

How to create a team climate where everyone says what they're really thinking and feeling

If you and your teammates are to gain the habit of saying what you really think and feel when you work together, you need to build an atmosphere of trust.

However, I've noticed a common misconception: many people think the sole key to team trust is psychological safety; that is, making it easy for team members to open up without feeling they are risking criticism or embarrassment by saying what's on their minds. While I agree psychological safety is a big part of team trust, there's another key. It's also about having faith in your teammates' motives – that what they say is what they mean, that they'll follow through on their promises.

For that reason, I believe there are three action keys to building trust in the team: agreeing your number one goal, joint accountability and openness behaviour.

Number one goal

Defining a unifying, galvanising motivating purpose creates the platform for trust building. If you haven't all centred your efforts around one main aim, it's harder to build trust. If you all have different goals, how can anyone trust anyone?

You need to define your number one goal in the coming period. This goal is *the most important thing the team must achieve within the next 3-12 months*. It's the one goal that, more than any other, defines success or failure to everyone in your team.

So how do you define that goal? Here are six steps to follow:

1. Together, draw up a shortlist of the issues, problems, challenges or opportunities facing your team. Decide which one should be your main focus.
2. Reframe the issue, challenge or opportunity as your team's number one goal, expressed as a stirring theme with a deadline (no more than 12 months). By "stirring theme," I mean a rallying cry around your top challenge. Expressing your number one goal as a theme arouses energy, commitment and unity because (a) it reflects the key issue facing your group (b) it uses emotional language, not dull management jargon and (c) it's time-limited, meaning it evokes a sense of urgency.
3. Decide what metrics you'll use to tell whether you've succeeded in achieving the number one goal ... or are on the way to succeeding. Keep it simple – no more than three metrics.
4. Set targets and deadlines for each metric.
5. Create a one-page scoreboard showing the number one goal, metrics, targets and deadlines.
6. Now make it your focus whenever you meet. That way, the number one goal and its supporting metrics and targets remain front and centre of everything you do.

Joint accountability

Joint accountability, like a coin, has two sides.

The first is the ethos that "we succeed, or we fail as a team." This means all members see themselves as jointly accountable for the whole team's results. You're all in it together.

The second is accepting responsibility for your part while holding your colleagues responsible for theirs. This means being ready to challenge underperforming teammates to achieve better results without waiting for the leader to intervene.

The first aspect means the second doesn't degenerate into finger-pointing and blaming. The members simply don't allow scapegoating. Instead, they generate – usually silent – powerful peer pressure for high performance. When that's not enough, you'll see teammates sometimes giving tough feedback on the run.

However, it's possible to practise giving such criticism without causing offence.

What has joint accountability got to do with trust?

Joint accountability – both the mindset behind it and the behaviour it spawns – builds the feeling that you can depend on your colleagues to do what they said they'd do – and do it well. Can you see the symbiotic relationship between trust and accountability? One depends on the other, so in practice you'll work on them simultaneously.

Openness behaviour

The third piece concerns openness behaviour and here psychological safety makes its entrance.

You have to work on team members' readiness to open up, to say what's really on their minds, and learn from colleagues' reactions to trust that they won't be exposed to criticism, hostility, mockery or embarrassment if they air concerns, ask questions, offer new ideas or admit mistakes. In other words, they'll be safe.

This is where team leaders' behaviour is so important. Their behaviour has more effect on psychological safety than any other factor in my experience, which is why they need to model the way. Here are eight suggestions for team leaders that worked well in promoting openness in teams I've coached:

1. Work on your own inner psychological safety, perhaps with an executive coach. Of the eight suggestions, this is the master key as you won't apply the other seven consistently if you don't feel psychologically safe. That is, if powerful subconscious beliefs and the fears they create have you in their grip. You'll perhaps grasp the idea of "psychological safety" intellectually and talk about it eloquently, but under pressure you won't project it. Why? Because inside you still feel psychological danger. The three most common beliefs I've noticed while coaching teams are:

"I'm not good enough, I'm bound to fail or make mistakes or not know the answer, and when that happens it will be humiliating."

"I'm insignificant, no one really cares what I have to say even though, officially, I'm the leader, so they'll only ignore or dismiss my input, which will feel devastating."

I'm not a likeable person so it's dangerous to reveal too much of myself because then they'll see who I really am and reject me, which is too painful to contemplate."

These beliefs and their fears drive leaders to engage in what we call defensive behaviours, which will almost certainly increase a feeling of psychological risk among your teammates. For example, they can lead you to criticise and blame your teammates, which will only drive them into their shells. So, by letting go of these beliefs and freeing up your behaviour, you'll start to set the right example.

2. Don't allow behind-closed-doors decision-making. It needs to be out in the open, with everyone included. Show interest. Be present when you're listening. For example, don't let yourself be distracted, don't fiddle with your mobile or laptop, make eye contact.
3. Don't assume you've always understood what others mean before you comment. Try playing back what they've said to confirm you've heard and grasped their point before you make yours.
4. Unless you've already established a strong rapport, avoid questions starting with "why" so the other person doesn't receive it as an attack or an attempt to blame. "Why" questions often put people on the defensive, meaning you don't get to the core answers you need. Turn them into questions starting with "What...?"
5. Pay attention to your body language, especially your facial expressions, to make sure you're not grimacing, scowling or frowning, thus making people wary of saying something.
6. Invite people to challenge your perspective and push back on your assumptions, opinions or inferences.
7. Scan the room, notice who is and isn't talking, and invite silent or low-profile members to say what they're thinking or feeling.
8. Show the real vulnerable or playful "you" by admitting when you don't know the answer, or you've made a mistake, or by offering crazy ideas in creative sessions

But it's not all down to the leader. Every team member can contribute and it's why conscious practice is helpful.

You can find useful exercises on the internet, many of which focus on members revealing their personal histories. However, I've found it's insufficient for people to share their stories. Yes, it helps, but it's not enough. I recommend that your openness-building exercises include questions touching on (1) team members' sense of belonging or added-value – or lack of it – in the team and (2) their relationships with teammates.

James Scouller is an executive coach and author of the trilogy, *How To Build Winning Teams Again And Again*. The three-part series will be available on Amazon and all other major bookstores.

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Article by JAMES SCOULLER