



Trust is important if you want to succeed at work – here's how to build it.

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From friends to families, partners to politicians, trust is the [fundamental glue](#) that holds together our relationships. In the office, trust makes it easier for people to work together. It enables them to rely on one another to complete projects, delegate tasks and take responsibility for mistakes. On the other hand, a lack of trust can lead to lower levels of cooperation, subpar performance and negative feelings in the workplace. When you start a new job, you may have to start from scratch to build trusting relationships. A good way of looking at trust is to identify green flags that signal the trustworthiness of a co-worker or manager.

In [my recent research](#) into the role of trust-building among entrepreneurs in Africa, I found that integrity is often the most important driver of trustworthiness, followed closely by character. This is likely to hold true across any workplace. My research [participants defined](#) integrity as being honest and having strong moral principles, while character was more about being dependable and empathetic towards those in need.

People with integrity follow through on their commitments and keep to their promises. They are reliable, dependable and accountable for their actions. This is true in both their personal and professional lives. They prioritise honesty and fairness, and are committed to doing the right thing even when it's difficult. Individuals with good character own up to their mistakes, take responsibility for their actions and make amends when necessary. They avoid spreading rumours, engaging in gossip or speaking negatively about others.

Trust and mental health

One aspect of workplace culture where trust can be key is in disclosing mental health conditions or personal issues with co-workers or managers. In a workplace with high levels of trust, choosing to disclose these issues can lead to more support and accommodation from line managers and colleagues. But if trust is low, it could result in isolation or even discrimination.

Some positive signs you can look out for to judge whether someone is trustworthy include:

active listening: someone who maintains eye contact, asks questions and acknowledges the speaker's points during a sensitive discussion is likely to be understanding, empathetic and trustworthy.

willingness to share: it is often the case that colleagues will share their own experiences too, as a sign of vulnerability and trust that can lead to deeper connections

respectful communication: communicating in a respectful and non-judgemental way is a positive sign for the working relationship.

follow-through: upholding commitments made during these discussions, such as resources or support, demonstrates reliability and dependability.

If these signs aren't evident, or you don't feel that you can trust your managers or co-workers with such sensitive matters for other reasons, it may be best to seek advice from trusted advisers or mental health professionals.

Building (and rebuilding) trust

Across trust research, frequently mentioned reasons for distrust at work include unmet expectations (broken promises or breaches in agreement), lack of transparency (when employees believe key information is being withheld from them), weak communication and misunderstandings, and micromanagement and unfair treatment. And once trust has been broken, the process of [rebuilding it](#) can take more time and effort than the initial process of trust-building.

Here are some things to keep in mind when building trust:

1. Good communication

An easy way to win trust through communication is by being open and transparent about your intentions in the workplace. In other words, don't keep secrets from colleagues (especially those you manage or who manage you) about your expectations for or understanding of a project.

In my work with indigenous entrepreneurs in Nigeria, I found that their business success often hinged on factors like shared cultural and religious practices or family ties. These factors helped build honest communication lines [that are fundamental to trust-building](#).

2. Be empathetic

Empathy in the workplace refers to the ability to share and understand the unique feelings and perspectives of your colleagues. When employees believe that their colleagues care and understand their perspective, they are likely to feel valued and respected. And, as I've found [in my research](#), constructive feedback that takes into account another person's feelings and emotional responses is a better way to build trust than through criticism and judgement. In the same vein, gossip in the workplace that can [damage the reputation](#) of individual workers or entire companies can also contribute to distrustful or uncomfortable work culture.

3. Consistency and accountability

Perhaps it goes without saying, but one of the easiest ways to build trust is to show that you can keep your commitments and do what you say you are going to do. Managers can contribute to this by creating [highly structured environments](#) where expectations (and how to meet them) are made clear. Accountability goes hand in hand with this. If you can assume responsibility for your actions and hold

yourself accountable when you make mistakes, you are communicating that you can be trusted, even if you may not always be perfect.

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