The Power of Trust in Fearless Leadership®

September 2023

Contents

FEARLESS LEADERSHIP®
UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The courageous shift to engage in essential conversations that build trust and move us forward.

And then there was trust...
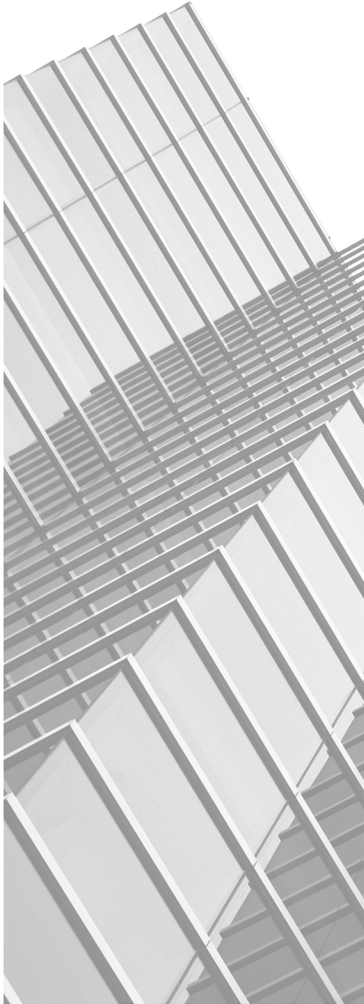
And then there was trust, and vulnerability too,
A duo of courage, in shades of every hue.
The leaders, once doubtful, now stood tall,
Trusting themselves, one and all.

They looked at each other with newfound belief,
No more doubting glances, no more grief.
The bond was strong, a bond so grand,
A circle of trust, across the land.

Oh, the trust was a treasure, sparkling and bright,
A beacon of hope, a radiant light.
In harmony, they worked, a harmonious theme,
Like characters from a magical dream.

So remember this tale, of trust's sweet embrace,
In a world where teamwork finds its place.
Believe in each other, and you will see,
A world of possibility, as happy as can be!

And then came trust … Like magic it spread … The leadership team trusted itself, each other and the organisation … And the organisation trusted the leadership team …

But there was no magic wand. No simple trick. No silver bullet.

Building trust in a leadership team, like in any relationship, needs conscious intention and attention. While Dr. Seuss inspired me to begin with a *Fox in Sox*-influenced poem, the work of developing and maintaining trust takes deliberate energy and focus over time.[1]

---

[1]One of the most important books on self-leadership ever written is Dr. Seuss' *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

Our external context

Today, we are facing significant trust challenges across our society. In Australia, the focus on 'turbulence' at Qantas – labour hire schemes and selling seats on cancelled flights – has shifted our attention from the scandals surrounding the big four accounting firms.

Even before these recent disclosures, the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer (conducted globally every year by PR firm, Edelman) found that Australia's institutional leaders are distrusted: business CEOs at 39% and government leaders at 41%.

We are also coming to terms with our levels of trust with technology. Data breaches in big companies have exposed the risk of our personal data being shared. As ChatGPT and other forms of AI become more advanced and more accessible, we are questioning the associated threats and opportunities. The adoption of self-driving cars is another example of our need to decide the extent to which we are willing to trust technology. Rachel Botsman (2017), author of *Who Can You Trust?* describes the 'trust leap' which is needed when we take a risk or when we do something in a fundamentally different way as we need to do with new technology.

Our internal leadership context

While these stories of trust provide the context for leadership right now, they are not the topic of my consideration. ***This paper focuses on trust within executive and senior leadership teams.*** It is for leaders who are part of a senior team. It makes a case for trust, and it explains trust and its impact. It also provides insight into building trust at the executive level and modelling powerful trust for the whole organisation.

While creating trust does not happen by magic, the impact of increased trust is almost *like* magic. Increased trust can help a senior leadership team by:

- reducing friction and uncertainty from the internal (a restructure) or external (poor economic conditions) environment
- breaking down silos that limit a team's ability to share resources and work effectively together (decreased productivity)
- bringing people along with a significant shift in organisational strategy
- resolving misunderstandings or miscommunication, particularly when the subject matter is difficult
- increasing information sharing, leading to better decision-making
- increasing cabinet solidarity
- leveraging thinking diversity in the team
- reducing disconnect or misalignment between agreed executive values, behaviours and actual practices
- increasing regard for the executive team across the organisation and with external stakeholders.

Fearless Leadership®

Fearless Leadership® accesses untapped potential. It is the courageous shift to engage in essential conversations that move us forward.

Trust is critical for Fearless Leadership—as you know from your own experience and as demonstrated in the Fearless Leadership Model. We can think of trust as a currency we earn over time, then invest wisely to create meaningful relationships and valuable outcomes. In *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen Covey (2012), famed author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* takes this metaphor one step further. He describes a lack of trust like a 'trust tax' while a 'trust dividend' is applied where there is a high level of trust.
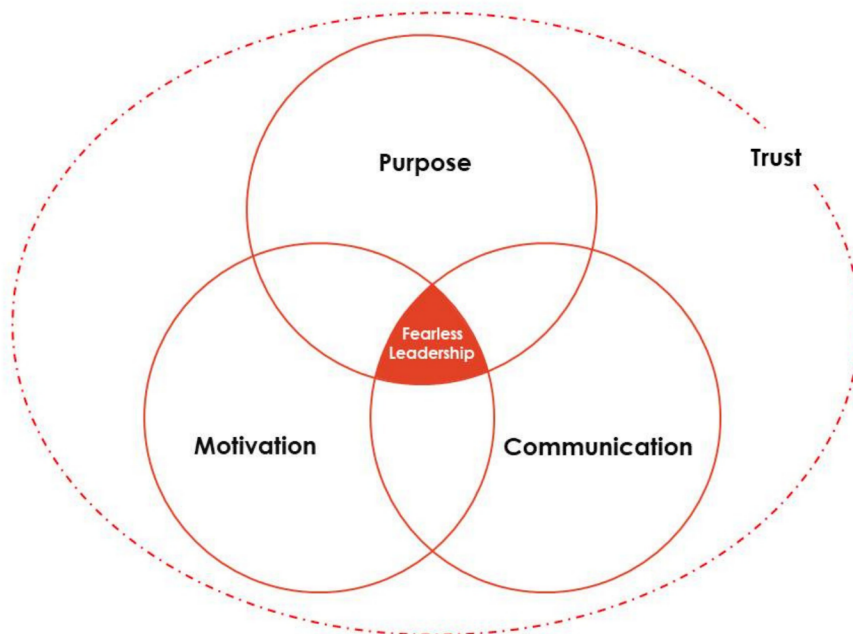
Figure 1: Fearless Leadership
© Corrinne Armour 2023

Fearless Trust is not trust without fear. I sometimes joke that the only time we feel a total absence of fear is when we are dead (or dead drunk) or a psychopath, neither of which are useful states for leadership. Fearless Trust, as with Fearless Leadership, is recognising the fear and using it as a data source in your decision-making.

If trust is the currency of relationships, how is your bank balance looking?

> *Vulnerability doesn't come after trust – it precedes that.*
> *Leaping into the unknown, when done alongside others, causes the solid ground of trust to materialise beneath our feet.*
>
> Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code*

Vulnerability is a trust superpower

In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown (2016) describes vulnerability as 'uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure'. It's that unstable feeling we get when we step out of our comfort zone or do something that forces us to loosen control. Brené's research indicates that we see vulnerability as a strength in others but as a weakness in ourselves. (My own experience, and that of my clients, backs this up anecdotally.)

As we think about operating in a leadership team, it's easy to think that we would first need a trusting base to show vulnerability. In fact, research is showing us that it's the other way around, as summarised by Daniel Coyle (2019) in *The Culture Code*: *'Vulnerability doesn't come after trust – it precedes that. Leaping into the unknown, when done alongside others, causes the solid ground of trust to materialise beneath our feet'.*

How is your relationship with vulnerability?

What is your reaction to the notion that vulnerability comes before trust?

CASE STUDY: Yamini's journey towards genuine vulnerability and trustworthiness

Yamini, a senior leader and working parent, is passionate about supporting other working parents. She openly shares stories about her family and the challenges of balancing work and home life. She always informs her colleagues when she leaves to pick up her kids from school, knowing this sets an example.

Feedback that 'she should show more vulnerability', and 'I don't feel like I know the real Yamini,' surprised and perplexed her. She believed she was already sharing authentically by discussing her family. When I asked Yamini if discussing her children and the struggles of being a working mother made her uncomfortable, she replied, 'Not really. I think it's important to talk about these things.'

Yamini was not showing true vulnerability. True vulnerability goes *beyond* comfort. The penny dropped for Yamini in a meeting where she shared a personal experience and felt genuinely uneasy. Later that day, several executives reached out to thank her for sharing and for trusting them with her story. That was the real essence of vulnerability.

> *Trust is choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions.*
>
> Charles Feltman, *The Thin Book of Trust*

What is trust?

If trust is that important, then let's be clear on what we mean when we talk about it.

Wikipedia defines trust as *'a feeling that somebody or something can be relied upon, or will turn out to be good. It is the feeling of being sure about something, even if it cannot be proved.'*

While this is useful, the definition of trust that best suits our discussion with executive teams is from Charles Feltman (2021) in *The Thin Book of Trust*, where he writes that *'trust is choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions'*.

Thinking about your role in your leadership team, what do you value that could be vulnerable to another person's actions?

Perhaps you value the outcome, the relationship, the connection with your direct reports?

Your reputation with a key stakeholder, your pride or your sense of security in the team?

WHAT DO YOU PUT @ RISK WHEN YOU TRUST?

- ☐ Success
- ☐ Reputation
- ☐ Insights
- ☐ Yourself
- ☐ Thinking
- ☐ Brand - personal
- ☐ Brand - team
- ☐ Connection w̄ that person
- ☐ Judgement
- ☐ ego
- ☐ Sense of self
- ☐ pride
- ☐ Motivation
- ☐ Confidence
- ☐ Relationships
- ☐ Open comm"
- ☐ personal values / beliefs
- ☐ outcomes
- ☐ certainty

I asked this question *'what do you value that could be vulnerable to another person's action'* of an executive team recently as we explored trust between them. Here are some of the things that surfaced. Perhaps some of their thoughts resonate for you too?

Charles Feltman also provides an excellent definition of distrust, *'What is important to me is not safe with this person in this situation (or any situation)'.*

This is pretty strong. How would you feel if you believed that *a peer thought what was important to them was not safe with you?*

Why does trust matter?

The answer to this question is simple. Trust matters because:
1. Working in a trusting team brings more joy. We spend at least 105,600 minutes at work each year, so we want to enjoy it.
2. Trusting teams perform better – they get more done and make more impact.

Intra-team trust is positively correlated to team performance. This has been verified across multiple studies (De Jong, Dirks & Gillespie 2016). Workplace trust provides a competitive advantage, and greater enjoyment and satisfaction within and outside the workplace.

Compared with people in low trust companies, people in high trust companies report the following (Zac 2017):

- 74% less stress
- 106% more energy at work
- 50% higher productivity
- 13% fewer sick days

- 76% more engagement
- 29% more satisfaction with their lives
- 40% less burnout.

What could you do with 106% more energy? What could be achieved with 50% more productivity across the organisation?

How is the trust in your organisation? **You could find a role in a high trust company? Or set about building the trust levels where you are?** If you choose the latter, this paper will help you.

CASE STUDY: Trust declines to catastrophic levels

The executive team of a prominent organisation was initially a cohesive and supportive unit with a clear sense of organisation and team purpose. They were open about their vulnerabilities and readily sought assistance when needed. Despite their high performance on most metrics, the team rarely undertook reflective practice and had not created a culture of learning and reflection.

The decline in trust began gradually. As the executive team expanded, the CEO failed to establish clear expectations for new members. Instances of behaviour that once would have been deemed unacceptable were overlooked.

Simultaneously, changes at the board level led to a breakdown in trust between directors, and between the board and the CEO. With this tone of trust set by the board, executives moved into protection mode, asking themselves 'who will they go after next?' Attending a board meeting was to be dreaded.

As trust eroded within the executive team, decision-making slowed, layers of review and bureaucracy increased, undesirable behaviours went unchecked and performance standards dropped. Trust reached its breaking point following a public review of the organisation's performance. The board and the executive team failed to view it as an opportunity for organisational learning, instead, perceiving it as a witch hunt. The executive team meeting became 'a place to fight, after we each armoured up', resulting in heated conflicts that hindered clear thinking.

Some executives left voluntarily, while others were forced out. A few remained to rebuild the organisation. It was public, harsh, and individually and organisationally damaging. 'You give so much of yourself in an executive role like this. It makes you question whether you want to be in another executive role.'

The impact of trust in leadership teams

The Fearless Leadership Ladder below highlights the correlation between trust, leadership team development, organisational culture and achievement of organisational missions.

Leadership Team	TRUST	Organisational Mission	Culture	Effort: Impact
Fearless	UNWAVERING	Achieving Purpose	Courageous	1:5
Successful	EMPOWERING	Impacting Purpose	Inspired	1:2
				TIPPING POINT
Performing	COLLABORATIVE	Meeting Objectives	Engaged	1:1
Functioning	EMERGING	Missing Objectives	Disengaged	2:1
Dysfunctional	TRANSACTIONAL	Creating Chaos	Surviving	5:1
Oblivious	NON-EXISTENT	Blissfully Unaware	Unfocussed	10:1

Figure 2: Fearless Leadership Trust Ladder © Corrinne Armour 2023

Oblivious: Trust is Non-Existent (or Not Considered)

Trust is given very little consideration by Oblivious teams as all the focus is likely to be on individual endeavours. Leaders are blissfully unaware of their personal and team alignment with organisational purpose. They lead an unfocused organisation. While the organisation may have a level of success, this is more likely to have resulted from good luck and timing than from action taken by the executive. This success is unsustainable—don't expect to see this organisation operating for much longer.

Dysfunctional: Trust is Transactional

Dysfunctional leadership teams have low morale, poor communication and low clarity around organisational purpose. Trust is limited and transactional in nature. With minimal interaction beyond necessary exchanges related to tasks, relationships are purely functional and diversity in style leads to judgement. Leaders are neither sharing information nor supporting one another. Whether behaviours are accidental or intentional, it feels like the competition in the boardroom is stronger than out in the marketplace. This is not the team environment to question decisions or ask for help. Across the business – as well as within the leadership team – it is hard work getting anything done, and there is a sense of 'this is about survival'.

CASE STUDY: Executive team learns to trust

The board at a utilities company appointed a new CEO to modernise the business. A few months into the role, the new CEO had little faith that the executive team could, in its current configuration, lead the organisation successfully into the future. The CEO's diagnosis of the team as Dysfunctional on the Fearless Leadership Ladder was largely based on its inability to trust one another:

- **Confidence:** The CEO had little confidence that the team had her back, and this resulted in her feeling a greater need to be involved in things she would normally have left to individual executives. It also generated a constant level of wariness and low-grade stress across the team.

- **Toxic relationships:** One executive was openly hostile towards his peers, resulting in two others playing peacemaking roles, and another actively retreating. While these incongruent behaviours went unchallenged, other supportive behaviours were withdrawn and open debate stifled as energy was challenged into survival.

- **Poor decision-making:** Executive team conversations were either short and focused with no opportunity for debate and where decisions were made through false consensus, or they were long and complicated, taking multiple tangents and where no decisions were made. This dynamic was replicated through all levels of management as staff throughout the organisation watched and followed the example set by the executives.

- **Blame:** A culture of blame, which began around the executive table, negatively impacted people's ability to be innovative and their readiness to take positive risks. Responding to shifting community expectations, the broader sector was moving to customer-focused systems, language, and pricing packages, while this company remained internally focused on traditional technical outcomes.

- **Lack of psychological safety**: With a lack of trust displayed in so many ways, this was not a safe place to work. There was reduced discretionary effort and engagement through the company, which led to low accountability.

A lack of trust, at an executive level, was having a significant impact on the current business. It was also generating a threat to the company's future viability.

Our 12-month Fearless Leadership program progressively developed trust within the team. We did this through an overt focus on trust and indirectly through focus on purpose, motivation, and communication. After six months, the Engagement Survey indicated a 17% increase in 'regard for senior leadership', providing additional external validation for the greater sense of alignment experienced from within the team.

Now, there is an ability and a desire to debate the tough stuff—about people and issues. While this can be uncomfortable, the team chooses to stay in the debate until everyone feels heard and decisions are made.

The stronger communication channels have allowed for a strategic planning process in which the executives challenge one another and are able to generate a robust plan. They are focused on extending ideas not on creating a defense.

Operating as a Fearless Leadership team, energy is being channelled into modernisation and fulfilling the organisational mission. Three tiers of management are now in alignment. An Organisational Culture Inventory (OCI) measured a statistically significant cultural shift across the organisation over two years and the desired constructive culture was evident at all levels. The organisation feels like a different place to work, and the results show that.

What energy is wasted in your team through low trust? What are the impacts of this on personal and business sustainability?

Functioning: Trust is Conditional

Functioning leadership teams have some idea of their purpose, and yet despite their efforts, objectives are missed. Trust is conditional; it is based on past performance and adherence to agreements that may or may not be shared and explicit. Leaders extend trust cautiously, and communication is centred around specific objectives. Diversity is tolerated without curiosity, individual strengths are not leveraged, and the benefits of inclusion are not realised. Conflict may be avoided by suppressing disagreement, resulting in missed opportunities to build trust. Trust is further undermined when decisions made in an executive meeting are not supported when everyone leaves the room. It takes significant effort to make any real impact with a culture of patchy engagement, at best.

CASE STUDY: One toxic team member brings down trust

Jolene was part of the executive team for many years. She had a visible public profile and strong corporate knowledge. Middle managers who reported to her were fiercely loyal. And yet something wasn't right.

The CEO sensed it but couldn't put her finger on it. Jolene's relationships with her peers were inconsistent. Each one experienced an episode of what felt like bullying. But surely not at a peer-to-peer executive level? And not when other members of the team seemed okay with her.

Low levels of trust across the executive team meant that individuals weren't willing to be vulnerable and disclose their own experience of Jolene with another peer. Each executive thought it was just them. After all, no one else was complaining and Jolene's direct reports were very loyal to her.

Research published by *MIT Sloan Management Review* (Sull et al. 2022) identified 'The Toxic Five Culture Attributes'.

It wasn't until Jolene took an executive role in another organisation that the extent of her negative impact was understood. The dynamic in the executive team was immediately lighter and more trusting and executives began to share experiences, piecing together the totality of Jolene's impact. After her departure, Jolene's direct reports opened up and disclosed the high level of micromanagement and lack of psychological safety they experienced.

The executive team was then ready to overtly focus on rebuilding trust and move up the Fearless Leadership Ladder.

Performing: Trust is Collaborative

Performing leadership teams believe they can go places. Trust is now visible as leaders actively collaborate with their executive team peers. With the emphasis on working together to achieve an agreed team purpose, they share information, seek input and encourage contribution, although this may not be consistent. Meeting objectives gives a sense of confidence. Team members feel heard and respected, if sometimes misunderstood. Conflict is surfaced and although it can be messy, the team learns from this, building trust. Within the team and across the business, people are engaged and wanting to contribute, so it's easier to get things done.

Within every team journey, there is a **tipping point** where the impact of the leadership team is magnified with no additional effort. The trust displayed by the executive team enables trust across the organisation. Effort is now directly applied to achieving the organisational purpose, rather than second guessing expectations, motivations and outcomes that result from a low trust environment.

> Within every team journey, there is a tipping point where trust magnifies the impact of the leadership team with no additional effort.

Successful: Trust is Empowering

Successful leadership teams fulfil their potential. The high level of trust is empowering, underpinned by clear and agreed goals, a high degree of respect for expertise within the team, and a track record of individual and team delivery. Self-awareness and team-awareness is high, and diversity is valued and leveraged. Team leadership is fluid: the leader leads with confidence and trusts peers, so they follow equally well when it suits team and organisational objectives. Trust in positive intention and strong alignment between individual, team and organisational purpose allows rigorous debate that leads to outcome-driven decisions. Determinations are supported regardless of whether everyone was in the room when the decision was made. Risk-taking is possible because the level of trust inspires confidence and support. Making progress towards purpose generates energy. People across the organisation are inspired to bring their best game to work, meaning everyone can make an impact.

To reach this level is the aspiration of most teams, and yet I know there is another level of team development above Successful … Fearless.

Fearless: Trust is Transformative

Fearless Leadership teams optimise performance by operating in a flow state to achieve amazing results with what appears to be minimal effort. Productive conflict is the team's source of creativity and this stems from a trust that is transformative. Leaders have complete faith in their executive team peers' abilities and judgement. They actively champion each other's and the team's successes and take collective responsibility for failures. Communication is open, people feel heard and play to their strengths, vulnerabilities are shared, and there's a deep sense of camaraderie. Organisational priorities are clear; they are informed by a strong understanding of current and future shifts in the external environment and focus that drives the whole organisation forward. This trust enables power structures to be dynamic and based on what is needed in the situation. People leave on Friday night as energised as they were at the start of the week. There is a culture of courage across the business

When I work with leadership teams, I am often surprised by their honesty in assessing the current level of their team and this leads to a valuable discussion that creates a foundation for a shared understanding to develop.

Contrasting low and high trust leadership teams

CASE STUDY: Executive team explores career options

Six months into a 12-month Fearless Leadership program, it was time to work on the specific needs of individual executives. Our work to date had focused on the needs of the executive team, and it was a team with high levels of trust. I asked each leader to think about a personal leadership challenge they would like to gain insight on and bring that to the discussion.

Without advance consultation, most leaders, including the CEO, brought up career development discussions. CEO: 'I think I have one more contract renewal in me, and then would like to move to a portfolio-based career.' COO: 'I love this region, but I have a sense I need to move away and gain broader experience before I land a CEO role.'

The conversations were personal, open and raw. Each leader was willing to be vulnerable and trust that their peers still saw them as committed and focused on their current role, while maintaining ambition for their next role.

Afterwards, everyone felt lighter. There was greater clarity, more connection to one another and heightened commitment to the current team they were in. They also had a support group to help them fill gaps they needed before their next role, spot opportunities and make connections towards their next career phase.

Contrast that to other executive teams where an executive might be going through a current recruitment process, and even then, not be willing to tell the CEO they are unhappy and/or ready for a a change, for fear of negative implications.

Which team would you rather be in?

Thinking specifically about trust, where is your team on the Fearless Leadership Ladder?

What causes you to think that?
What would your peers say?

As you read the scenarios below, consider where on each continuum you sit most often in your current leadership team. Are you on the Low Trust end, or closer to the Fearless Trust end for each of the aspects described below?

FROM Low Trust

TO Fearless Trust

FROM Low Trust		TO Fearless Trust
Leaders prioritise self-preservation. Feeling unsafe, they tend to exhibit less flexibility, share limited information and impose stricter rules. This ultimately impedes the organisation's ability to adapt.	**SAFETY AND ADAPTABILITY**	Leaders protect both their colleagues and the organisation. When faced with challenges, team members turn to one another for support, openly sharing their knowledge to create a comprehensive understanding. This sense of belonging facilitates coping with uncertainty and encourages experimentation, thereby enhancing the organisation's ability to adapt.
Team decisions are made quickly and easily (despite the complexity of the topic), often influenced by the loudest voices or most senior leaders. There is a lack of cabinet solidarity, so decisions are often not supported outside the boardroom, nor are they implemented.	**HONORING DECISIONS**	Robust and constructive conversations ensure divergent perspectives on complex topics are drawn out and considered. Outside the boardroom, there is solidarity as everyone stands behind the decisions made. Commitment translates into implementation.
Decisions are made independently with little consultation or communication with others, causing friction and division and resulting in poor quality decisions.	**DECISION-MAKING**	When it's appropriate for one executive (or a small group) to make decisions, the rest of the team trusts the decision-making process and supports the outcome. Results are communicated to allow for adjustments in other plans.
Diversity is challenging. Difference in style is misinterpreted and language and other cues are misunderstood, causing miscommunication, frustration and judgement.	**STYLE DIFFERENCE**	Diversity is seen as differences that can be leveraged. Leaders draw on one another's strengths. Misunderstandings are resolved as assumptions are aired and explored, which results in an inclusive way of working.
The CEO's (or any dominant executive) bad ideas are often endorsed and implemented without thorough scrutiny, posing risks to the business.	**INFLUENCE OF POWER**	Challenging the ideas of others is not only safe but actively encouraged. This approach harnesses the collective wisdom of the team, leading to sound and well-considered choices. The CEO maintains the final decision.
Leaders do what they have always done: avoiding experimentation with new approaches out of fear of failure.	**INNOVATION**	Leaders innovate and take calculated risks, trusting that their positive intent will be understood, even if the outcome is not always successful.

ORGANISATIONAL SILOS

Leaders operate in isolated silos primarily focused on protecting their own domains. Individual agendas take priority. Problems are left for individuals to resolve, and consequently, there is little peer-to-peer learning.

While divisional accountability is maintained, the leadership team provides organisational leadership. Organisational priorities are agreed and then resources are directed to the highest need and greatest impact areas. These teams drive the organisation forward by seeking collective support to resolve challenges too complex for any one person. Egos are put aside as problems are openly discussed and solutions are collaboratively developed. This approach encourages a networked operation across the organisation, resulting in a match between resource allocation, project needs and priorities.

CONFLICT

Conflict is avoided and misunderstandings persist, eroding relationships within the executive team and leading to biased perspectives that influence future interactions. Junior staff feel compelled to align with their senior leader, hindering cooperation throughout the organisation.

Misunderstandings are identified quickly. Open and curious conversations facilitate the clarification of underlying causes, enabling necessary adjustments and fostering a collaborative and adaptive environment. Continuous learning is encouraged, which benefits everyone involved.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Executives participate in criticising other leaders or parts of the organisation. Discourse undermines activity and relationship building.

Executives remain curious, ask questions, offer alternative interpretations and encourage constructive discussion about other parts of the organisation. No one is 'thrown under the bus'.

TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

Tough conversations are avoided. Leaders know what happened in the past when challenges were made to current thinking or practices, and they are not willing to risk that. The focus tends to be on blaming individuals.

The focus is on debating ideas rather than attacking individuals. Differences of opinion are surfaced and resolved constructively, involving all relevant people. While these conversations can be challenging, they result in building (not bruising) the relationship to further deepen trust.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is low. Leaders conceal mistakes, shift blame onto others in challenging situations and/or overlook poor behaviour.

Open and candid debriefs and reviews are conducted to uncover areas where things may not have gone as planned. Lapses of poor behaviour are noticed and addressed. These discussions, although at times uncomfortable, provide valuable opportunities for collective learning and growth while maintaining a high level of individual and team accountability.

	VULNERABILITY	
Leaders hide their lack of knowledge, fearing that asking for help or admitting ignorance could be exploited by others. This can lead to increased stress, avoidable errors, and reduced capacity for individual and organisational learning.		Leaders are comfortable declaring when they lack information or understanding, and they are willing to ask for and receive help. Showing vulnerability in this way sets a positive example of continuous learning for the entire organisation.
External danger exacerbates the already heightened threat response at both individual and team level. Leaders tend to become more defensive, more inclined to blame one another, and offer limited support for one another.	**RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL THREAT**	External challenges serve to strengthen the existing team support networks. The team provides a safe and collaborative space to generate and refine potential responses and debrief challenging situations. This approach fosters resilience and adaptability within the team.

Moving from left to right on the continuum, we can discern significant differences in how leadership teams operate and the impact on organisational dynamics.

On the left, we can observe energy going into actions that make people feel safe, but don't contribute meaningfully to the actual work or foster improved working relationships and outcomes. When trust goes down, control mechanisms – organisational and individual – proliferate.

As we move to the right – where trust thrives – control mechanisms are released. Greater trust fosters an atmosphere of openness where leaders are more exposed, show greater vulnerability and are willing to take individual and collective risks. The net effect is a workplace where trust becomes the bedrock upon which stronger relationships are built, innovation flourishes and organisational outcomes are optimised.

- Where would you plot the trust of your leadership team on these continuums?
- How does this impact your energy?
- What is needed to move your team to the right more quickly and more often?

- What is the implication of those situations when your team is on the right?
- What role does the CEO play?
- What role could you take?

CORRINNE ARMOUR

The neuroscience of trust

What about the brain?

Recent advances in neuroscience provide an understanding into the biology of trust and insight into how leaders can respond.

1) The brain perceives a threat five times faster than a reward.

So, when tensions are heightened around the boardroom table, it's not surprising that people imagine the worst. A threat response reduces the capacity for insight and solution focus—not a state you want for your leadership team.

2) Different areas of the brain are involved when we engage with friends and foes.

When you perceive your colleagues as competitors or enemies (and therefore invoke a threat response—no matter how mild), you may be reducing your access to creative thought and limiting the capacity of the team.

3) Trust releases oxytocin that calms the amygdala.

The amygdala is responsible for your fight-flight-freeze response. You may have heard the term 'amygdala hijack' to describe an immediate and overwhelming emotional response that is out of proportion to the actual stimulus. The hormone oxytocin has been associated with decreased amygdala activation and is stimulated by trust. In times of change, uncertainty or threat, the greater the trust in the team, the faster the threat response can be reduced so the team can move quickly into an appropriate response.

4) Trust creates joy.

Trust stimulates oxytocin release, and oxytocin produces happiness (Zac 2017). We can all use more joy in the workplace.

A model for assessing and developing trust

Trust is not binary. It's not yes or no, black or white, off or on. It's not 'I trust you' or 'I don't trust you'. Trust is subjective and contextual.

To get to the bottom of trust in a leadership team, we need a more considered and sophisticated way to explore trust.

There are numerous models for assessing the components we consider – both consciously and unconsciously – when determining our level of trust in others, for example:

- Connection (feeling), consistency (behaviour), credibility (knowledge). (Maister, Galford & Green 2021)
- Authenticity (I experience the real you), empathy (I believe you care about me and my success), logic (I know you can do it. Your reasoning and judgement are sound). (Frei & Morriss 2020)
- Competency (skills, knowledge, time and resources), reliability (dependability, behavioural consistency), honesty (honest about intentions and motives). (Botsman 2017)

These approaches have differences and share commonalities. Each moves us to a more sophisticated understanding of trust beyond the 'do trust/don't trust' polarisation.

The model I find most practical and accessible is from Charles Feltmen's *Thin Book of Trust*. It distinguishes between four key elements that contribute to trust:

1. **Care:** That you consider both your interests and those of others.
2. **Sincerity:** That you are honest, say what you mean and mean what you say, and your behaviours align with your words. That your opinions are valid, useful and backed by sound thinking.
3. **Reliability:** That you honour the commitments and promises you make.
4. **Competence:** That you have the ability (capacity, authority, skills, resources) to do what you commit to.
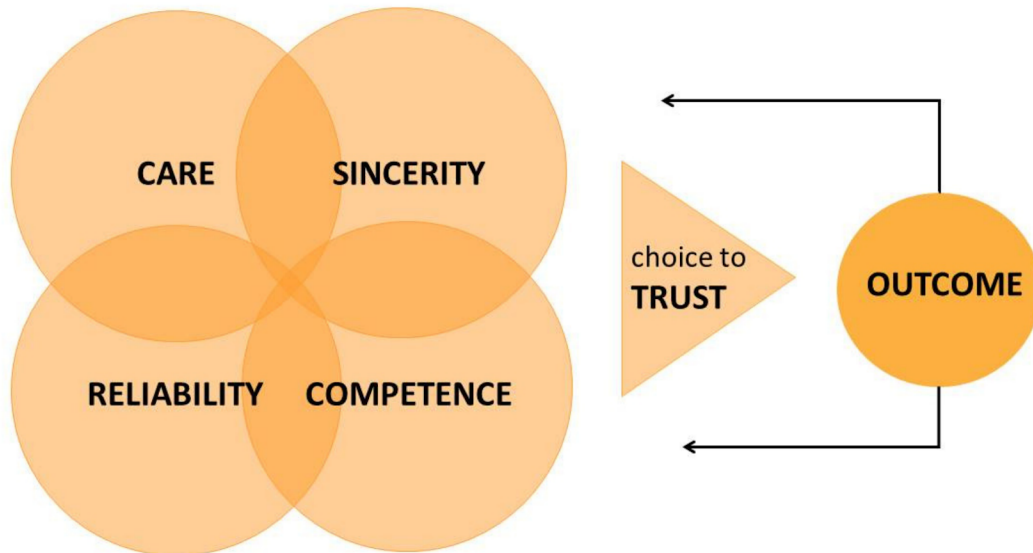

Figure 3: Trust as a Decision (Feltman 2021)

This model implies that 'to trust or not' is not a blanket decision. Instead, **trust is a decision based on your assessments across four domains.**

I may be convinced that you care about me and our shared interests, and that you are competent, while I question your capacity to fulfill the commitment you are making. This leads to a lack of trust. In other instances, I may doubt your consideration of the team's best interest (care) even though I am confident in the other three elements of trust, and so choose not to extend trust to you.

What conversation do you need to have?

What is needed from you in this conversation?

Moving trust from a binary 'do trust/don't trust' to an assessment based on the situation will help you to gain clarity about what is causing you to distrust a peer.

This clarity allows you to consider and initiate a fearless conversation to articulate, explore and resolve trust breakdowns. Such conversations require vulnerability from you and invite vulnerability from the other person. They have the potential to result in much greater trust.

How well can you be trusted?

Of course, while you are assessing your colleagues, the reverse is also happening. They are assessing you and making decisions on their ability to trust you. Consider your own performance on the four domains of trust as you work with your leadership team peers: care, sincerity, reliability and competence. Which domain is stronger for you? Where could you focus greater attention?

It is important to point out here that our perception of our own trustworthiness may be biased. In *The Trusted Advisor*, the authors describe an executive education program in which they asked, 'Who operates at a higher level of trustworthiness, you or your colleagues?'

It may not surprise you to know that the answer is almost always 'me'. Of 800 participants, 15% rated their colleagues at the lowest level of trustworthiness, yet only one of the 800 rated themselves as being at that bottom level (Maister, Galford & Green 2021).

Think about a situation in the past fortnight where trust may have been lower than ideal. What was your contribution?

What could you do now to repair and/or enhance the trust in this relationship?

How well can you trust the team?

This model obviously applies between people, and your micro-assessments will impact how you relate to your individual executive team peers. **You will also have trust (or not) in the team as another 'personality'.**

For example, perhaps the team committed to actions it could and should have been able to honour, and yet the actions weren't fulfilled. This caused you to lose trust in the team's reliability. Is there a universal level of honesty across the team or do you have doubts about the sincerity of the team as a personality?
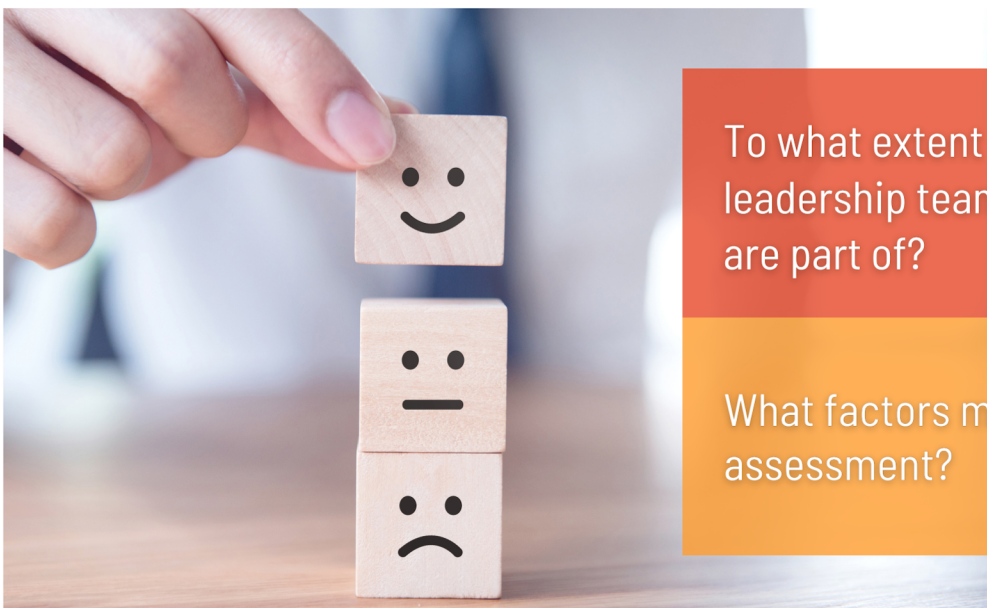
To what extent do you trust the leadership team you are part of?

What factors most impact your assessment?

5 trust trials you could begin today

Convinced about the importance of trust on your executive team? Ready to step into Fearless Leadership and build trust?

Here are five trust trials you could begin today. Choose one to focus your attention on. Play lightly and with curiosity. What are you noticing? What are you learning? How will you apply that learning as you are building greater trust?

1. Work on your own trust gaps. Reflect on the extent to which your behaviour in this leadership team communicates 'worthy of trust' to others. If there were one domain of the trust model on page 17 that you need to work on, which one would it be? Care, sincerity, reliability or competence? What could you do today to strengthen that?

2. Show vulnerability. Trust is not the precursor to vulnerability. Vulnerability is the precursor to trust. (See page 5). Where could you show vulnerability within this team? Possibilities include:

- Share something about yourself that helps others 'know' you and your backstory. You might be surprised at what others will disclose in response, and what common ground you might uncover to use to build trust.
- Be honest when you are missing knowledge, don't understand the logic someone is using, or are not making sense of a plan that others seem to be endorsing. Ask an open question that demonstrates you want to build understanding.
- Declare it when you don't have the answer and/or are not confident about the way forward and involve others in jointly identifying options. This enables others to be more open.
- Ask peers for help. This signals a willingness to admit you don't have all the answers, and that you have a desire to support one another. Asking for help stimulates oxytocin production in others, increasing their trust and cooperation (Zac 2017).

Be careful here that you aren't tricking yourself. You are not being vulnerable if this self-disclosure doesn't make you feel at least a little uncomfortable.

Oversharing is not showing vulnerability either. It's simply oversharing and occurs when a leader divulges personal information or emotion to the extent that it becomes uncomfortable or distracting for those around them.

3. Intentionally build relationships with your peers. While it can be tempting to focus on the technical aspects of the work and minimise the focus investment in personal relationships on an executive team, this won't serve you. Strong relationships generate oxytocin, which contributes to trust. Neuroscience experiments show that when people build social networks at work, their performance improves (Zac 2017).

4. Deconstruct trust in a specific situation. Consider a particular relationship where you could say 'I don't trust her'. Think about the trust model on page 17 to better understand what causes your distrust: care, sincerity, reliability or competence. Now that you have an enhanced understanding of the situation, what conversation could you initiate with that person that could build trust?

5. Invite a conversation within your leadership team on the state of trust in the team. Share this white paper and encourage your peers to read it—in particular, the Fearless Leadership Ladder on page 8. Lead a conversation on where each person thinks the team sits on the Fearless Leadership Ladder and what causes them to think that. This is a conversation that builds awareness and a shared understanding. A subsequent conversation on possible responses can lead to action, translating insight to action.

The Fearless Trust opportunity

By the time you have reached executive leadership level, you have probably worked in both low trust and high trust teams. You know the difference trust can make. You know the impact trust has on you (personally and professionally), the team dynamic, and on team and organisational results.

Creating trust does not happen by magic, and yet the impact of increased trust is almost like magic. It's a magic worth cultivating. It's Fearless Trust worth building.

What would be possible for your organisation when your leadership team builds trust and embraces Fearless Leadership?

Go fearlessly!

Corrinne.

Organisational success flows from a leadership team that connects deeply, leads fearlessly and delivers transformational results.

Fearless Leadership® – are you ready?

What do our clients say?

I am enjoying working in this exec team more. We are more cohesive, present as a team, and the business is seeing us as a team. We make better decisions and have a great rhythm in meetings. We weren't bad before – we are better now.

John Yardley
Deputy CEO – Bank Australia

Right from the beginning I had confidence that Corrinne completely understood where our challenges were, and this has proven to be the case. Working with Corrinne, the quality our conversations has increased and we have progressively built greater trust to create a safe space for robust discussion.

Fearless Leadership has had an exponential impact on our business. With a combination of this program with the exec team, strategy work driven internally, and a focus on accountability, we hoped we would make a movement into a <OCI – Human Synergistics Organisational Cultural Inventory> blue constructive culture and shift one layer of leadership. We have actually delivered on three layers of leadership, positively impacting culture across the whole organisation.

Sarah Cumming
Managing Director – Gippsland Water

Corrine's coaching has helped me to lead my team with greater fearlessness and authenticity. It has taught me that having the right, open conversations with my team, even on seemingly difficult topics, can really build trust and strengthen relationships. Being able to face into critical conversations with Corrine's guidance has enabled to me to make positive shifts and still be my authentic self, which is something I really value.

Dorothy Grouios
General Manager – Dulux Group

Looking back, there has been phenomenal growth, particularly in taking accountability and trust. We have built a team that can lead through the complexity of health. I am confident as the CEO and we are confident as a team. Fearless Leadership has and will stick because we all believe in it and live it, and we have people who constantly remind us.

Jackie Kelly
CEO – Moyne Health Services

We went into this as a dysfunctional team. Corrinne provided an energy and process that has enabled barriers to be broken down and opened the gateway for the leadership team to be more sharing and trusting with each other. We now look past perceptions to interpret behaviour as it is intended.

Executive Director of Nursing & Allied Health
Metropolitan Hospital

Fearless Leadership® Program

**The courageous shift to engage in essential conversations
that build trust and move us forward.**

Your Leadership Team, Aligned and Fearless

Corrinne's Fearless Leadership® Program builds senior leadership and executive teams that are inspired and focused by a strong and shared purpose, connected by mutual understanding, powerful through harnessing their diversity, and underpinned by trust. They lead sustainable organisations balancing an internal and external focus.

The Approach

Fearless Leadership results when purpose, motivation and communication develop in an environment of trust. Each element of Fearless Leadership® Program builds these key areas by addressing:

- Lack of shared purpose and clear direction
- Low social and emotional intelligence within the team
- Misunderstanding and friction
- Lack of collaboration and trust
- Absence of cabinet solidarity over decisions made
- Low individual and shared accountability
- Fear and stress about the challenges faced

- Inability to leverage thinking diversity and professional expertise
- Suppressed or unhealthy conflict
- Lack of external focus
- Poor results
- Untapped team and organisational potential
- Great team ready to go further

The Results

The transformational outcomes of the Fearless Leadership® program are game-changing:

- **Aligned and clear:** Your team's agreed and shared purpose aligns with organisational purpose. The team works as one.
- **Shared vision:** There's clarity on the organisation you want to be and what you stand for.
- **Motivational map:** Through motivational profiling, team members have increased self and group awareness, and emotional intelligence so they can use to leverage their collective wisdom.
- **Communication that builds not bruises:** Your team is equipped to constructively surface and address underlying tensions.
- **Decisions made and honoured:** Team decisions are confidently and robustly debated, then committed to and upheld by the entire team – regardless of initial dissension between individuals.
- **Accountability:** Team members hold themselves and each other accountable for individual and collective outcomes.
- **Courageous culture:** Your leadership team models the Fearless dynamic needed for success. Inappropriate or incongruent behaviour is challenged and addressed in real time.
- **Confidence and safety:** Trust & support across the team creates an enhanced appetite for innovation and risk.
- **Respect for diversity** in decision-making, personal styles and professional expertise. Inclusion that generates results.
- **Open, supportive and vigorous dialogue:** Necessary for better decisions and innovative contemporary solutions.
- **External awareness:** Tuned into external context and abreast of strategic opportunities and threats.
- **Organisational success f**lows from a leadership team that connects deeply, leads fearlessly and delivers transformational results

Fearless Leadership® – are you ready?

Profile - Corrinne Armour

Fearless Leadership - Untapped potential. The courageous shift to engage in essential conversations that build trust and move us forward.

Corrinne is Australia's leading thinker in Fearless Leadership. Through 10 years in corporate leadership roles, 2½ years living and teaching in the jungle on the edge of a warzone, and over 15 years in and out of board rooms working with senior leaders, she's gained much to share about leadership.

A well-recognised instigator of change and growth, she empowers leaders to realise the potential in their careers, teams and organisations. Corrinne draws on experience in the corporate world heading large teams and projects with budgets in excess of $80 million. She knows, firsthand, the practicalities of juggling multiple priorities and perspectives.

Additional to a science degree and postgraduate business qualifications are her impressive accomplishments as a registered Project Manager with the Australian Institute of Project Management, an accredited Professional Certified Coach with the International Coaching Federation, and a certified Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Practitioner. In 2022, inspired by a 2019 program onsite at Harvard University, Corrinne completed Case In Point accreditation, a facilitation approach developed at Harvard.

Living and working in a jungle refugee camp gave Corrinne powerful insights into Fearless Leadership and an active passion to enable others to fulfill their potential. Married to an ex-freedom fighter and mother of two daughters, she appreciates the importance of balance in a team.

Corrinne is a dynamic speaker and influencer, with a natural ability to inspire.

Empathic, honest and results-focused, Corrinne helps you leverage your team's diversity and collective brilliance to establish a leading edge that carves out your organisation from its competitors. Her Fearless Leadership framework is innovative and trusted, informed by positive psychology and underpinned by Neuroscience.

Renowned names attest to the success of her approach including Royal Children's Hospital, Bank Australia, DEWLP, Worksafe, NAB, Alfred Health, Moyne Health Service, Gippsland Water, Dulux Group, Pitcher Partners, Griffith and Monash Universities, numerous local councils and may others.

Author of *Leaders Who Ask: Building Fearless Cultures by telling less and asking more.* Co-author of *Developing Direct Reports: Taking the Guesswork Out of Leading Leaders* and two specialist texts in human behaviour used by coaches and consultants worldwide.

Get in touch

Get in touch by contacting Jacinta Culibrk, Corrinne's Relationship Manager

📞 +61 403 214 443

✉ hello@corrinnearmour.com

🌐 corrinnearmour.com

🌐 corrinnespeaks.com

Connect with Corrinne

in http://au.linkedin.com/in/CorrinneArmour

References

Australia on a Path to Polarisation: Edelman Trust Barometer 2023 2023, https://www.edelman.com.au/australia-path-polarisation-edelman-trust-barometer-2023.

Botsman, R 2017, *Who Can You Trust?: How Technology Brought Us Together and Why It Might Drive Us Apart*, Hachette UK.

Brown, B 2016, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, Penguin Life.

Covey, SR & Merrill, RR 2012, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, Free Press.

Coyle, D 2019, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, Random House Business.

De Jong, BA, Dirks, KT & Gillespie, N 2016, "Trust and Team Performance: A Meta-Analysis of Main Effects, Moderators and Covariates," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101(8):1134–1150.

Feltman, C 2021, *The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work*, Thin Book Publishing Co.

Frei, FX & Morriss, A 2020, *Everything Starts with Trust: The First Step To Becoming A Genuinely Empowering Leader*, https://hbr.org/2020/05/begin-with-trust.

Maister, DH, Galford, RM & Green, CH 2021, *The Trusted Advisor* 20th Anniversary Edition., Free Press.

Scott, S 2002, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, Piatkus Books.

Seuss 2004, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, HarperCollins UK.

Sull, D, Sull, C, Cipolli, W & Brightenti, C 2022, *Why Every Leader Needs to Worry About Toxic Culture*, https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-every-leader-needs-to-worry-about-toxic-culture/.

Zak, PJ 2017, *The Neuroscience of Trust: Management Behaviors that Foster Employee Engagement*, https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust.