

The Foundation and the Fault Line.

Trust gives grounding. It can also mire the team.

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Many team offsites claim the same ambition: build trust. A facilitator asks the room to fall backward into a colleague's arms, or a survey asks employees to rate how much they trust their leadership out of ten. These exercises are somewhat illustrative. They tend however to ingrain and reduce trust as an objective and a measure.

What organisations measure becomes what people optimise. And while we concentrate on optimising the tool we often lose sight of the outcome sought in the first place. This is how trust has become a dangerous buzzword.

Trust is not the finish line. It is the opening move toward an uncertain horizon.

The real question for leaders is therefore not whether their teams trust one another. It is what that trust enables them to do, and what becomes dangerous when trust goes unchallenged.

TRUST COMMANDS HARD FEELINGS

Ask what a trust score is meant to buy an organisation, and the list is most likely about: candour when something is going wrong, delegation without the leader re-checking every decision, speed under pressure, and the resilience to recover after a real setback. They are important team assets that failing organisations lack. But their connection with trust is only partial and often misleading.

Philosopher Annette Baier drew a distinction worth keeping close here: reliance and trust are not the same thing. We rely on a train timetable or a supplier's delivery date. If either fails, we are disappointed. Trust is different. It exposes something more personal: trust implies having accepted vulnerability. And if a colleague leverages weaknesses against us, it breaks trust. Being disappointed and being betrayed do not feel the same, so reliance and trust should first be distinguished at this emotional level. Hard facts are not hard feelings.

This distinction resolves a lot of workplace confusion. Most of what gets labelled a 'trust problem' on a team is a reliance problem: a task that slips, a decision reversed without warning. These can be solved in a rather cartesian manner with clearer commitments and better follow-through. Trust, in

such cases, is the wrong topic to tackle. Treating an execution problem as a psychological problem, and vice versa, can waste considerable management energy.

Fixing reliance issues may address trust in the process. It won't necessarily improve trust in people.

Patrick Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* put trust (the trust in people) exactly where this argument needs it: at the base of a pyramid, not the top. The summit of his model is results. Trust, in his account, is not the prize but the precondition for something harder and less comfortable: honest conflict. A team only earns the label if its members can admit a mistake or ask for help without the admission being used against them later.

Organisational trust is then indissociable from a set of perceptions. In practice, we must accept that people sense whether a leader is safe, coherent and aligned before they necessarily articulate why in any rational way. It is then important, when addressing trust, to start with how it is felt rather than rushing to attach words and dashboards to it. Then only, simple selected models and progressive rationalisation help framing where improvement can be targeted. The model of Mayer, Davis and Schoorman names three perceptions: ability, benevolence, and integrity. In other words: Can you do the job? Do you care about my interests? Will you behave according to principles I consider acceptable?

Harnessing trust then starts by recognising it as a means rather than an end, an emotional surge rather than a measured response, and a prevalence of integrity over other values. But things cannot be improved when trust remains a wish list of vague associations. So let's unpack what gravitates around the topic.

THE FALSE FRIENDS OF TRUST

Trust gets used interchangeably with words that are related but each asks something different of us.

Leadership teams often attempt to repair trust by investing in behaviours that are valuable but insufficient: better listening, more empathy, greater openness or tolerance of disagreement. These may improve the climate. They do not necessarily make people willing to become vulnerable.

Tolerance asks us to coexist with a view we do not share. It requires nothing about the other person's inner life. We can tolerate a colleague indefinitely without ever wondering what they actually think.

Open-mindedness is not about the other person at all. It is a stance toward our own certainty: a willingness to revise what we believe when the evidence asks us to. It can happen entirely alone, with no other person in the room.

Empathy is the accurate reading of someone else's internal state and it is available even where trust is not. We can empathise precisely with a competitor or a difficult stakeholder without extending them an ounce of trust.

Trust is the only one of the list that asks us to accept exposure. It is the costliest word on the list. And it is the one most directly contributing to building a self-improvement dynamic within a team. Indeed, vulnerability is the true call for collaboration and for change.

But still, most trust-building exercises optimise for the wrong end of the spectrum. Too often, when trust is lagging, the conversation shifts to revisiting peripheral soft skills and then misses the core issue. Ingrained fears are the real concern. Trust can exist only when the context is perceived as safe.

Confusing the terms is not only semantic clumsiness. It is why so many initiatives score well and still cannot deliver sustained performance.

Exposure and integrity are giving us a good compass to pinpoint where trust sits relatively to tolerance, open-mindedness, empathy, and competence.

Competence further blurs the game. Indeed, in the quest for performance, we naturally tend to allocate our 'supposed trust' to competent individuals. Obviously, establishing a minimum competence threshold is a prerequisite to seeding trust and relevance as a team member. However, Navy SEAL Commander Rich Diviney warns us that competence and trust should absolutely be kept distinct for accurate judgement and effective individual development. His model reveals that high-competence / low-trust individuals are in fact toxic and detrimental to medium-term performance. Never let visible competence blind you to invisible relational risk. The danger is that individual competence can be made brightly visible in the short term while trustworthiness is more subtle to grasp. It may not be grasped at all in metrics-driven cultures. This is where damage to collective performance is often invisible until much later.

One of leadership's most expensive blind spots: tolerating destructive behaviour because the individual continues to deliver visible results.

Diviney's model (then popularised by Simon Sinek) clarifies the divide by, on the one hand, linking performance with the battlefield moment (i.e. shoots well) and by, on the other hand, linking trustworthiness with the integrity at the camp (i.e. behaves well).

Ought to be rare, fragile and precious, trust is essential. Think of a team where trust finally emerges after having established and sustained long enough an environment where fears are acknowledged and where toxic behaviours are addressed. Should leadership congratulate itself on such solid ground? Yes, but a deeper threat is systematically lurking. It is a fault line below the foundation. Indeed, trust, once granted, changes what a group is capable of noticing — and not always for the better.

Irving Janis coined the term *groupthink* after studying military decisions where a room of genuinely capable people converged on a plan that failed in contact with reality. His finding runs against instinct: the failure was not caused by distrust or infighting. It was produced by unusual cohesion. When a group trusts itself enough, dissent starts to feel like disloyalty before anyone consciously decides to suppress it. Then the appetite to stress-test a plan gradually disappears along with the discomfort that would have caught the flaw.

A parallel risk sits at the level of a single trusted source. When one voice (a loyal lieutenant, a favourite dashboard, a founder's read of the market) becomes the account a team defers to, a wide reality gets compressed into one comfortable narrative. The voice is rarely dishonest, but trust tends to remove the friction that would otherwise prompt a second opinion.

None of this is an argument for caution over action. Being careful with the word trust and withholding a label is not withholding a chance. Action must be driven by sequence and method.

Elixir's programmes address this through structured autonomy. People are given genuine latitude to act, while a short backbrief confirms that they understand the intent rather than merely the instructions. The same principle applies collectively: diverse perspectives must be deliberately created before a group converges. (see our articles on the *lead-2-motion* concept and on the *sensory-tribe* concept).

Some situations call for evidence before belief. Others call for belief before the evidence exists because waiting for proof would have meant the chance never arrived at all. The difference lies in the conditions around the bet, not in the courage of the person making it and not in the trust we place in one voice over another. What is needed instead is the judgement to know when diverging is the right call based on the fullest possible perception of the context (see our article on *critical thinking*). Trust, once established, needs such companion to allow *groupflow*. A key condition for adaptive teams. A remedy to *groupthink*.

Trust enables action. But perception protects action from becoming collective blindness.

We were hoping trust would lead to sustained performance and tangible results. It can. Trust gives a team the grounding to act, delegate, recover and take intelligent risks.

But trust alone is not enough. Left vague or unchecked, it can narrow what a group is willing to question and eventually what it is capable of seeing.

The leadership task is therefore to build trust while preserving divergence, challenge and the richness of collective perception. Trust provides the foundation. Perception prevents the foundation from becoming a fault line.

If you recognise your organisation in any of these elements, the next step is a conversation.

Discover the full discipline, including a whitepaper, programme descriptions, and the complete article series, at sensoryleadership.org

Contact Elixar at projects@elixar.eu

#SensoryLeadership #PerceptionBeforeStrategy #GroupFlow #DecisionQuality

About the Elixar services

Elixar is the sole provider of comprehensive Sensory Leadership programmes — delivered in-presence, anywhere in the world, in English, French, and Italian. Programmes range from the full Sensagy™ journey (24 hours, six modules, spanning sensory awareness, direction-setting, and execution) to the focused OlfaTeam™ format (10 hours, five modules, anchored in olfactory practice and project management application) to keynotes and half-day interventions in retreats and seminars.

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About the Founder of Elixar

Jeremy Leroux is a Managing Director and Strategy Advisor (Cert. MCI, California) with more than twenty years of international leadership experience in B2B industries spanning beverages, food ingredients, and pharmaceutical applications before deepening his practice into the world of perfumes (Cert. Olfactive Design, Politecnico di Milano). Having lived and worked across France, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Italy, he graduated in France as an Engineer and MSc in Food Processes and obtained an MBA in California. He founded Elixar on the conviction that sensory experience is and will be a foundation for the performance of humans and businesses.

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