confidence that colleagues will support and follow through. In sum, *emotional alignment is both a product of trust and a reinforcer of it* – it binds the team together and propels them forward in unity, improving both the quality and speed of collaborative work.

The Cost of Emotional Inconsistency: How Trust Erodes

If emotional alignment builds trust, then **emotional inconsistency is the hidden destroyer of trust**. When leaders are erratic in their emotional expressions – upbeat one



day, hostile the next, or when they habitually *suppress their true feelings* – employees struggle to know where they really stand. Over time, this erodes the confidence that is the essence of trust. Team members might ask themselves: “Which version of my boss am I going to get today? Can I be honest, or should I tread carefully?” Inconsistent emotional signals create ambiguity and anxiety, which are enemies of trust.

One common form of inconsistency is **leadership emotional suppression**, often born of good intentions. Many leaders feel they should project calm and strength at all times, so they hide anxiety, frustration, or exhaustion behind a stoic “game face.” Yet studies show suppressing emotion (“surface acting”) has hidden costs. Leaders who constantly fake a smile or bottle up stress eventually experience more burnout, insomnia, and health issues [11]. This strain can lead to lapses in self-control – the suppressed emotions leak out in unexpected ways, such as irritable outbursts or disengagement. From the team's perspective, a leader who one day seems affable and the next day snaps is *deeply unsettling*. Trust takes a hit because employees sense something is off: the leader's words and body language don't match. As **Harvard Business Review** noted, a leader who never shows what they truly feel can lose credibility; people may perceive them as inauthentic or unreachable. Emotionally “reliable” leaders, by contrast, strike a balance – they don't unload every fear on their team (maintaining professionalism), but they also don't pretend to be superhuman. They communicate their feelings in a measured way and signal that it's okay for others to do the same.

Another trust killer is a **team culture that avoids conflict or difficult emotions**. Often, in low-trust teams, members are reluctant to voice disagreements or talk about hurt feelings. They opt for polite avoidance, leading to what Patrick Lencioni calls “*artificial harmony*.” While conflict avoidance may keep things superficially calm, it's corrosive to trust in the long run. Unaddressed grievances turn into lingering resentment. Team members start doubting each other's honesty (“He never said he was upset, but I sense he is”). Moreover, avoiding constructive conflict means the team never gets to *clarify misunderstandings or truly resolve differences*. Small issues that could have been fixed with a candid conversation metastasize into bigger problems. Innovation and engagement suffer because people don't feel safe challenging ideas – after all, if there's no trust, dissent could be dangerous. Research encapsulates this dynamic succinctly: **“Without trust, teams avoid conflict... unspoken issues fester, and innovation stalls.”** Over time, this erodes the faith team members have in one another. They may start to assume others hold hidden agendas (since nothing is out in the open), breeding further distrust.

Emotional inconsistency also includes **misalignment between stated values and emotional tone**. For instance, a company might preach “employees first,” but if leadership's emotional reactions (e.g. visible anger at minor mistakes, or cold indifference to employees' personal challenges) tell a different story, trust in leadership plummets. People trust what leaders *do* and *emote* more than what they say. A leader who says “my door is always open” but responds with irritation when someone actually walks in, sends a conflicting signal. The emotional experience of that interaction (the employee feels scolded or unwelcome) will outweigh any verbal assurance. Such misalignment can make employees cynical, convincing them that transparency is not truly safe in practice.

In sum, consistency and authenticity are critical. **Trust is built in drops and lost in buckets**: each consistent, genuine emotional interaction adds a drop to the “trust reservoir,” but one bout of volatility or prolonged emotional fakery can empty the tank.



HR and leaders should therefore be vigilant about emotional culture. They should solicit feedback on whether employees find management's behavior consistent with company values. Coaching leaders to practice "*deep acting*" (finding sincere ways to align their feelings with their role) rather than surface acting can help reduce the authenticity gap. And teams should be encouraged to address conflicts early, before they calcify. By keeping an eye on emotional consistency – both in oneself and across the team – organizations can prevent the slow leak of trust that undermines long-term performance and morale.

Building Trust-Rich Workplaces: Implications for HR and Leadership

For HR professionals and leaders, the science is clear: **trust isn't just a feel-good notion, it's a measurable driver of organizational success.** Building a trust-rich, emotionally intelligent workplace requires intentional policies, cultural norms, and training programs. The encouraging news is that trust can be developed and strengthened over time – it is a *learnable skill at the organizational level*. Below are key focus areas for HR and leadership to cultivate high trust:

Cultivating a High-Trust Culture. Trust in teams is built on leadership behaviors, open communication, and consistency of actions. To foster trust, organizations should encourage leaders to **lead by example** – demonstrate the integrity and transparency they expect from others – and to **empower their teams**, giving employees autonomy and showing confidence in their abilities. Communication practices should be emphasized: leaders and colleagues must be **open and honest, listen actively** to each other's concerns, and create a "feedback-rich" environment where constructive feedback is frequent and welcomed. Just as important is **consistency**: keeping promises, aligning words with deeds, and maintaining reliable support for colleagues. When employees observe these behaviors – consistent follow-through, approachable leaders, and candid communication – trust flourishes because the workplace feels fair and dependable.

Integrate JOY Intelligence™ and psychological safety into training and policy. Given the role of emotions in trust, HR should promote JOY Intelligence™ (JQ) at all levels. This can include leadership development programs on self-awareness and emotional expression, so that managers learn how to handle stress without alienating their team. Training can cover techniques like reappraisal (reframing challenges to reduce negative emotional reactions) and active listening, which help leaders respond to issues calmly and empathetically. Concretely, HR can implement policies that protect employees who speak up (no retaliation for honest feedback or whistleblowing) and encourage managers to admit their own mistakes as learning moments.

Foster a culture of transparency and fairness. Trust grows in sunlight. HR can set the tone by pushing for transparency in how decisions are made and how information is shared. This might involve regular all-hands briefings from executives, sharing rationales for major decisions (even the tough ones like layoffs or reorganizations), and open-door policies that are truly practiced. Importantly, transparency must be coupled with fairness – if employees see that rewards, promotions, and feedback are given out consistently and justly, their trust in the organization deepens. Consistency in applying rules and considering employees' voices in decisions signals that the company "walks the talk,"



reinforcing cognitive trust in leadership^[12]. HR can also use surveys or trust audits to gauge areas of mistrust and address them proactively.

Encourage healthy conflict and emotional honesty. Counterintuitive as it sounds, encouraging *constructive conflict* can build trust. HR can train teams on conflict resolution and dialogue skills, reinforcing that disagreement when respectful is not only acceptable but desirable. By normalizing statements like "I respectfully disagree and here's why...", organizations teach employees that *ideas can clash and both people still trust each other at the end of the day*. Leaders should model this by not shutting down debate or punishing dissent. Additionally, promote **emotional honesty** in appropriate ways: for example, managers can start team meetings with a quick check-in ("What's everyone's stress level this week?") or share how they cope with challenges, to humanize the workplace. When people see peers and leaders express vulnerability or emotion appropriately, it signals that "*we are all human here*", reducing fear and increasing mutual trust. Of course, emotional expression should remain respectful; the aim is not to vent angrily but to communicate openly ("I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed, can anyone assist?") – fostering empathy and support within the team.

Finally, HR should treat **trust-building as an ongoing strategic priority**. This means measuring it (through employee engagement surveys that include trust and safety indices), rewarding it (acknowledging managers or teams that excel in creating inclusive, trusting climates), and weaving it into the company's leadership competency models. Mentorship programs or cross-team projects can be used to break down silos and build trust across departments. Some organizations even incorporate trust-building exercises and discussions into regular operations – for example, retrospectives after projects that discuss not just *what* went wrong or right, but *how the team worked together* emotionally and trust-wise. By continuously monitoring and nurturing the factors discussed – transparency, emotional alignment, consistency, psychological safety – HR can help **institutionalize trust** as a core aspect of the organizational culture.

Conclusion

Trust is not a soft, abstract ideal; it is grounded in hard science spanning neuroscience, psychology, and human behavior. In the workplace, trust acts as the linchpin for transparency, psychological safety, and high performance. It unlocks employees' willingness to share ideas and feelings, to take initiative, and to stick together when challenges arise. We've seen that affective neuroscience (like the oxytocin system and emotional attunement) explains how and why humans place trust in others – our brains reward us for social bonding but also warn us against inconsistency or threat. Organizational psychology research consistently finds that teams who cultivate trust and emotional intelligence outperform those that don't, as open communication and safety drive innovation and agility. Behavioral science reminds us that negative experiences can erode trust quickly (thanks to negativity bias), so leaders must tread carefully and authentically.

For HR executives and leaders, building a *trust-rich, emotionally intelligent workplace* is one of the best investments in organizational health. It means shaping a culture where empathy is as valued as efficiency, where managers are trained in the science of emotions, and where policies reinforce fairness and open dialogue. The implications go beyond just nicer working relationships: trust is linked to lower turnover and burnout, faster decision cycles, more adaptability in change, and even better financial



performance. By viewing trust through a scientific lens, we can approach it not just as a value but as a *strategy* – something that can be nurtured through understanding human emotional dynamics.

In the end, a workplace with high trust is one where employees feel **psychologically safe, genuinely connected, and unified in purpose**. Emotions are aligned toward shared goals, and team members can rely on each other to respond predictably and supportively. Such an environment doesn't happen by accident; it is cultivated through deliberate leadership and HR practices. As organizations strive to innovate and adapt in a fast-changing world, those that prioritize trust and emotional alignment will have a decided advantage – they will be the places where people's brains and hearts are fully engaged. The science of trust makes one thing abundantly clear: *when people trust each other at work, they can accomplish extraordinary things* – and they'll do so with both speed and satisfaction, knowing they are supported every step of the way.

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