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How Can Leaders Cultivate a Culture of Organizational Trust and Implement Effective Strategies to Drive High-Performance?

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## Abstract

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## INTRODUCTION:

### **Breaking Barriers toward Producing Organizational Trust**

*In the words of Frank Crane, 'You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you do not trust enough.' — Perry Smith*

Trust within the workplace has been often overlooked in regards to the effectiveness of higher performance and competitiveness. However, it is an essential factor when determining long term goals, cultural practices, and overall stability among employees and the organization. “Fulmer and Gelfan defined trust in an organization at the individual level as a psychological state comprising willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of an organization” (Cohen, 2015).

A PricewaterhouseCoopers study of corporate innovation among the Financial Times 100 showed that the number one differentiating factor between the top innovators and the bottom innovators was trust (Ellis & Shockley- Zalabak, 2009). In fact, Fortune Magazine's criteria for identifying “100 Best Companies to Work For” consists of 60% on trust in the organization. With such an emphasis on organizational trust, why is it difficult to implement? The answer is simple. Trust is not simply defined as a link to success, nor is it easy to foster in such cut throat characterized business organizations. Similar to our personal lives, trust is crucial in any relationship ranging from your significant other to your best friend. However, once trust is lost it is hard to get back and difficult to alter our mindset about a person once we've had a negative experience. When this occurs in a business environment not only does it affect two people but the company as a whole. Costs will plummet, business goals and clarity is lost, opportunities are missed, and efficiency will be lower than ever.

Many times employees believe that distrust is the easy way out. No emotional entanglement, no need to feel vulnerable, and no expectations or disappointments. Sadly, this is the mentality that washes away motivation, creativity, and open-minded thinking. Low trust behavior among levels of the organization can become deadly and spread like wildfire. Furthermore, it can contribute to the idea of “it’s me versus them”, not that we are all one team. While some factors are not in our hands, it is the responsibility of each member in the organization, especially leaders to break barriers for high-trust. Through this, the workplace has a better opportunity for creativity and innovation, as well as a culture of unity that is reaching for a higher goal together.

Much of this study analyzes several factors of leadership and the benefits an organization reaps when breaking barriers towards developing high-trust. However, this poses the question, what if trust is lost? Or what if it’s hard to break barriers among divisions and employees because of the organization’s structure? Or even worse, our trust is taken advantage of and used against us. As we dive into the realities of developing a high- trust workplace, we will answer these questions and provide an in-depth analysis of factors that may play a role as well as some strategic solutions to implement as leaders.

## **What Drives Trust?**

### ***Communication Intensity and Goal Alignment***

While the topic of trust and its outcomes on relationships is widely researched, what drives trust is briefly discussed. In fact, there is a conflicting view on high-trust as some authors believe “trust enhances performance (Morgan and Hunt 1994), effectiveness of managers (Culbert and McDonough 1985), project success (Diallo and Thuillier 2005) and information sharing (Ozer, Zheng and Chen 2011). While the opposite view posits that there is very little relation between trust and performance (Dirk 1999)” (Muhammad). Furthermore, not only does trust not impact performance but it degrades performance by putting the organization at risk of being taken advantage of and/or using vulnerability as means to abuse someone or the business.

The main question posed is if trust is unrelated or related to performance. To test this, there was a study in 2015 on antecedents and outcomes of trust, where researchers explored two factors: communication intensity and goal alignment, and if they can help in a) increasing performance as well as b) decrease opportunism. When trust is intact in an organization the ability to share the same goals and strive for cooperation becomes much easier. However, building trust must demonstrate effective communication skills and information sharing between two people. “Through intense communication, frequent interaction partners understand the behavior of each other and negotiate any unwelcomed situation thus alleviating opportunism. Trust through better communication and interaction soothes the flow of information and higher performance. Secondly, each partner knows that his or her counterpart will act according to norm and he or she will get fair treatment. Hence, it is in the best interest of both to do their part to achieve maximum profit and long term relationship” (Muhammad). Through the regression analysis, results proved that

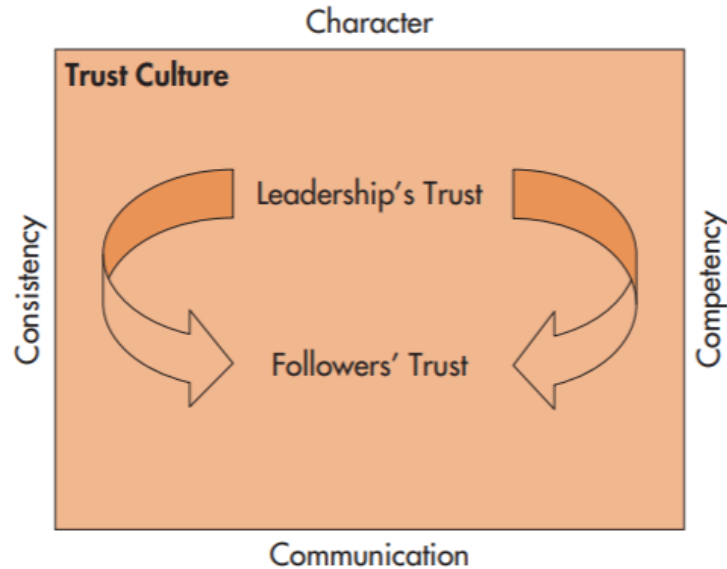


communication intensity and goal alignment both help not only build trust but also help employees be more aware of behaviors through interactions. “These findings are also supported by Snyder and Morris (1984) who found that quality of communication and information exchange are critical to revenue and overall organizational performance. Furthermore, high levels of communication are helpful to resolve unforeseen issues and exchange information” (Muhammad). The results also identified low levels of opportunism, seeing as both parties would suffer if their shared goals are not achieved.

This study shows us that indeed a high- trust culture should increase performance. But, one must understand that there requires a mutual respect for that bond to form. This is where leaders come into play and must take initiative. Research shows that only 49% of employees trust senior management, and only 28% believe CEOs are a credible source of information (Covey). These statistics prove to us that nearly half of the employees working in an organization lack the ability to trust their top managers. Leadership is defined as “an important function of management which helps to maximize efficiency and to achieve organizational goals” (Importance of leadership for Organizational Excellence, 2015) and if displayed correctly then “a remarkable leadership behaviour stresses upon building an environment in which each and every employee develops and excels. It has the potential to influence and drive the group's efforts towards the accomplishment of goals” (Importance of leadership for Organizational Excellence, 2015). But if you take a closer look all these factors of an excellent leader such as influence, personal growth, efficiency, and unity towards achieving goals are affected by trust whether we accept it or not.

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## Organizational Environment



We understand the attributes of a good leader and why it is important to display trust towards fellow employees. But the conflict lies in the lack of several leaders adapting to the risk of trust, which becomes a large barrier to reach employees and efficiency. The best leaders always lead out with a decided propensity to trust, as opposed to a propensity not to trust. As Craig Weatherup, former CEO of PepsiCo said, "Trust cannot become a performance multiplier unless the leader is prepared to go first." A leader has the power to influence others for the betterment of individuals and the company as a whole. In order to fully take on this job, one must have self-trust, relationship trust, and smart trust.

SELF TRUST- The first step is to create self-trust and to understand the confidence you have in yourself to achieve goals and towards the betterment of the company as a whole.

RELATIONSHIP TRUST- Now that you have trust in your leadership skills, it's time to commit to making relationships with others in a way that you inspire and collaborate with employees.

SMART TRUST- Extend trust first in order for employees to not feel like there is an underlying reason or personal benefit to day to day interactions. Be genuine and authentic in why you're reaching out and convince them how working together can increase the company even more. Do not easily confuse this with blind trust but rather a smart trust with clear expectations and strong accountability built into the process.

As the famous author of “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” Stephen Covey states, “When trust is low, in a company or in a relationship, it places a hidden "tax" on every transaction: every communication, every interaction, every strategy, every decision is taxed, bringing speed down and sending costs up. Significant distrust doubles the cost of doing business and triples the time it takes to get things done. By contrast, individuals and organizations that have earned and operate with high trust experience the opposite of a tax—a "dividend" that is like a performance multiplier, enabling them to succeed in their communications, interactions, and decisions, and to move with incredible speed. A recent Watson Wyatt study showed that high trust companies outperform low trust companies by nearly 300%!” (Covey).

## **Jack Welch's Leadership on Trust**

*“A leader who can inspire trust is invaluable for bringing together individuals and holding them together until trust can form.” —John Gardner*

Jack Welch was arguably known as the greatest leader of his era. “As the CEO of General Electric from 1981 to 2001, “Welch expanded the company, leading it to a dramatically increased market value from \$14 billion to \$410 billion under his leadership. Welch had a reputation as one of the top CEOs of all time, and Fortune magazine dubbed him Manager of the Century in 1999” (Kagan). Jack Welch is one of the world's most respected and celebrated CEOs, known for his unmatched track record of success, enormous love of people, fierce passion for winning, and unbridled desire to change the world for the better using his unique management practices, which are collectively called The Welch Way (Jack Welch- Business Insider). Welch wasn't any traditional CEO, nor did he manage his unrelated business as a typical strategist. However, he was deeply committed to developing its people and focused on aligning the skill sets and mindsets of GE employees. He wanted the company to be known in the future as a place where people have the freedom to be creative and a place that brings out the best in everybody. “In his 21 years as CEO, Jack transformed GE into the world's most admired and successful company with his innovative management techniques” (Jack Welch- Business Insider). When asked what his key is to being a successful leader he states, “The trick is building truth and trust. “If [your employees] trust you, they tell you the truth, and when you get the truth, you act quickly,” the octogenarian management expert says. “And so truth and trust play an enormous role. People have to trust you. You have to build in trust for people” (Conway, Lombardo, Kristie & Sanders, Kelley, 2001).

As a business leader, Jack outlines how building trust comes from three fundamental qualities: being direct, setting a vision, and including creativity. He starts by encouraging leaders to be candid and being clear when speaking to everyone on your team. Regardless of what role, it is essential to take time out to know everyone and ask about how they are doing and what they need to do to improve. As a role model, Welch spent at least 70% of his time on people issues which consisted of teaching and developing others. Straying away from the traditional approach, he kept tabs on everyone and even had three of his senior executive's visit each of his businesses to review the progress of the company's top 3,000 executives (Bartlett, 2000). Having clarity on where people stand and visualizing where they need to be creates an open and safe environment, allowing them to foster a trusting relationship. Welch suggests that every three months, managers should physically write the names of each employee and discuss what they are doing well in and what they need to improve on. This is a great strategy to not only know your employees better, but also allow your organization to reach high-performance. Because without the realization and reflection of professional goals, there is no way your employees will reach new heights.

Next, Mr. Welch discusses setting the vision as he shares in an interview with Harvard Business Review in 1989, "Good business leaders create a vision, articulate the vision, passionately own the vision and relentlessly drive it to completion". He strongly believes that a real leader must have the self-confidence and intellectual self-assurance to be clear and precise in understanding what the business as a whole is trying to achieve. Insecure, doubtful, and fearful leaders will only worry their subordinates and cause them to have less trust in you and the decisions you make. Lastly, you must allow room for a culture of creativity, fun, and innovation. Take time to recognize and appreciate a team's successes and always provide a positive and uplifting environment for everyone to collaborate. This would also further a relationship of trust,

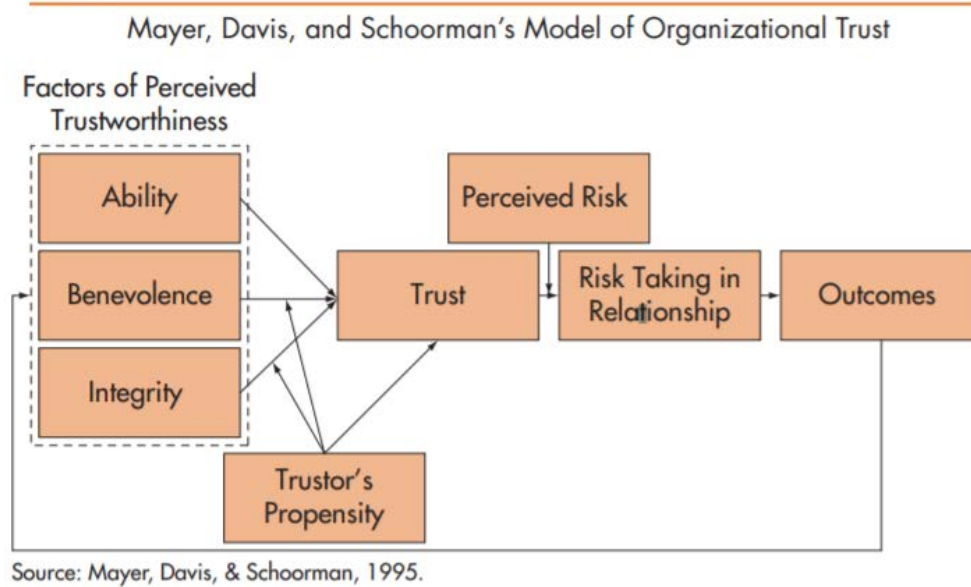
emphasizing that leaders are above just deadlines and bottom-line results, but instead showcasing their genuine care and support for their employees.

Furthermore, as CEO of General Electric, Welch made the culture and its people his highest priority. His greatest concern was those who were unwilling to change and embrace the culture of GE. In order to avoid this toxic environment among employees, he created a new leadership criteria in which he rated GE top level managers not only on performance but also to the extent in which they “lived” GE values. “Welch was focused primarily on the skills of his employees and their mindsets and wanted to be surrounded by employees with speed, simplicity, and self-confidence. He wanted each employee to think about how they can be more effective and efficient. The management team consisted of individuals who had strong commitment to GE’s changing values, and those willing to adapt and embrace change and different ideas” (Bartlett, 2000).

Overall, Jack Welch’s three essential qualities in a leader will allow for members to identify more with the organization and in turn result in a higher percentage of not only trust but also effectiveness. This will avoid more cases of alienation and that “I’m in it for myself” mentality I was discussing earlier. With a less toxic and typical business cut-throat environment, there will be plenty of room for success without sacrificing the trust among the organization.

## Leader Strategies for Building Trust

### Organizational Model of Trust:



### **COMPETENCE:**

Oftentimes leaders will have this misconception of not being able to contribute or make a critical impact on building an environment of trust as they don't see bottom line employees on a daily basis. However, research shows that leaders have a much higher influence on their subordinates than imagined. While we associate leaders to guide the company through purpose, vision, and execution organization's forget that these qualities are only achievable with the unity and trust of a team (Shockley- Zalabak, Pamela S., Morreale).

Many argue that a competent and skilled leader can be able to lead an organization to success regardless of the organization's ability to cooperate. Trust becomes a bystander as it is not

detrimental to performance. However, being a competent leader for a position/title is not equivalent to having people trust that competence. “Competence is the perception that the subject builds based on others perception of technical ability, assessing his body of knowledge and professional profile in a specific field. If the perceived competence built over the other is high in a given area the subject is more likely to trust him” (Ferreira-Oliveira, 2014). For example, when you are planning to hire a professional to do your taxes for you. The first question that pops in your mind is what their credentials are? While you may agree that they are competent and far knowledgeable in filing your taxes correctly that doesn’t necessarily mean that you have developed trust in them to handle sensitive financial information. This is the similar case when working in business organizations. For long-term results and high performance behaviors among employees and leaders, it is fundamental to provide a foundation of trust.

The higher percentage of employees that have belief/ trust in your leadership, the more freedom you have in setting goals and strategies to achieve a common goal. This will allow employees to feel better motivated and create a space for innovation when subordinates believe their ideas will be valued and will be evaluated fairly. That being said, it works both ways. A leader must also have faith and loyalty among their subordinates or else the structure and system of the organization will also crumble.

### **BENEVOLENCE:**

“Benevolence is described as the perception towards the other as selfless, loyal, and someone who acts without any selfish motive” (Ferreira-Oliveira, 2014). When analyzing an organization we can see that employees are truly the main asset to a business. When leaders put aside personal needs and put employees and the company as a priority, magic happens. I do want



to preface by saying that this doesn't necessarily mean that a leader must obey the wants of an employee or do as the wish to keep them satisfied. It's more so this 50/50 mutual understanding that someone is listening to my concerns and cares enough to help me towards reaching my professional goals. "Building trust is based on a genuine caring for others, a commitment to doing what is right, and a belief that caring and commitment will generate organizational excellence. It is aligning intent with action and developing an understanding of how high-trust evaluates the impact of action" (Shockley- Zalabak, Pamela S., Morreale).

With this sense of support, an employee becomes more productive and attains motivation to reach high-performance. Not only that, but the retention rate is significantly higher when leaders in organizations show concern for the well-being of their employees. When looking at this in a broader perspective we can see that trust can not only affect employees but also stakeholders, clients/customers, supporters, and even competitors. "Customers, clients, or supporters are more loyal to organizations that care about their needs, whether for quality products and services, meeting societal needs, or for timely response to problems. Stakeholders, including customers and clients, also tend to evaluate concern based on service support" (Shockley- Zalabak, Pamela S., Morreale).

## **INTEGRITY:**

Having integrity heavily ties into this idea of developing openness and honesty as leaders in an organization. Communicating problems and providing clarity to changes or decisions being made and handled is the key to the organization reaching high-performance. While this may seem like a straightforward concept which most leaders understand, it has actually been surveyed that "over 80 percent of organizations report communication problems, with credibility of leadership

communication generally rated low. Accurate information is fundamental to trust building, as are explanations for decisions and a general openness and timeliness in all communication behaviors” (Shockley- Zalabak, Pamela S., Morreale). Some leader strategies to implement include providing a lateral flow of information through constant communication (which I will further discuss later on in the strategic analysis section). The strongest relationship in the workplace is built on both a leader and employee to freely exchange thoughts and ideas without the fear of being vulnerable to trust. Thus, the importance of transparency highly correlates to a higher chance of breaking barriers towards producing organizational trust.

## Strategic Analysis- Organizational Implications of Trust

*In this section, I will discuss various organizational issues faced when the lack of trust might occur and how to avoid it. By strategically analyzing Jack Welch's leadership style, I will dive into practical solutions and adjustments to modify the structure of an organization and support the belief of breaking barriers for high-trust.*

**PROBLEM/ ISSUE #1:** Organization is too bureaucratic

**SOLUTION: Get rid of bureaucracy and introduce a “boundaryless” behavior-** Oftentimes the cause of an internal disturbance or lack of trust is developed can be caused by an organization's structure of being too bureaucratic. By getting rid of labels/titles we can ensure that everyone in the company feels valued. Employees at all levels should work cross functionally through what Jack Welch calls a “boundary less” approach. “This is characterized as an open, anti-parochial environment, friendly toward the seeking and sharing of new ideas” (Bartlett, 2000). Welch was able to break strategy laws by articulating General Electric in the 1990's as a `boundaryless' company because he wanted to break down barriers, or boundaries, that existed at the time between different parts of the company. With a boundaryless organization more people will ignore or erase group labels such as “top line management”, which get in the way of people working together and trust developing. Furthermore, with introducing a boundaryless behavior more people across all functions (not just top management) can be in sync with the company's goals.

**“Work Out” Management Style-** Another factor that contributed to Jack Welch's success in leading GE was the open discussions between management and employees during the meetings that were referred to as, “Work Out”. This style of management utilizes “your organization's significant business objectives to bring the right people together to come up with new ideas and create solutions that are approved right away and implemented in 90 days. This dynamic process

also builds cooperation, and increases morale by instilling values of excellence, involvement, growth, and shared knowledge throughout all levels of your organization” (General Electric). “Work Out” created a safe space for employees to voice their opinions and suggestions to manage how work could be improved through open dialogue. The result of this management style led to growth rates that doubled shortly after implementation.

In a Harvard Business Review interview, Jack Welch shares how “Work-Out is absolutely fundamental! Organizations are not going to succeed if people end up doing the same work they’ve always done. The ultimate objective of Work-Out is so clear. We want 300,000 people with different career objectives, different family aspirations, and different financial goals, to share directly in this company’s vision, the information, the decision-making process, and the rewards. We want to build a more stimulating environment, a more creative environment, a freer work atmosphere, with incentives tied directly to what people do” ((Tichy, Charan). Most importantly, it can avoid a silo mentality and increase opportunities to work together as well as have a well-rounded knowledge across all functions. Furthermore, this will reduce clashes and fights among divisions and increase unity, common-goal thinking, as well as overall productivity.

**PROBLEM/ ISSUE #2: Top management team meetings**- While team meetings are created to overview core objectives of the organization and achieve a better focus on upcoming projects. It also causes a drift among people in top management and bottom line workers. Due to only top management attending these meetings, only a select amount of people can a) speak or share ideas and b) be up to date on the information that is flowing in the organization. While a business is made up of different puzzle pieces, it is still essential to understand that in the end these pieces should come together to make a bigger picture. All components in the organization have

importance and carry weight, however, not everyone gets the same information. Complications arise when bottom line workers get cut off from information they need because only top level managers were invited to the team meeting and important information was not passed along. This causes trust issues as people on the subsidiary level feel threatened or disrespected as the same knowledge was not being shared as the people above them.

**SOLUTION: Cross integration + 360- degree feedback forms** - Instead of the traditional approach of knowledge flowing top down, the company should have knowledge and communication flow lateral. Organizations should be able to accumulate time towards thrashing out problems, and especially getting people talking across all functions. There should be instant communication with each other and no disconnect about any functions prospects and programs.

By implementing 360 degree feedback forms for example, you can get an equal assessment of all people in the organization, even top level management. In addition, 360 degree feedback forms can avoid the concern of people at the lower level getting dominated with power and knowledge. A 360 degree is “an instrument to get performance ratings and feedback from subordinates, peers, customers, suppliers, and/or supervisors. The goal is to get feedback from different sources about performance and areas of improvement” (Vulpen). Oftentimes certain businesses or organizations feel that the way they execute and interact with employees and teams is fine. They work well and get the job done. However, this is about elevating performance and reaching goal alignment. In order to do this, individuals must perform at their best, utilizing their abilities to their highest potential. With a 360, you can gauge a broader perspective on employees and it can be quite eye opening as you critically analyze your strengths and weaknesses. Not to mention the trust that is developed across all levels of the organization, regardless of title.

However, I do want to point out that a common mistake when executing a 360 is utilizing it as a form of performance evaluation that can impact pay and promotions. This is not what an organization should aim for as it will give the opposite outcome and will lose its power as a tool for trust and development. Instead, performance appraisals shouldn't be linked and the 360 needs to be used as a personal development tool not as a rating tool. This form of feedback is described as an instrument that can not only build competitive advantage but also focus on leadership development to target team goals. In fact, a meta-analysis done in 2001, found that "subordinates and peer ratings explained more variation in measures like productivity and profit than other sources" (Conway, 2001).

**Skip-level meetings-** One way to directly tackle this issue is by implementing skip-level meetings. As leaders it is essential to have insight from all levels in order to make strategic decisions for the company as a whole. A skip-level meeting is "when a CEO or simply a higher up manager meets with employees that are more than one step down the chain of command. This allows for higher level employees to talk with lower level employees in a safe and productive environment building a bridge from boss to the worker" (Appfluence, 2018). With skip-level meetings leaders can look at the organization from the ground-up, allowing you to a) interact more and create a stronger bond with employees at all levels and b) better understand the decisions that need to be made in regards to work environment, new possible products, project ideas, and overall aligning the companies visions and priorities.

The key with these types of meetings is efficiency through meaningful interactions internally. The great thing about skip-level meetings vs. normal meetings is that employees have the opportunity to voice how they feel about what's going on in the organization. This can range

from suggestions to increase efficiency as a team to how you feel in your current role and way to achieve your professional goals. Some benefits to skip-level meetings include, “A more open environment for sharing ideas, which facilitates innovation as well as a universal understanding of your company vision and priorities. It can also increase overall employee engagement, as everyone feels valued and included by executives” (Appfluence, 2018). All these factors, once again, drive the importance of building transparency and breaking barriers for trust throughout the organization, regardless of the status that is held. In a realistic approach, all leaders must understand that not every employee will easily open up or be as up front with their opinions. However, building a bridge of connection and continuing to foster that relationship will be beneficial if that employee chooses to share something in the future.

## CONCLUSION:

*“When you have trust and you get that trust in place throughout the company, people are empowered- people are free.” – Angela Ahrendts*

In a perfect world, equal balance of trust is achieved within leaders and employees in an organization. But, unfortunately, this is not the case in many situations. Trust is hard to earn and is built through actions not simply words. People ranging from stakeholders, staff, clients, and even employees across all divisions must have a reason to trust your competency and leadership.

Through this study, we can confirm the positive aspects that a high-culture of trust can have on the employees behaviors across all divisions and most importantly to achieve high performance. Key findings establish the true benefits reaped when trust is incorporated by leaders such as: reducing cost, improving communications, goal alignment, and enhancing management. “Trust becomes the core of our virtual work environments. Excelling at communicating values, trust, and connections to the organization to all stakeholders is a leadership responsibility. Trust is fundamental to stimulate the innovation, creativity, and risk taking needed to bring about productive change” (Shockley- Zalabak, Pamela S., Morreale).

While we can't imply that trust is the only driving factor towards business performance, we can conclude that by implementing these business strategies for high- trust, the workplace has a better opportunity for creativity and innovation, as well as a culture of unity that is reaching for a higher goal together



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