



The Trust You're Not a Part Of:

Why the most important trust on your team may be the trust that has nothing to do with you.

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A few years ago, I began working with a senior leader (call him Mark) whose team looked, by most measures, like a success. His people respected him. They came to him readily, brought him their problems, and took his counsel seriously. If you had asked Mark whether he had a high-trust team, he would have said yes without hesitating, and for good reason.

But the team had been siloed for years. Not because people distrusted each other, exactly, and not because Mark was hoarding control; he wasn't. The real issue was more subtle. His people had come up through very different paths, with uneven histories of working shoulder-to-shoulder to solve hard problems. Some of them had built real trust with one another. Many of them hadn't and had never been given a reason to. So, when friction arose between two of them, they didn't work it out between themselves. They brought it to Mark. Each of them, in effect, lobbied him to intervene on their behalf, and Mark—capable, trusted, willing—obliged.

Here is the uncomfortable question this case raises, and it is the question this article is about: **What if the trust your people have in you is masking the trust they *don't* have in each other?**

The blind spot in how we think about trust

Most of what gets written about trust in leadership (including, rightly, the other articles in this collection) is about the vertical relationship: how you, the leader, earn the trust of the people who work for or with you. That work is foundational, and none of what follows is meant to diminish it. Being trustworthy is necessary.

But it is not sufficient. And when it comes to how a team actually performs, a great deal of what determines whether they succed is trust you are not a party to at all. It is the trust your people extend, or fail to extend, to *each other*.

This is easy to miss precisely because you can't see it from where you sit. You experience the trust people have in you directly, in every one-on-one and every hallway conversation. The trust they have in one another happens in rooms you're not in or fails to happen in silences you never hear. A leader can preside over a team of individuals who each trust the leader completely and trust one another hardly at all, and, from the center of it, feel that everything is fine.

Why high vertical trust can suppress lateral trust

It gets more counterintuitive still. In some cases, the very strength of a leader's relationships with their people can hold back the trust those people need to build with each other. There are two common versions of this, and they can operate separately or together.

The first is the one Mark's team didn't have but many teams do: **the leader is the preferred bridge.** When you are the most capable, most trusted person in the group, the most efficient path for everything (every question, every disagreement, every decision) runs through you. It feels like good leadership, and in the moment it often is. But if every connection on the team has to cross the same bridge, the members never build direct spans to one another. Your competence becomes a substitute for their relationships. And a team with only one bridge has a dangerous property. When that bridge is unavailable—you're traveling, you're pulled into a crisis, you leave—the team is suddenly stranded. Trust that runs through a single point isn't resilient; it's a single point of failure.

The second version is Mark's: **the trust was never deliberately built.** Here the leader isn't a bottleneck by ego or design; the lateral trust is simply thin because the people were never given enough shared, real work to build it. They have varying tenure, different arrival points, and no accumulated experience of relying on each other and finding that reliance rewarded. Left alone, this doesn't fix itself. People default to the safe move, which is to route around each other… through the leader.

Note that a team can have neither problem in the obvious sense (no tyrant at the hub, no obvious dysfunction) and still be starved of the lateral trust that performance depends on. That's what makes this so easy to overlook.

What the research says

The research is unusually clear for a topic this human. The most rigorous study is a large meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, which pooled 112 studies covering nearly 8,000 teams. Researchers found that trust among team members has a robust, above-average relationship with team performance[1]. Two findings matter especially for our purposes.

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First, that relationship held even after the researchers statistically accounted for how much the team trusted its leader[2], which means member-to-member trust is doing true, independent work that trust in the leader does not explain away. This is the empirical basis for a claim some researchers now make directly: when it comes to team performance, how much your people trust each other may matter as much as, or more than, how much they trust you.

Second, the effect was strongest on teams whose members were highly interdependent, teams whose work genuinely requires them to rely on one another. Which is to say that lateral trust matters most exactly where real teamwork is required: where team members are highly interdependent, and least where a "team" is really just a set of individuals reporting to the same boss.

It's worth adding the concept most people now associate with this territory: psychological safety, the shared sense on a team that it's safe to take interpersonal risks, admit a mistake, ask an obvious question, or raise a hard problem without being punished for it. When Google set out to discover what made its most effective teams effective, psychological safety was the factor that rose to the top.[3] That study was observational (it shows association, not proof of cause) so we shouldn't rely too heavily on it. But it points in the same direction as everything else: what most determines a team's effectiveness is less *who* is on the team than *how the members relate to one another.*

[1] Bart A. de Jong, Kurt T. Dirks, and Nicole Gillespie, "Trust and Team Performance: A Meta-Analysis of Main Effects, Moderators, and Covariates," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 101, no. 8 (2016): 1134–1150. The pooled sample was 112 studies / 7,763 teams; intrateam trust showed an above-average relationship with performance (ρ = .30) that held after controlling for team trust in the leader, and was stronger under high task interdependence.

[2] For the broader "trust in the leader" literature this contrasts with, see Kurt T. Dirks and Donald L. Ferrin, "Trust in Leadership: Meta-Analytic Findings and Implications for Research and Practice," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87, no. 4 (2002): 611–628.

[3] The construct originates with Amy C. Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," Administrative Science Quarterly 44, no. 2 (1999): 350–383. Google's Project Aristotle identified it as the most important of five dynamics of its effective teams; see Google re:Work, "Understand Team Effectiveness." Note that Project Aristotle was observational and identifies association rather than proving causation.

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Why this matters most at the top

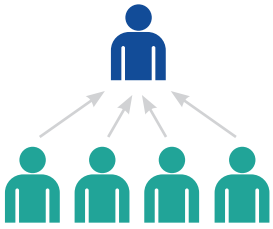
This trust gap exists on teams of every kind. It shows up most consequentially, and most invisibly, on executive teams, which is precisely where we at Bell Leadership tend to spend a lot of our time, and where the stakes are highest.

Executive teams are unusually prone to the single-bridge problem for a structural reason. Each member arrives as the leader of their own function or region, carrying a natural loyalty downward, to their own people, and often a natural rivalry sideways, toward peers competing for resources and standing. The one relationship each of them is sure to invest in is the one upward, to the chief executive. The predictable result is a top team where every spoke trusts the hub and the spokes barely know one another. And because the rest of the organization takes its cues from the top, a fragmented executive team reproduces a fragmented company beneath it.

The correction is a shift in how each executive understands the job. **A senior leader's first responsibility is not to their function, their region, or their number. It is to the enterprise as a whole and, concretely, to being a genuine peer to the other people at the table.** This is a defining part of what it means to be an executive. When members of a top team come to see "being a good teammate to my fellow executives" as part of the actual job rather than a nicety layered on top of it, the sideways trust starts to have somewhere to grow.

Both Types of Trust Matter

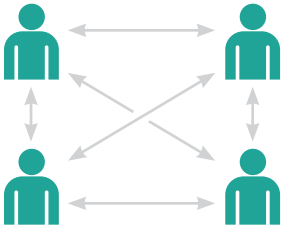
VERTICAL TRUST
Team to Leader
Provides a Critical Foundation



Your **team trusts you** for support, guidance, and decisions.

A team can trust their leader completely and *still* underperform if teammates don't trust *each other*.

LATERAL TRUST
Peer to Peer
Multiplies Team Performance



Your **team trusts and relies on each other** to share information, solve problems, and deliver results.

Build both. Lead both.

What the best teams do — and what *you* can do

If you go looking, the teams that have this right share an unmistakable signature. They have spent real, deliberate time together—not just transacting business, but learning together, wrestling with genuine challenges together, sometimes simply enjoying each other's company. The strongest ones I've watched came up through the ranks together over years, building relationships and even friendships along the way; others engineered on purpose what history didn't hand them. What they have in common is that the trust between members was built, not assumed. So, the practical question for any leader is: how do you build it on purpose?

- **Run the absence test.** Look back honestly at the last dozen significant problems or decisions on your team. How many got resolved between the people involved, and how many routed through you? Then ask the harder question: if you were unavailable for a month, how much of what your team accomplishes would still happen? The count is usually sobering, and it's the fastest way to see whether you've unwittingly become the only bridge.

- **Send them back to each other.** When one of your people comes to you with a frustration about a peer, the reflexive move of hearing them out, weighing in, and smoothing it over yourself may feel like leadership, but it quietly undermines the very trust you want to build. Every time you resolve it, you teach the team to route conflict through you. Often the more valuable response is a question: "Have you talked to her about this?" followed, where it helps, by bringing the two of them into the same room. You're not refusing to help. You're helping them build a span that doesn't cross your bridge.

- **Model the vulnerability you want them to show each other.** Lateral trust needs permission, and a team takes its cues on what's safe from watching the leader. When you name a mistake of your own, or say plainly, "I don't know," in front of the team, you lower the cost of everyone else doing the same with one another. Mark's turning point came, in part, when he acknowledged to the group that he'd gotten an important call wrong, and, without quite announcing it, gave everyone else permission to be that honest, too.



- **Create the conditions for peer trust to build.** Trust between people grows out of shared, somewhat consequential experience, and on most teams that experience won't happen on its own; you have to design it in. Give two people who don't naturally connect a real problem to own together. Rotate who runs the meeting so that the same voices don't dominate. Structure the work so people depend on one another rather than only on you.

And then there's the fuller version of that final principle, which I'll offer as a recommendation rather than a technique, because I've watched it work too many times to leave it out:

- **Bring your team together, genuinely together, on a recurring basis, for more than status updates.** The teams I've seen build the deepest trust invest in real time with one another: gathering in person, learning something new as a group, adding tools to their shared toolkit, and putting those tools to work on the actual business challenges they face. The learning matters, but so does the being-together in sharing meals, solving hard problems side by side, and discovering that the person from the other function is someone they'd choose to rely on. That combination of time, shared learning, and real work, repeated, does something no amount of one-on-one leadership can. It builds the web of trust that holds when you're not in the room. Which is, in the end, the whole point. The question worth carrying out of this isn't the one most leaders instinctively ask: Do my people trust me? The better question, the one that in fact predicts what your team can accomplish, is quieter and harder to answer: **When I'm not in the room, do they trust each other?**

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