With

How High Performing Teams Build Trust - Ron Friedman, HBR (Jan 2024)



Summary

Building **trust** in the workplace can't and shouldn't fall solely on the shoulders of management. After all, trust isn't relayed from the top down. It's built organically on a foundation of behaviors exhibited by all team members that empower everyone to produce their best work." In this article, Ron Friedman presents 5 ways that the most High Performing Teams build trust. Read on to find out more...

1. **High-performing teams are more than three times more likely to begin by first discussing how they will work together**

2. **Another factor that differentiates high-performing teams is their tendency to proactively share information.**

3. **Members of high-performing teams are more likely to share recognition for their accomplishments with teammates**

4. **High-performing teams are more likely to believe that workplace disagreements lead to better decisions (as opposed to damaging relationships).**

5. **Members of high-performing teams don't just interpret conflict more adaptively — they're also more prone to taking the initiative in resolving (conflict)**

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Overview: Conversations about cultivating trust at work often focus on the relationship between managers and employees. While useful, this approach represents only half the equation. As important... is establishing trust between teammates.

So, how do the best teams build trust among themselves?

To find out, my team surveyed 1,000 U.S.-based office workers, with the goal of pinpointing behaviors that differentiate high-performing teams and understanding what we can learn from their approach... Our research found that high-performing teams are exceedingly rare; only 8.7% of respondents gave their teams qualifying scores. We also identified five key behaviors related to trust that set these teams apart.

1. High-Performing Teams Don't Leave Collaboration to Chance

When launching a project, many teams follow a predictable cadence: They assign tasks and start working. ***High-performing teams, on the other hand, are more than three times more likely to begin by first discussing how they will work together,*** paving the way for fewer misunderstandings and smoother collaboration down the road.

How exactly do you have a conversation about collaborating? In his new book, How to Work with (Almost) Anyone, Michael Bungay Stanier provides a series of prompts teammates can use to conduct what he calls "Keystone Conversations" before starting a project. Colleagues take turns sharing:

1) the tasks at which they excel,
2) their communication preferences, and
3) successful and unsuccessful collaborations they've experienced in the past.
Critically, Bungay Stanier also recommends proactively creating a strategy for when things go awry, by inviting team members to devise a plan for handling any breakdowns in collaboration, should they occur.

Ultimately, the precise prompts your team uses to establish collaboration norms matter less than engaging in a dialogue on how you will work together. Doing so contributes to trust by signalling respect for one another's strengths and preferences, securing agreement on process, and inviting team members to speak up when they notice opportunities for improvement.

2. High-Performing Teams Keep Colleagues in the Loop

Another factor that differentiates high-performing teams is their tendency to proactively share information.

Greater transparency doesn't just foster trust — it's also been shown to fuel creativity, performance, and profitability. In contrast, when colleagues withhold information from their teammates, there are frequently deeper issues at play. "Knowledge hiding," as it's referred to in academic literature, often suggests a lack of psychological safety or an underlying power struggle.

In our study, we found that members of high-performing teams are significantly more likely to take responsibility for keeping others informed rather than expecting a manager to do so. In other words, they don't just avoid hoarding information — they go out of their way to keep colleagues in the loop, creating a culture of inclusion.

3. **High-Performing Teams Share Credit**

Receiving praise for a job well-done isn't just rewarding, it also contains an important team-building opportunity — one that high-performing teams leverage often.

Instead of soaking up praise alone, ***members of high-performing teams are more likely to share recognition for their accomplishments with teammates*** by acknowledging or thanking those who played a role in their success. In so doing, they increase the likelihood of their colleagues feeling appreciated and promote a norm of reciprocity, both of which contribute to the experience of trust.

It's a clever approach — and not just because it fosters better teamwork. Recent studies indicate that when we share credit for our accomplishments, we appear more likable without seeming any less capable.

4. **High-Performing Teams Believe Disagreements Make Them Better**

Years ago, psychologist John Gottman noticed something odd about happy marriages: thriving couples often fight more than unhappy ones. More important than the sheer number of disagreements, Gottman's research revealed, is the way a couple navigates them...

Happy couples do all sort of things that make for more productive disagreements: They avoid name-calling and sarcasm, focus on what they need instead of their partner's failures, and use "I" statements to communicate in a way that makes their partner less defensive.

Like thriving marriages, high-performing teams don't experience less conflict. Where they differ is the way they interpret and respond to disagreements.

Our findings indicate that ***high-performing teams are more likely to believe that workplace disagreements lead to better decisions (as opposed to damaging relationships).*** They also rate their teammates as more effective at preventing disagreements from getting personal.

These two observations are likely connected. A workplace disagreement can be perceived as an opportunity or a threat, and our interpretation influences the way we respond. Among high-performing teams, viewing conflict as a source of strength makes disagreement less harrowing, reducing the frequency with which colleagues lash out.

5. **High-Performing Teams Proactively Address Tension**

Members of high-performing teams don't just interpret conflict more adaptively — they're also more prone to taking the initiative in resolving it.

In our study, we found that they are significantly more interested in "hearing if they upset a teammate," and more willing to proactively reach out if "something didn't feel right between me and a teammate."

Both responses reflect a broader tendency among high-performing teams to embrace a 'Growth Mindset' when it comes to colleague relationships. This term is typically used to describe the way successful people respond to setbacks: by believing that outcomes can be improved through effort, learning, and perseverance.

- Ron Friedman, Harvard Business Review (January, 2024)