TRUST Framework

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Introduction

Welcome to the TRUST Framework community! We hope you find this framework for establishing and managing trust in your organisation insightful and practical. If you have any questions or comments, just use the links you'll find in the 'Joining the Community' section.

Getting started

If you are new to the TRUST framework, start by reading the framework, beginning with **Axiom 0**. If you already have a good grasp of trust principles and why establishing a model of trust is important, then you can skip to the second half of this document, which provides practical guidance on implementing the framework in your organisation and a playbook that describes specific techniques for applying the framework.

Why do we trust people and organisations?

Most of us want to trust people and organisations because it makes work more efficient and enjoyable.

Trusting is a very 'human' thing to do - our community, society, and culture is built on trust relationships. In the Dark Ages, tribalism and a lack of trust produced closed societies that advanced slowly, with no free exchange of ideas, goods and services. Clearly, a world without trust would not be a world most of us would like to live in.

In our day to day lives we trust many institutions, such as the international postal system, airline safety and contactless payments, just to name a few. Trusted food safety standards means we can shop without fear of food-borne illnesses like salmonella and having these standards allow efficient production and free trade across borders, meaning lower costs for consumers.

Consider the next time you visit a store and use a self-serve checkout; see how you simply tapped your phone on a screen and walked out of the store with your items - and nobody

gets upset. The merchant does not worry that they will not get paid and you don't worry that your account will be incorrectly debited. This is just one example of the power of trust in shaping an efficient and enjoyable society.

Trust also promotes freedom and liberty for its participants. When a party is trusted, it gives them the freedom to live and work in ways that they find are most in-line with their preferred ways of working and the task at hand.

Why the TRUST Framework?

Axiom 0

To use this framework you must accept the following axiom: **maximising trust throughout the organisation, in all directions, creates a more efficient and happier working environment, resulting in higher value creation for the organisation and its stakeholders.**

Agile frameworks implicitly build trust

Agile is extremely good at encouraging people to adopt methods that build trust, without explicitly identifying 'building trust' as a goal. While this framework has its roots in Agile development methodologies, it has been designed to make trust-building an explicit part of any process.

When we make trust an explicit goal, it becomes easier to ensure that processes are applied in ways that build and support trust, rather than reducing trust.

For example, sharing the information people need to do their jobs (transparency) is helpful in a high trust environment. However, in a low trust environment, transparency could be used defensively as people try to cover themselves.

Examples of Agile concepts in high and low trust environments

	High trust	**Low trust**
Transparency	Sharing a roadmap with your team so they can be part of the decision making process from the start.	Delivering a status report that nobody reads, to cover yourself.
Collaboration	Entering the collaboration with vulnerability and an expectation to learn and adapt.	Entering the collaboration to validate your current understanding.

| Feedback	High frequency, with the aim to improve. Able to act on data, even if it's negative.	Cherry picked to validate the existing approach.
Change as an expectation	Environment created to facilitate change, where doing the right thing, based on your current information, is the expectation.	Change is seen as a deviation from the plan.

Why do we need a TRUST Framework?

Existing frameworks don't address trust as a first-class citizen when it comes to establishing culture, team formation and delivering outcomes. This framework aims to make *implicit* trust building *explicit*.

Many teams fail to adopt Agile delivery practices because they don't have, and aren't moving towards, a high trust environment. In fact, teams might need multiple approaches, as projects progress and levels of trust change. For example, it's common for teams working in low-trust environments to use highly structured Agile frameworks, which allow trust to be built over time. However, as the environment changes and trust increases, the structure can be removed and the team may adopt a more Lean approach.

This shows why it's important to understand how Agile approaches can be adapted and applied at different stages of maturity.

The Trust Model
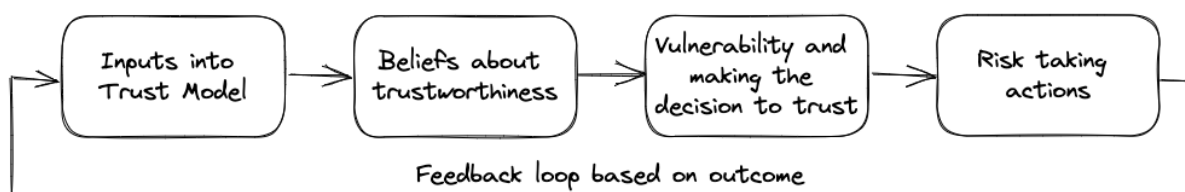
[*Source: Graham Dietz (2011) Going back to the source: Why do people trust each other?, Journal of Trust Research, 1:2, 215-222, DOI: 10.1080/21515581.2011.603514*]

The simplified trust model diagram above, based on the paper by Graham Dietz, outlines the input, process and outputs of the trust process cycle.

Inputs

- **Trustor's pre-disposition to trust**: all parties enter a new relationship with varying levels of trust.

- **Trustee's character, motive, abilities, behaviours**: these traits must be considered when entering into a new relationship.
- **Nature of the trustee-trustor relationship**: the level of trust in a relationship will depend on things like the historical relationship and power dynamics between trustees. For example, a partnership will often have a different trust dynamic than a supplier-customer relationship.
- **Situational influences (institutions, culture, role and reputation):** the implicit trust that is built up by organisations through constraints and organisational practices which are reflected in relationships when people come from that organisation.
- **Domain-specific concerns:** working in a national security context will likely bring about different concerns than creating a marketing website in the retail sector.

Process

- **Evaluating trustworthiness:** What confident, positive expectations do you have, based on the ability, benevolence and integrity of the other party?
- **Deciding to trust:** How will you evaluate the risks and consequences, and demonstrate a willingness to to be vulnerable and take action?
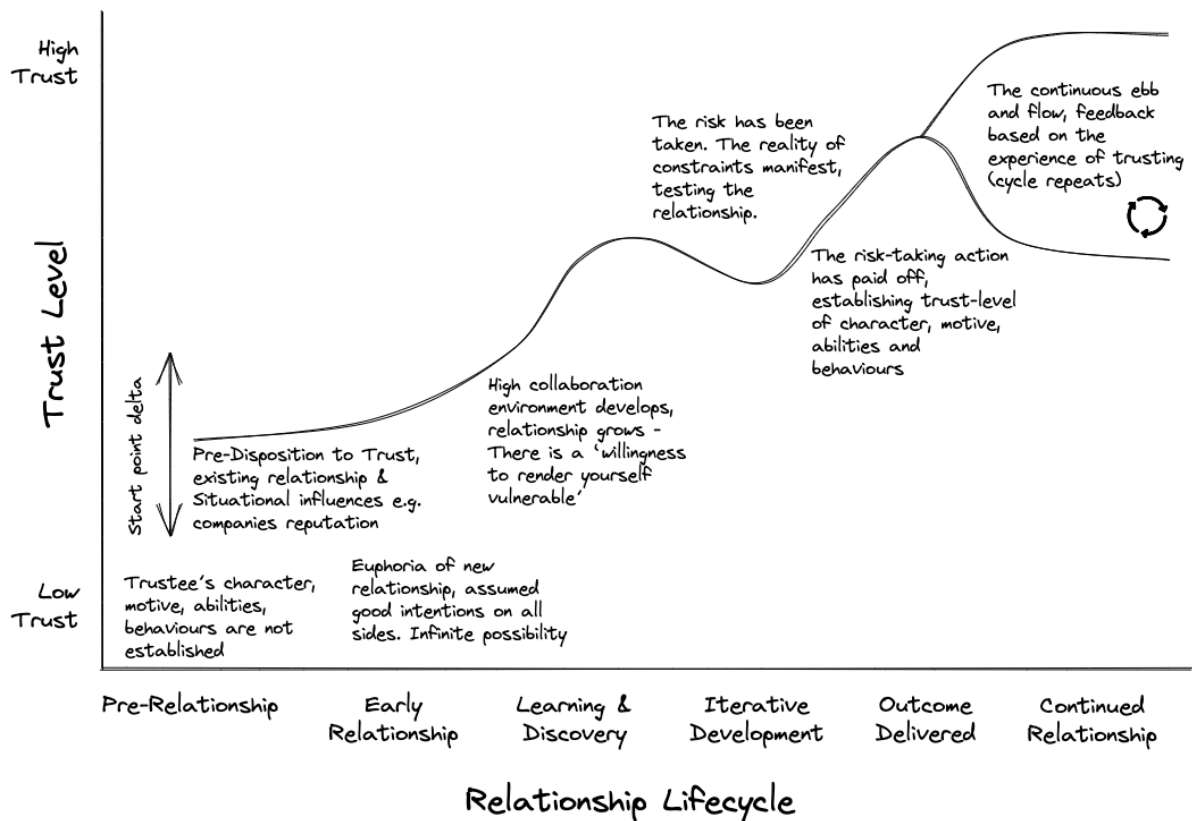
Output

- **A risk-taking action:** this could mean starting a new project, making a decision to go forward, signing a contract, etc.

Feedback loop

- The actions taken in a relationship create new inputs into a relationship, especially around pre-disposition to trust. Over time, our level of trust in a relationship is increasingly defined by past actions and outcomes.

The impact of trust on the relationship lifecycle

Working relationships go through different stages of trust as they mature.

The chart plots *Trust Level* (from *Low Trust* to *High Trust*) against the *Relationship Lifecycle* stages: Pre-Relationship, Early Relationship, Learning & Discovery, Iterative Development, Outcome Delivered, Continued Relationship.

Annotations on the chart:
- Start point delta
- Pre-Disposition to Trust, existing relationship & Situational influences e.g. companies reputation
- Trustee's character, motive, abilities, behaviours are not established
- Euphoria of new relationship, assumed good intentions on all sides. Infinite possibility
- High collaboration environment develops, relationship grows – There is a 'willingness to render yourself vulnerable'
- The risk has been taken. The reality of constraints manifest, testing the relationship.
- The risk-taking action has paid off, establishing trust-level of character, motive, abilities and behaviours
- The continuous ebb and flow, feedback based on the experience of trusting (cycle repeats)

Stage	Definition	Trust Multipliers
Pre-Relationship	Have little information about the team or organisation that will perform delivery.	Establish credibility
Early Relationship	Establishing a superficial relationship through demonstration of previous actions.	Establish mutual respect, assume and foster good intentions. Do not prejudge or pre-limit the relationship
Learning & Discovery	Establishing a common and deep understanding of goals, scope, approach, constraints, risks and success measures. Establishing real human relationships.	Strive to have a deep understanding of the shared problem to be solved and be honest and realistic about the risks and ability to deliver. Use Active Listening techniques to aid understanding without prejudice. Be clear about the risk-taking action. Talk about trust as a specific thing.
Iterative Relationship Development	The cyclic delivery of the proposed solution.	Establish multiple touch points to demonstrate work and show progress. May include: ● Daily Stand Up ● Retrospectives ● Showcases

		Active management of trust. Escalate risks and issues. Share bad news early and ongoing trust management.
Outcome delivered	First opportunity for potential value to be realised.	Well considered, smooth execution. Deliver upon commitments. Early feedback throughout helps build trust.
Continuous Relationship Development	Continued opportunity for improvement and value delivery (repeating the cycle)	Building upon existing relationship to reach higher levels of trust.

The relationship cycle repeats, so that the positive and negative outcomes realised in the previous cycle feed into the starting point delta of the pre/early relationship.

Building High Trust Environments

Given what we know about the inputs into the trust model, how do we create and build high trust environments?

Establishing a trust culture

The root of a high-trust environment is culture. Therefore, building a high-trust environment requires you to establish and maintain a trust culture. A trust culture means that people within a team or organisation adopt an expected set of values, behaviours and attitudes that build and demonstrate trust.

Having an active trust culture makes it easier to hire and establish teams that value trust, but how do you create a trust culture?

A good place to start is building trust into your operating model, which will feed through into ways of working. Leaders should be clear about the importance of trust in the organisation, setting priorities and budgets accordingly.

When embarking on a new relationship, look for opportunities to build goodwill early in the relationship – this is a great investment for the long term.

Finally, establish a no-blame culture. Give genuine autonomy to your teams, and be authentic in giving and receiving feedback.

Adult-Adult relationships

An Adult-Adult relationship (vs an Adult-Child relationship) is a relationship where both parties treat each other with mutual respect, on equal terms. Establishing Adult-Adult relationships within organisations, teams and between 3rd parties promotes trust and gets away from the antipattern of the more 'command and control' style Adult-Child relationships.

Analyse and review your current relationships and question if they are Adult-Adult or Adult-Child. If they are Adult-Child, question how you can elevate the relationship to an Adult-Adult one. Setup new relationships in an Adult-Adult style.

Psychological safety

Another important element of trust is building a culture where people feel safe to be vulnerable and take risks in front of each other.

Psychological safety is about ensuring everyone feels safe to make suggestions or ask questions without worrying they will be seen as less competent or knowledgeable. When we feel safe in the workplace, we're more likely to admit mistakes, collaborate freely and take on new roles.

Recent [research](#) from Google suggests that people are less likely to leave companies with psychological safety, and they're more likely to be more effective, sharing more diverse ideas and driving greater revenue.

Useful exercises to build psychological safety include:

- **Make regular feedback a priority**. Encourage team members to speak up with feedback, including dissenting opinions. Ensure that when people give a differing opinion, they are listened to and feedback is provided in a positive and encouraging way. Be actively involved in meetings and practice giving immediate feedback to other people's ideas and opinions.
- **Get to know people.** When people know their team and feel comfortable around them, they are less likely to be afraid to speak up. Look for opportunities to build familiarity with teams, whether it's organising a Happy Hour or having regular lunchtime networking events.
- **Avoid blame.** Instead of focusing on what went wrong and who caused an issue, ask, "What have we learned, and how do we make sure this goes better next time?" It's about not singling out one person for a mistake, and focusing on positive outcomes of learning and improvement.
- **Make decisions collaboratively.** When making important decisions, ask the team for their input. Not only does this help people feel included, but it leads to psychological safety. Once the decision is made, make sure to explain to team members how their input was considered, and why the final decision was made. Your honesty and transparency will help build trust and psychological safety.
- **Be your team's cheerleader.** Look for opportunities to support and celebrate your team. This might mean encouraging their personal and professional development or looking for ways to showcase their great work to senior leaders in the organisation.

Vulnerability

When we talk about vulnerability in a professional relationship, we are referring to our willingness to risk potential consequences if one party doesn't deliver on its promises. When

a partner delivers late, it might have negative consequences such as increased costs or missed revenue.

What input factors decide how willing we are to trust someone and be vulnerable in a trust relationship?

Trustor's predisposition to trust: There's a virtuous circle of vulnerability in a trust relationship. If the trustee is willing to be vulnerable in one stage of a relationship, then the trustor is more likely to be vulnerable in the next stage, which enhances trust from the trustee (and so on).

Showing vulnerability increases the likelihood that someone else will trust you.

Nature of trustee-trustor relationship: This is especially relevant if one party is more senior than the other. If the more senior party in a trust relationship is able to show vulnerability, trust is more likely to be established.

Senior members showing vulnerability increases the likelihood that a trust culture can be established.

Vulnerability and personal values

At an individual level, being vulnerable and exposing your values to other team members greatly increases the overall level of trust in the team.

Trustee's character, motives, abilities, behaviours. When team members are clear about their Core and Flex values, it allows team members to see their character. Teams can then use this information as a basis to build mutual trust and respect.

Clarity of expectations and delivery against your commitments

When we're clear about the outcomes we want to achieve, it's more likely that our partners will deliver what we want. When we talk about outcomes, there are multiple opportunities and paths to delivery, while requirements present limited ways to meet expectations.

Being clear about what we want means that other parties don't have to fill in the blanks and make assumptions. This is critical because one of the most important factors in building trust is delivering against commitments. It can be achieved through the following inputs:

Trustee's character, motives, abilities, behaviours. It's important to develop the behaviour of clearly communicating your expectations to build trust. Ambiguity is a trust killer.

Upfront clarity is important, but it's worth noting that expectations are never static. Your planned work and estimates will be challenged as projects progress, so your expectations of outcomes should be adjusted accordingly.

Nature of the trustee-trustor relationship. When setting clear expectations, it's important to communicate the *meaning* of the work. This means explaining why you are undertaking this work, and what a successful outcome means to the organisation as a whole. When this is plainly stated, the team understands and can connect their contributions to the overall goal, thus enhancing the trust relationship.

Trust Management

Trust management is similar to quality - It's **everybody's** responsibility, and successful trust management is about **ACTIVELY** managing trust. This means that trust issues should be addressed as soon as they arise.

What are the concrete actions that you can take to establish, build and maintain trust in your organisation?

Establish trust

First impressions count and can have a disproportionate impact on the future of a trust relationship. For this reason, it's critical to pay attention to building trust at the outset of a new relationship, where your actions have the greatest potential to affect the outcome. We suggest paying a good deal of care and attention to building trust at this stage.

What can be done to better establish trust?

- Build a [high-trust environment](#) (see section above)
- Understand the problem to be solved, and listen genuinely with intent.
- Understand the culture of the organisation you will be working with.
- Be extra transparent, and solicit feedback early in the relationship.
- Make efforts to establish 1-1 relationships with coworkers and stakeholders
- Try to find common ground between different parties
- Start with an attitude of openness and don't assume you have all the answers; avoid defensive behaviours. Don't prejudge or pre-limit the relationship. Don't solutionise until you have a good grasp of the problems to be solved.
- Understand what motivates your stakeholders, get into their heads, develop empathy.
- Be aware of organisational politics, but avoid getting involved, where possible.
- When possible, show expertise and ability (e.g. working code, reference to past projects, paper prototype).
- In the case of a consultancy, demonstrate integrity through commercial agreements that have built-in checkpoints to evaluate expectations, such as giving both parties the opportunity to continue or end the relationship. Building in shorter notice periods can also be helpful.

Build and maintain trust

Once trust has been established, it's important to continuously assess ongoing trust levels, and continue working to build trust. Trust erodes over time, so simply maintaining a static level of trust is not enough. Teams need to deliberately and continuously amplify trust inputs.

When done well, this creates a trust flywheel, as the feedback loop of trust makes it easier to trust in the future so you're starting with a higher pre-disposition to trust.

What can be done to build and maintain trust?

- Operate in a transparent and collaborative manner.
- Be clear about the objectives, and any changes to previously agreed objectives.
- Establish an adult-adult relationship (as opposed to an adult-child). Work to be seen as equals in the relationship.
- Address trust-related issues as they arise. Do not let them grow into a bigger problem or ignore them, hoping they will go away.
- Be clear about your abilities and limitations.
- Deliver against your commitments.
- Actively discuss trust levels between groups and individuals. Solicit feedback on the current level of trust and ways trust can be improved on a regular basis.
- Solicit feedback on an individual level with team members and stakeholders.
- Acknowledge mistakes, and when others make them, reinforce a no-blame culture. Use the opportunity to learn and grow as a team.
- Use retrospectives to incrementally improve ways of working and to address trust issues as they arise.

Continuous investment in trust

Because improving trust positively affects the ability to deliver value, it's important to continuously invest in developing trust maturity in your organisation.

This may include setting aside a budget for trust-related activities, appointing trust-specific roles within your organisation and/or further developing aspects of a high-trust environment.

Review your trust-based investments on a regular basis to ensure they are adequate for your needs.

Long term relationships

To maintain trust over a long period of time, it's important not to take a relationship for granted. In many cases there will be turnover in people within organisations and the working environment, which can erode trusted relationships built over time. To address this, deliberately schedule checkpoints to review the relationship and acknowledge changes that have occurred, both within the relationship and external factors. You should hold frequent retrospectives to find opportunities to repair any trust gaps that might have occurred.

Roles and responsibilities

Trust management across the organisation should be seen as similar to the concept of quality, in that it's everyone's concern and responsibility lies with all parties.

While having trust champions throughout the organisation is advisable, appointing a dedicated person with the responsibility of building and maintaining trust, such as a Trust Leader, is also recommended. This role raises trust concepts with the teams, actively works to build trust, and should be supported by leadership. The role is justifiable given the opportunity for efficiency and wellbeing improvements.

The responsibilities of the role(s) managing trust within the organisation are as follows:
- Establishing and promoting a stated trust culture, with clear engagement and support from leadership
- Facilitating the development of the organisational trust values
- Facilitation of workshops to solicit feedback on trust levels and opportunities to grow trust
- Handling trust-related incidents, be they at the individual, team or organisational level
- Mediating issues between parties and individuals when trust is eroded and propose mitigations
- Transparently reporting trust level across the organisation
- Keep the trust management process as Lean as possible

Reputation and trust

Before you enter a trust relationship or in an ongoing relationship, each party already has a perceived reputation. This is based on many things, including organisational and individual reputation, previous track record, perceived abilities and expertise.

Organisational reputation

To establish reputational credibility at the organisational level, the following actions should be taken:

Deliver: delivering on your commitments is paramount to establishing and maintaining your reputation.

Credentialism: create collateral that demonstrates your previous delivery track record. Provide details of areas where you have had a positive impact. Show don't tell. It's important to demonstrate through example rather than just proclaim your achievements.

What can be done to build organisational reputation?
- Deliver, deliver, deliver!
- Establish credentials through clear communication of past achievements.
- When possible, have existing customers or stakeholders available to give candid feedback about your performance to new parties.
- Understand the interpersonal relationships that may already exist between your team members and external stakeholders.

- Clearly and publicly state your organisational values.

Individual reputation

To establish individual reputation, the following actions should be taken:

What can be done to build individual reputation?

- Deliver against your stated commitments.
- Develop a network of people who can support your credentials with personal recommendations.
- Document your contributions and achievements in previous projects and capture lessons learned.
- Demonstrate your abilities through industry talks, blogs, books and community activity.
- If looking for work, update your social media and professional profiles, include job titles and context around your responsibilities and role within the teams. Display your skills and leadership experience throughout the interview process through demonstrable examples.

Restoring Lost Trust

It is important to acknowledge when a trust relationship has been damaged. Understanding how and why a relationship soured is critical if the relationship is to be repaired.

Loss of trust events
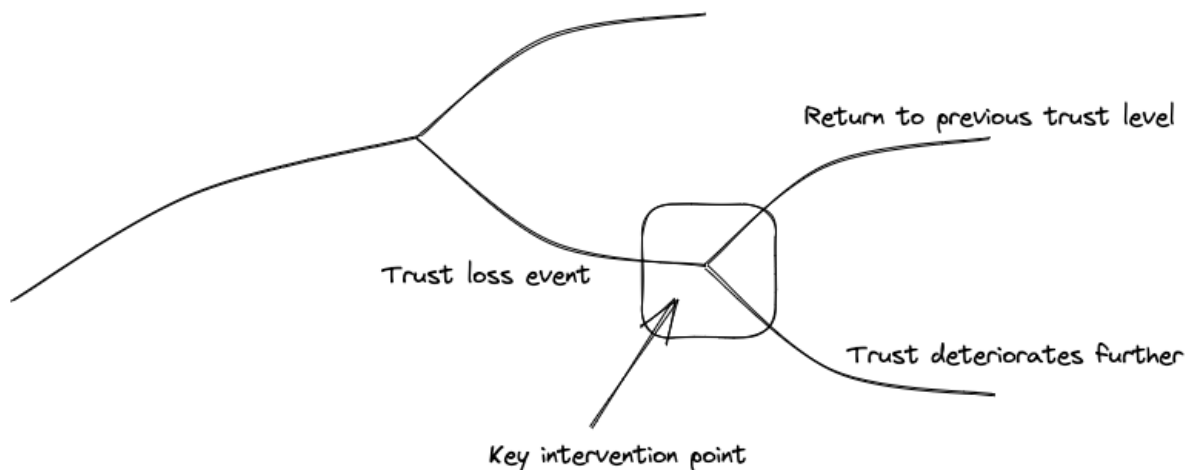
Loss of trust events are natural. It's normal for things to go wrong, resulting in a deterioration of trust. What's important is how such events are dealt with. The goal is to quickly reestablish trust.

A common reaction to a loss of trust event is to put in more process to try and prevent the event from happening again. This additional process adds inefficiencies and can further erode trust, for example, through the increased surveillance of individuals, more oversight or checking of work. Although the intention is to prevent issues from occurring in the future, added surveillance measures move relationships away from trust, and it can be difficult to regain. The root cause of the trust loss isn't fixed, it is monitored in the hope that it is prevented, or worse yet, it is ignored and hoped that it goes away. There is a loss of faith in people, and processes are created that disempower and demotivate.

The intervention point should start with the thought, "How can trust be regained?"

More oversight can be considered, but only if it is a temporary measure with the purpose of regaining trust, agreed upon by all parties. Any intervention should result in the rebuilding of trust. Any intervention that does not have this goal will likely further erode trust.

An example of an intervention that can rebuild trust is the Blameless Postmortem, where people are empowered to accept what happened, and learn from it. The team then assigns actions to fix the root cause. They are trusted to resolve the issue. Another example could be more frequent meetings between individuals where a loss of trust has occurred, which is an inefficiency in the short term (due to the lack of trust), but has the goal of rebuilding trust.

Once trust has been reestablished, any additional or inefficient processes that had been added to address the issue should be removed.

Early intervention
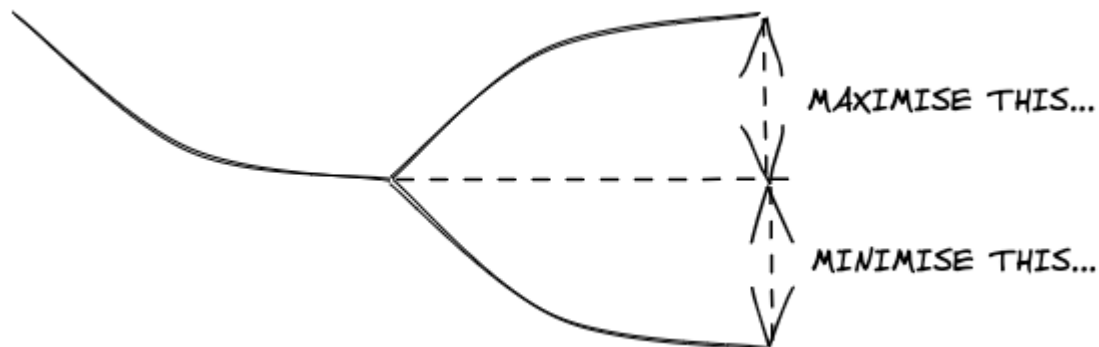
This diagram shows a branch at an event, where two potential outcomes could happen, one where trust is gained, and one where it is lost. The ideal is to **minimise any trust losses, and maximise trust gains**.

There shouldn't be big drops in the amount of trust we have, if this happens, it can be an indicator of a low trust environment, with people waiting for things to go wrong.

With focus being on quick trust recovery, we'll also want to take preventative action in advance to not let that trust drop too much. Create an environment to prevent big trust drops using Agile thinking, such as being transparent and addressing trust issues as soon as they arise.

Broken trust

When trust has completely broken down, it might be best to revisit the initial inputs into the trust model and restart the relationship from scratch, using the tools and techniques already discussed.

Unfortunately, there are times when there is a mutual agreement that the relationship is not going to work out. It's okay to leave a relationship if the value and mutual benefits are no longer present.

Misplaced trust

Misplaced trust is antithetical to high trust. It's possible to trust another party wholeheartedly, only to have our positive assumptions dashed by bad actors. It's important to validate your understanding of inputs through due diligence - a trust relationship should never be based on intuition alone.

Trust can be misplaced but this doesn't mean you shouldn't ever trust another party. Try to understand the risks you are taking but don't allow a previous poor relationship to affect your ability to build new relationships with a fresh set of eyes.

Trust and risk

Trusting people does not mean that we abandon all processes. In fact, some process is a necessary part of an effective way of work. However, if we do establish processes, then the processes should be beneficial for all parties involved. We shouldn't add processes because a single person doesn't trust another part of the business.

In high risk situations, there may be processes that are proportional to the risk. For example, handing firearms may involve elaborate steps to ensure the guns are safe before passing them on to others. This additional process is beneficial to all parties involved and is warranted given the risk of potential harm.

Again, we can use agile thinking and ask ourselves - Can we reduce the risk by having smaller or more frequent interactions? How can we be more transparent? We can also retrospect on ways of working through the lens of trust and potentially look to remove processes that are not mutually beneficial.

Ultimately, our processes need to save time, and provide better outcomes in proportion to the risks they address.

Measuring Trust

It isn't always possible to directly measure trust reliability at an individual level, but we know that trust plays an important part in delivering important outcomes for your organisation.

For example, the following are factors that could identify a trust issue, or be enhanced by a strong trust relationship:

- The throughput of quality work into production
- The agility of the organisation, and how the organisation manages change
- Overall team happiness
- Team psychological safety
- Reduction in the number of 'trust-related incidents'
- Other indications of a high-trust culture (as outlined above)

Simply asking people to quantify their subjective attitudes about trust in a survey is unlikely to give useful results. The emphasis should be on people's actions and attitudes, rather than a simple metric.

The authors acknowledge that there is additional input and opportunity for the community to contribute more to the identification and development of trust measures.

Techniques and Resources

There are many tools and techniques already developed that help to establish trust. We have outlined practical ways to apply the TRUST Framework in the companion playbook *(draft in progress)*, where you can find tools and techniques applicable to each stage of the trust relationship.

We hope the community will contribute additional resources as we evolve the framework and the playbook over time. If you have ideas to contribute, please see the 'Joining the Community' section below.

Joining the Community

To join the TRUST Framework community, please visit https://trust-framework.com. We are actively looking for your input on new tools and techniques to build trust, evolution of the framework itself and involvement in other ways, such as giving talks, running workshops in your organisation and being a trust champion. We want to hear from you, so don't hesitate to contact us at info@trust-framework.com.

You can also join our Discord channel at: https://discord.gg/VdRABZChvD

If you don't have time to participate directly, it is enough to start to think about trust relationships and bring a trust-aware mindset into your ways of thinking. Please share this framework with your teams if possible.

Special Thanks

Special thanks to the following contributors:

- Todd Anderson - Founder, co-author, Pr0j3c7T0dd / Equal Experts
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