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You Can't Be a Great Leader Without Trust. Here's How You Build It

This article is by [David Horsager](#), author of *The Trust Edge: How Top Leaders Gain Faster Results, Deeper Relationships, and a Stronger Bottom Line*.

Among all the attributes of the greatest leaders of our time, one stands above the rest: They are all highly trusted. You can have a compelling vision, rock-solid strategy, excellent communication skills, innovative insight, and a skilled team, but if people don't trust you, you will never get the results you want. Leaders who inspire trust garner better output, morale, retention, innovation, loyalty, and revenue, while mistrust fosters skepticism, frustration, low productivity, lost sales, and turnover. Trust affects a leader's impact and the company's bottom line more than any other single thing.



One of the biggest mistakes a leader can make is to assume that others trust him simply by virtue of his title. Trust is not a benefit that comes packaged with the nameplate on your door. It must be earned, and it takes time. As a leader, you are trusted only to the degree that people believe in your ability, consistency, integrity, and commitment to deliver. The good news is that you can earn trust over time, by building and maintaining eight key strengths:

- **Clarity:** *People trust the clear and mistrust or distrust the ambiguous.* Be clear about your mission, purpose, expectations, and daily activities. When a leader is clear about expectations, she will likely get what she wants. When we are clear about priorities on a daily basis, we become productive and effective.
- **Compassion:** *People put faith in those who care beyond themselves.* Think beyond yourself, and never underestimate the power of sincerely caring about another person. People are often skeptical about whether someone really has their best interests in mind. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is not just an old saying. It is a bottom-line truth. Follow it, and you will build trust.
- **Character:** *People notice those who do what is right ahead of what is easy.* Leaders who have built this pillar consistently do what needs to be done when it needs to be done, whether they feel like doing it or not. It is the work of life to

do what is right rather than what is easy.

- **Contribution:** *Few things build trust quicker than actual results.* At the end of the day, people need to see outcomes. You can have compassion and character, but without the results you promised, people won't trust you. Be a contributor who delivers real results.
- **Competency:** *People have confidence in those who stay fresh, relevant, and capable.* The humble and teachable person keeps learning new ways of doing things and stays current on ideas and trends. According to one study, the key competency of a successful new MBA is not a specific skill but rather the ability to learn amid chaos. Arrogance and a "been there done that" attitude prevent you from growing, and they compromise others' confidence in you. There is always more to learn, so make a habit of reading, learning, and listening to fresh information.
- **Connection:** *People want to follow, buy from, and be around friends—and having friends is all about building connections.* Trust is all about relationships, and relationships are best built by establishing genuine connection. Ask questions, listen, and above all, show gratitude—it's the primary trait of truly talented connectors. Grateful people are not entitled, they do not complain, and they do not gossip. Develop the trait of gratitude, and you will be a magnet.
- **Commitment:** *People believe in those who stand through adversity.* People trusted General Patton, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Jesus, and George [Washington](#) because they saw commitment and sacrifice for the greater good. Commitment builds trust.
- **Consistency:** *In every area of life, it's the little things—done consistently—that make the big difference.* If I am overweight, it is because I have eaten too many calories over time, not because I ate too much yesterday. It is the same in business. The little things done consistently make for a higher level of trust and better results. The great leaders consistently do the small but most important things first. They make that call and write that thank you note. Do the little things, consistently.

Trust can't be built overnight. It requires time, effort, diligence, and character. Inspiring trust is not slick or easy to fake. Trust is like a forest. It takes a long time to grow and can burn down with a just touch of carelessness. But if you focus on these eight components with every action, you will foster trusted relationships—whether with employees, customers, suppliers, or fellow leaders—that will drive results and the bottom line.

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