

How to Build a Workplace Culture That Promotes Trust

3 Exercises from The School of Life at Work



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How to Build a Workplace Culture That Promotes Trust

To get the best out of our teams we not only have to equip them with the knowledge and tools to perform effectively, but we must also create and foster working environments that support them to flourish.

A company culture that promotes trust not only ensures that employee wellbeing is continuously protected but generates a space of freedom, supportiveness and openness that enables everyone to show up authentically and thrive within their work.

To create this environment, we must collectively embrace individuality, practice the art of non-judgement and value genuine candour in ourselves and others.

The School of Life at Work equips businesses and their people with the emotional skills to thrive at work - and grow as people. To support you in building a culture of trust with your teams, we've prepared the following three exercises for individuals, teams and leaders.

The Simple Benefits of Being Available

How accessible we seem to others will make people more likely to open up when you ask questions, and more likely to give you opportunities to listen and give them feedback and ultimately, trust you. Politicians make every effort to meet people directly. They take time to speak with voters in person because they know that leaders must be seen to listen. Without doing so, they cannot hope to inspire confidence amongst those people they wish to lead.

What are three things you do at work to demonstrate availability to others?

For example, do you go for lunch or drinks with people you don't work directly with or who are junior to you?

Do you frequently check in with those around you on a messaging platform, or by stopping at their desk if you're in the office?

Or maybe you let people know your general schedule, for example if you leave to collect your children from school at a certain time everyday, so they have a chance to ask you any questions before they know you are busy.

Creating Clear Expectations

Jazz music requires a huge amount of trust – everyone in the band is improvising throughout, at least to some degree. So if you want the band to perform well, it's not possible to simply dictate ahead of time how they should perform each note. And it might be very demotivating to give a lot of negative feedback after a performance. Instead you have to focus on giving guidance to build trust. One of the most famous jazz musicians of all time, Thelonious Monk, (and his frequent collaborator, the saxophonist Steve Lacy) understood this.

To help Monk communicate better with the band, Lacy decided to take the many pieces of feedback that Monk regularly gave and work them backwards into a list of guiding principles.

Below are a few that really stand out:

- Just because you're not a drummer, doesn't mean that you don't have to keep time.
- A musical note can be as small as a pin or as big as the world; it depends on your imagination.
- Let's lift the bandstand!

If you wrote a list like this for the people you work with, what would it say? Think of specific points of behaviour, more general principles of performance, and aspects of team or organisational culture.

Asking Humble Questions

Psychologist Edgar Schein conducted a study into serious accidents in the workplace and found that most were the result of senior management failing to ask their team: “How are things going? Have you seen any problems? What’s going on that I need to be aware of?”.

Schein called this the humble enquiry.

To create an environment of trust, your team needs to feel supported. This is not possible if you don’t know what’s going on for them, how they’re feeling or the challenges they are facing.

Here are Schein’s top five humble enquiries:

- What’s going on?
- Help me understand...
- Can you give me some examples?
- Can you tell me more about...
- How can you/we/I learn more?

Jot down one humble enquiry question that you find works well with your team.

Perhaps it’s your go-to opener for 1-2-1s; perhaps it’s the question you always ask when you find yourself in the lift with someone.

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