



New Role: **NEW NEED** **TO BUILD TRUST**



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Setting the Scene

You have been through the recruitment process. The interviews, the assessment tools and reference checks are behind you. As part of the process there was the opportunity to discuss the culture your new organization is moving towards. Your new team leader, in like manner, invested significant time in describing the team you are moving into. You have explored the organization’s product in the marketplace, talked to people you know in the capital markets and have unraveled the organization’s financial history. The final decision to make a job change was, of course, a family decision.

Now you have arrived. You have landed. You met several of your new team members during the recruitment process but, at best, those were somewhat guarded conversations. There will be integration support. The key, however, lies in building those so important early relationships. Expectations are high. Although you will be given time, you will only have one chance to make a first impression. Don’t miss the opportunity.



Early on, what you don’t know will dominate your thinking. Become comfortable with being uncomfortable. No matter your role or the organization culture you have now joined, the ever-increasing clock speed of the marketplace, a post-COVID redefinition of “the workplace”



and a need for comfort with ambiguity shape your new reality. In order that you are not overwhelmed by the first two, you have to work on the third.

Comfort with ambiguity means not knowing everything you would like to know but pushing to the edge anyway. It is to recognise that the status quo is always under attack, reflection is a learning imperative and how you learn is, ultimately, more important than what you learn. Comfort with ambiguity promotes the courage to be different. Not the nail that deliberately sticks out or the rebel without a cause but a willingness to embark on the road less travelled. Paraphrasing Heraclitus,¹ no one steps into the same river twice. In an environment dominated by change, every story is a new story and every problem is a new problem.

Being comfortable with being uncomfortable also means rethinking the traditional definition of resilience. When you stumble or move off track it's not enough to bounce back, you have to learn from the experience. View integration as, above all, a journey. A rite of passage where, although there will be times when you get in your own way, you have an opportunity to explore how to become the very best version of yourself.



1 Heraclitus was a Greek philosopher (540 BCE – 480 BCE).



Adopting new behaviour starts with a question. As you move through the integration process write down the questions that come to mind. A great question asks for (describes) what you want, not what you don't want. For example, ask not why key employees are leaving the organization but why the most talented stay. That way you can start to do more of it.

Having reviewed each of the trust building issues identified later in the text, take time out for reflection. What do you need to start to do? Stop doing? Do differently? Do more of? Revisit and evolve your initial thinking regularly. Catch yourself doing it right. What's working for you? Do more of it.

The importance of the team has, in the past, received a good deal of attention. For the most part, it's been idealistic rhetoric. By way of example, the hiring process, the compensation system and how people are assessed have been heavily skewed towards the individual. To survive, let alone thrive, tomorrow's organization will be focused, flat, fast, flexible and fertile (to new ideas). What does that mean? The organizational philosophy of *built to last* will, of necessity, be replaced by *built to change*. The shift in power from the enterprise to the individual – that we are already experiencing – will continue to evolve. And traditional hierarchy will give way to the organization as a team of teams. To understand the implications for moving into a new role, think of hierarchy as playing drafts (checkers) and moving into a team-based, network organization as three-dimensional chess.

You are not “onboarding.” That's too transient a term. You recognise from previous experience that to be fully integrated into the role will take several anxious months. Job #1 is building trust. It's your single most important integration issue. As a leader, there are seven facets of building trust you *must* get right. See **Figure one**. The mantra is keep it simple ... but not too simple.

The ideas and suggestions presented deliberately move beyond the traditional trust-building fare. They speak to context, not merely content. In a complex, uncertain and rapidly changing world, the path to mediocrity is doing what we have always done, better. Change the content and the team merely plays the same old game in a different way. Change the context and you change the very nature of the game. Leaders change the game.²

Before reviewing the seven trust building suggestions that follow, it will be helpful to hold in mind the considerations outlined below.

- ✓ The text is skewed towards a leader who is new to the organization. Promotion, moving within the organization or forming a new team demands no less attention

² The difference between content and context highlights a dilemma with much that goes under the title of “executive coaching.” Clearly, short-term performance and/or behavioural issues have to be addressed/affirmed (content). What is all-too-often missing, however, is coaching as it relates to the strategic context. The behaviour needed to, for example: deliver future, role-specific competencies; build the culture the organization needs; successfully lead the team in a *built to change* environment. Without appropriate measurement, of course, sink or swim challenges such as those described are destined to remain within the realm of conjecture.



to building trust. Being promoted within the organization may, in many respects, be more challenging than moving from the outside. There will be less tolerance of “dumb” questions (invaluable for a new entrant), a different expectation timeframe and less perceived need for integration support. In similar fashion, change someone on the team and you step into a new team. Expectations shift, patterns of behaviour are recast and new questions emerge.³

- ✓ Unless you are the CEO (and then there is the board), you will be the team leader on one team and a team member of several others. The emphasis here is on building trust as a new team member. The insights are no less meaningful, however, for a new team leader.
- ✓ Top teams live in a goldfish bowl. The higher in the organization they operate, the higher the magnification. The multiplier effect of a misfiring top team cannot be overstated. And its greatest impact will be with middle management, a group that, in many organizations, is already distressed, disenfranchised, disconnected and disappointed. Without a supportive and committed cadre of middle managers, you don’t have a strategy, you have a plan that won’t get implemented.
- ✓ If you don’t grow the people in the business, you can’t grow the business. To that end, in much of what a team leader does, they work for the team. Servant leadership isn’t a philosophy in pursuit of the need for organizational agility – it’s a practical necessity.
- ✓ The single most important change imperative is to adopt new behaviours *before* you have to. If you wait until you are forced to change, it’s too late. Only those trapped in an exclusively tactical mindset assume tomorrow will be a replay of today. The time to learn how to swim is *before* you are under water.

1. Embrace the Organization’s Guiding Principles

There are two kinds of values: personal values and the organization’s values. To avoid confusion between the two, it’s helpful to think about the organization’s values as “guiding principles.” Central to the hire decision – for both parties – was compatibility⁴ between the candidate’s personal values and the organization’s guiding principles.

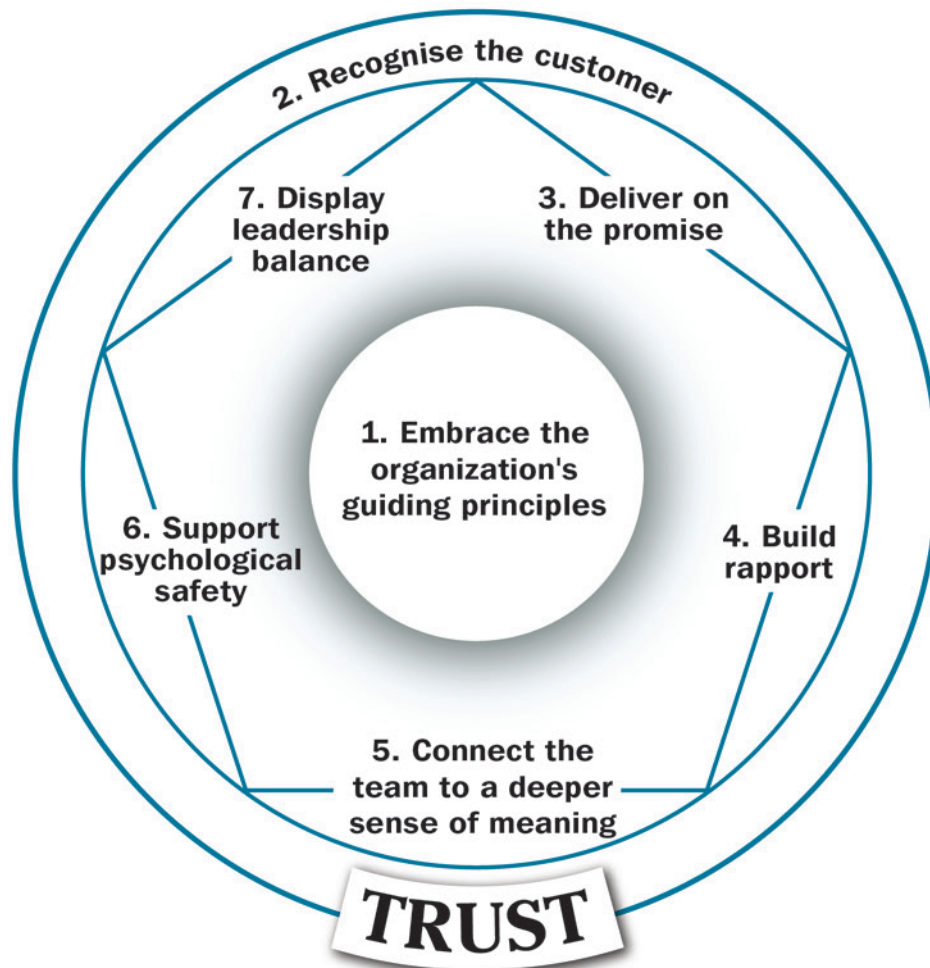
Guiding principles aren’t rules. They give permission to act. They also represent red lines

³ In that you can’t manage what you don’t measure, a robust assessment of “team chemistry” is invaluable.

⁴ We are not describing common or even shared values. In a homogeneous culture that is a laudable goal. In a multicultural society (e.g., 52% of the population in Toronto were born outside Canada), rooted in very different societies, candidates collectively draw on a virtual cornucopia of personal values. It is enough that the candidate can relate to and accept the organization’s guiding principles. In a multicultural society, the need for well-defined, work-based, guiding principles are, thus, of paramount importance.



Figure one



that you don't want to cross. No less important, you can't afford to be a passive supporter of what it is the organization believes in. Early on you have to make overt signals that you have bought in. Don't be too obvious. Then again you can't afford to keep other team members guessing. In sharing your story (practice it, people will want to know), where integrity allows, draw out where your past success exhibited alignment with your new organization's guiding principles.

You will also have a window of opportunity to ask questions that are pretty obvious to everyone else on the team. If you are unsure what the guiding principles mean in practice, don't just seek an explanation, ask for an example. To identify how to orchestrate your behaviour in line with the guiding principles, translate each into an action verb. "Innovation" isn't really a guiding principle. As a term, it's too general. Expressed as "to bring a new product to market every eighteen months" gives it meaning.



To appreciate the value of a gift you have to know why it was chosen. To understand an artist, you have to examine their paintings. To get a better sense of the guiding principles, it is helpful to explore the following: Why, especially, were you hired? What critical leadership behaviours do top performers on the team deliver? What did the previous incumbent in the role deliver that made them successful? It's too early to know where/why the previous incumbent was (possibly) less than successful. That's a matter of timing, tact and having already established trust.

If the organization's vision is a lighthouse that illuminates the future, guiding principles enable you to navigate stormy seas. The challenge with digging out the guiding principles is that: (1) in about a third of organizations they remain mute (not defined); (2) about a third of organizations have guiding principles that many people inside the organization don't believe in or connect with; and (3) in the final third the definitions aren't principles at all but good business practices, e.g., integrity. To confuse matters more, not a few organizations have guiding principles that belong in the 1990s.

If the guiding principles are clearly defined and internal commitment is clear, all well and good. If not, detective work is required. Every successful organization has guiding principles, even though they may not be entirely obvious. Fortunately, success leaves its own footprints. What to explore?

- i. What is the founder's leadership point of view?
- ii. Who are the organization's heroes? What do they believe in? What makes them successful?
- iii. What cannot be replaced? What drives the organization's success? What is the firm's unique capability?
- iv. What is the promise implicit in the brand? What does the organization's best customer admire about the business?
- v. Diversity and inclusion is a given. How are those enacted?
- vi. What new technology is on the immediate horizon? What retooling of how the organization operates and/or reframed leadership behaviour is implied?
- vii. Hybrid employment often redefines the meaning that lies behind the guiding principles. What has primacy in the virtual world? Mental health? Choice regarding pattern of work? Keeping people informed? Other?
- viii. Look at the organization's website. A great website opens with a compelling graphic



– an emotion-laden, visual metaphor that captures the organization’s story.⁵ What is the story behind the image?

- ix. In decision-making, when faced with choice, what does the team leader deem to be important?
- x. What are the criteria for success within the performance management process?
- xi. What criteria defines “high potential” within the organization?
- xii. If the organization is committed to a specific, high-profile consulting company, what do they bring to the table?
- xiii. If, as demanded in a rapidly changing business environment, the organization has a process through which to measure culture: (1) how is today’s organization culture described? and (2) what culture is demanded in the future?

The organization’s guiding principles are your lifeboat in a storm, the frame of reference that allows you to see clarity when confusion abounds, the golden thread that bridges data and analysis with meaningful decision-making. Always enquire in a way that is positive and open ended. A question that carries a critical tone and/or suggests that the way things stand is something you disagree with erodes trust. An implied criticism of the team leader or manager-one-level-up is to enter the “danger zone.”

Trust building: surface, understand, embrace, live and amplify the organization’s guiding principles.

2. Recognise the Customer⁶

When the organization’s guiding principles and the underlying business model are misaligned confusion is assured. As a result, coming out of COVID there are two things organizations should revisit. One: the organization’s values (guiding principles). Two: their business model. The business model answers the question, “What does tomorrow’s customer want to buy and how do they want to buy it?” Even if what the customer wants to buy stays the same, there is a strong possibility they want to — now or in the future — buy it differently.

Organizations that attempt to manage the business from the inside-out – Kodak, General Electric, Nokia, Blockbuster, EMI, being classic examples – are on a collision course with “failure.” In establishing your identity, in staking out your contribution, in the language used and the examples given ensure that the customer is always in the room. Trust building isn’t

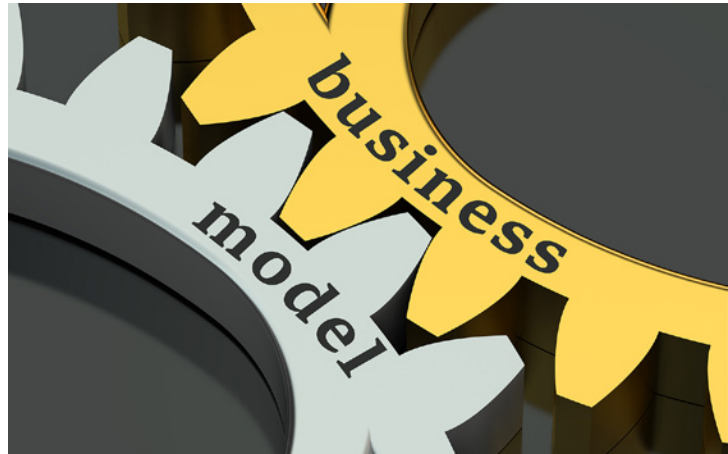
⁵ Best-in-class organizations understand that visitors to their website make the decision to stay (or leave) within the first ten seconds. As a result, the opening page of their website represents an emotional invitation to what it is that makes the organization special.

⁶ Where appropriate, for “customer” read “client.”



limited to developing and building relationships. It's about respect, focus and, as perceived by your new colleagues, keeping your eyes on the prize. It's creating tomorrow's customer. No one was ever criticised for asking the question that, were they in the room, the customer would have asked.

There are three dominant business models. You quickly destroy trust if, especially unknowingly, you are on a different page to the rest of the team.⁷ This is easily done. Your new team will take the business model for granted. Conversely, if your previous role was anchored in a different business model it will inform your mindset. When faced with a new challenge, when under stress, the default mental models we access are, invariably, the ones we know best. Consider the following business models.



- i. *Adding value.* Continuous improvement. Doing what we have always done better, e.g., six sigma. Mindset: transaction. Typically, a commodity business where little separates one provider from another. Value platform? Operational excellence – meeting and, where possible, exceeding the customer's needs.
- ii. *Creating value.* Innovation, pushing beyond what we have done before. Moving to the next level. Working collaboratively with customers to add to the firm's (differentiated) offering. Mindset: transition. Typically, a business sector where innovative competitors regularly push the value proposition into new territory. Value platform? Operational excellence + customer intimacy.
- iii. *Inventing value.* Moving beyond what others assume is possible. Unbridled curiosity, learning as play and asking breakthrough questions become a unifying theme. Typically, a business sector where market leaders regularly introduce new products and services. Mindset: transformation. Value platform? Operational excellence + customer intimacy + unique capability.

Trust building: ensure that the customer is in the room. Unless your role is to reframe it, act in accordance with the (emerging) business model.

⁷ A red flag in the hiring process is when there is a disconnect between the business model(s) the candidate has succeeded in and the emerging business model of the hiring firm. Because this speaks to very different business practices (e.g., business development), lack of such fit is a potential derailer.



3. Deliver on the Promise

This is more about an ongoing pattern of behaviour than it is a specific action. It's a self-discipline. An unchanging habit. An unwavering commitment to do what it is you said you will do. The team will be testing you. Performance antenna will be on full alert. And the small things can be as problematic as a significant goal. Be on time. If you say you will call back, call back. Answer emails. Anticipate and, as a result, be prepared. That first presentation is really an audition.

You may be a gifted speaker, look like you were sent from central casting and have an enviable reputation but your everyday Waterloo is delivery. Be it the board or a subordinate, nothing destroys trust faster than a missed deadline, a commitment not followed up on or a promise broken. There is a reason it's called *leadership*. Leaders *always* find a way to "ship." "Promise is a big word. It either makes something or breaks something." – Anon.

And if something does fall between the cracks don't make excuses. "Tap dancing" is an art form that should be practiced on an entirely different stage. In a similar vein, don't be afraid to say "no." Do it with grace. Explain your rationale and commit to what will be achieved. Then deliver. Only the uninformed, insecure and the inadequate are a party to their own downfall.





Early on find a signature objective that you can build your reputation on and then deliver more than was expected. In doing so, go out of your way to share the credit and, where appropriate, thank people for their support.

About here we need to factor in an, often overshadowed, performance characteristic — hard work. Angela Duckworth’s research⁸ informs us that when circumstances are the same, achievement depends on two things – *talent* and *effort*. It takes drive, initiative and effort to transform talent into a skill. It, similarly, takes hard work to turn a skill into achievement. And if Christmas is cancelled, well, you buy the tree anyway. It’s called “character.” Talent is a gift; character is a choice. No matter how gifted the high performers on your team are, they didn’t get there without talent, commitment, character and *hard work*.

It would be wrong to define success purely in terms of “delivery.” Making a difference ultimately means: (1) contributing to the organization’s competitive advantage; (2) helping the team move to the next level; (3) growing both as a leader and as an individual; (4) positively impacting the lives of the people around you; and (5) leaving a legacy – especially, leaving a legacy. The problem? You can’t do any of these unless you first deliver on the promise.

There is a special bonus if you can help someone else on the team deliver – especially if they are struggling in an area where you excel. Be humble. A masterful coach provides support but wants others to stand on the podium.

Keep your power dry if integrity means that you are unable to share ideas or information from your previous employer. Breaking a small confidence might make you look good at the time, but lack of integrity will always – as in always – come back to haunt you.

Trust building: sweat the small things. Always – always – do what you say you are going to do.

4. Build Rapport

Rapport is an essential ingredient in building a constituency and nothing less than make or break in terms of fitting into the team. The rule? Start as you mean to go on.

From her research, Harvard psychologist, Amy Cuddy, discovered that the early steps of trust are set in motion within the first 20 seconds. Cuddy emphasises that competency counts for little unless trust has first been established. Qualifications, reputation and experience, similarly, take a back seat until the basic building blocks of trust are in place. When meeting someone new, those first, precious 20 seconds open (or not) the door to opportunity.

If appropriate, use the person’s first name very early in the conversation. Without overdoing

⁸ GRIT (2016), page 42.



it, continue using their name – it’s a courteous and symbolic act that brings a degree of early intimacy to the discussion. The late Peter Drucker referred to courtesy as “the lubricant of leadership.”

Rapport is reading the room. It’s being in the moment. It’s listening ... really listening. It’s about openness. It’s being vulnerable. It’s keeping your judgement gene in check. It’s asking questions – not to display why you are *interesting* but to show how *interested* you are. It’s having “a beginner’s mind.” It’s the assumption that seeking to know is always a precursor to the presumption of knowing.

Rapport is a dance comprised of three steps. Step one: my own needs. Step two: looking at the situation through the eyes of others on the team. Step three: the ability to move outside of the ongoing interaction and observe what’s really happening. Someone new to the team who has only perfected step one — not uncommon — will not only look awkward, they won’t be asked to dance. Learn the dance.

Claude Debussy once remarked, “Music is what happens between the notes.” Masterful listening implies “listening for” and not “listening to.” It means listening not just for what is said, but also for what is omitted. It means hearing the silence. It means interpreting the message in the space between the words. It means, when faced with inappropriate resistance, forging the silence the way a blacksmith wields a hammer. It means being tuned into the subtleties of the speaker’s body and the subtext in the language. The payoff? When we are fully engaged, we start to hear not just the speaker’s intentions, but the meaning behind what is being presented. And in that meaning we can start to understand the speaker’s true intent and state of mind. In moving into a new role, what could be more important?



Count three beats after the speaker has finished speaking ... before asking a question. Use positive body language to reinforce that you are listening, e.g., nod your head, use positive



hand gestures. It's not enough to listen ... you have to “signal” that you are listening! Smile. Harrods, one of the world's most successful retailers, tell their staff, “teeth means money.”

Be informed. People trust others when they have something in common. Where possible, make a positive reference to something the individual you are meeting or a team member has said, achieved or even written about. Comment on what it is you share – a common experience, for example, is always a good fallback.

An aura of confidence, being courteous, supportive gestures, leaning in slightly, a positive comment, tonality, the overt act of listening, eye contact, behavioural mirroring and projecting positive intentions ... all put trust on the right track. Daniel Kahneman⁹ put it this way, “If people are failing, they look inept. If people are succeeding, they look strong and good and competent. That's the ‘halo effect.’ Your first impression of a thing sets up your subsequent beliefs.”



⁹ Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences (2002).



The thinking around employee engagement has evolved. Organizations have come of age. They realise that, although bundling “highly engaged” and “somewhat engaged” together may make everyone look good, building on a false positive is never a good idea. Simply put, you can’t be *somewhat engaged*. In a similar vein, you can’t be somewhat part of the team. If you stay on the periphery, make an arbitrary contribution, or insert yourself only when self-interest beckons, you will at first be marginalised, then side-lined and, before too long, rejected. You can’t fire a broken arrow, carry water in a broken bucket or make *coq au vin* without chicken. And you can’t build rapport with the rest of the team if your commitment to the team is anything less than 100%.

Communication is a two-way street. And excellence isn’t an accident. Tailor what you want to get across to fit both the audience and what has gone on before. To emphasise a key point, slow down. Use “the pause” the way a conductor uses their baton. Repetition heightens receptivity. Create a compelling metaphor to move into new territory and a story to share best practice. Know that “imagine” is just about the most powerful word in the leadership lexicon.

Factor movement into how you communicate. Going for a walk with a team member engages all three modalities (ways to process information): visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Leaders are readers. Reading develops your vocabulary. It also informs your own writing. Writing, in turn, clarifies your thinking. Keep a learning diary.

The world of work is clearly not as it was. Whether face-to-face or virtual, make every meeting of the team an opportunity to build and continue to build rapport.

What of rapport in the virtual world? Below are a few suggested approaches:

- i. Until the technology improves, online meetings are found wanting as regards to: (1) the basic interpersonal chemistry; (2) the capacity for empathy; and (3) the behavioural bandwidth of face-to-face interaction. The small cues and micro behaviours that inform the traditional meeting are mostly lost. This gives rise to three important rules. Rule #1: focus. More content = less understanding. Rule #2: be in the moment. Listen more, speak less and check regularly for understanding. Rule #3: encourage learning how to learn. Less PowerPoint, more power to.
- ii. Video and voice is 200% more effective than voice alone.
- iii. As in any meeting, cell phone(s) totally *out of sight*. The fact that a cell phone is visible is both disrespectful and a distraction.
- iv. Delegation – the lost art of leadership – needs to be rekindled.
- v. Digital meetings demand greater discipline. Have an agenda – two or three priorities only. Pework improves both understanding and effectiveness. Trust the agreed



process. Start on time and end at the agreed time. Be sensitive to participants with limited resources, family pressures and/or in a different time zone.

- vi. If several people are involved, check in quickly with everyone at the beginning. Look for subtle signs of mental health concerns.
- vii. If it's a team meeting and you are the moderator, ensure that each team member has a voice and that the rhythm of the meeting keeps everyone's interest.
- viii. The moderator/facilitator should emphasise key points by speaking slower and recognise that silence is often the best question of all.
- ix. In moderation, self-deprecating humour can project vulnerability, speak to humility, draw people in and add to a general sense of psychological safety.
- x. "Dressing down" can be perceived as a "put down." Ask, "Not how comfortable am I but what signal am I sending?"
- xi. If you are using a laptop, buy an external camera and laptop stand. A camera will improve the image. Looking up at your chin doesn't present you to good advantage.
- xii. Drop the contrived backgrounds. At a conscious level, we know you are not in Hawaii. At a non-conscious level, we are compelled to ask, "What else lacks authenticity?"
- xiii. Avoid virtual meeting burnout. Less is more. Because the interaction is unnatural, virtual interaction is tense, tiring and stressful.

Trust building: if you don't build rapport you can't develop relationships. Start as you mean to go on.

5. Connect the Team to a Deeper Sense of Meaning

No matter how good your rapport skills are, you won't build trust if: (1) it appears you are trying to come across as the smartest person in the room; (2) you bring up the name of your past employer too often (it suggests that your mind is someplace else); and/or (3) you fall into the trap of being co-opted by others on the team who put their own needs ahead of the group.

There are not very many great teams. If you have ever worked in one it stays with you throughout your career. Most teams inhabit the middle ground. Not a few are dysfunctional. A wayward team is apparent when: (1) the group is dominated by one or two members; (2) subtle criticism of others on the team emerge; (3) tough questions are avoided; (4) missed targets prompt excuses or the need for someone to blame; and/or (5) humour is either missing or misdirected. No matter what you have been told about the team, if humour – the right kind of humour – is absent you have joined an unhappy team.



Unless you are the new team leader, trying to fix the team will turn you into an unwelcome “guest.” That doesn’t mean sit back and hope for the best. You can become an inspirational presence, a beacon of hope, a catalyst that reminds the team of what is truly important. What everyone on the team really needs (not simply wants) is to feel part of something bigger than themselves, to embrace a sense of belonging. A new member can start to move the team in that direction by introducing imagery, story, metaphor and language that reinforce and tap into our quest for meaning.

The bickering, the game playing, holding back, the out-of-meeting negative criticism take something important away from everyone on the team. A compelling purpose, the environment, fairness, inspiring the customer, the wider role of the organization (team) in the community and working on a project that others don’t even deem is possible can transcend *what is* and move the focus to *what is possible*. With a compelling *why*,¹⁰ ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things. Without “a motivating reason to be,” money, manipulation



¹⁰ Regardless of the popular literature, not every organization has a compelling purpose. In its place, the leadership challenge becomes to connect team members to their personal story; to enable them to live their dream. This speaks to mentoring, coaching, an unwavering investment in leadership development and a highly effective succession process. If you want your best people to spurn overtures from the competition, don’t just invest in their development – inspire them.



and personal gain become the only glue available to bind people together,

For the team leader, establishing a sense of belonging is behavioral gardening. You prepare the ground, plant the seeds, water, weed regularly and add the right fertiliser. If you have chosen well, the team will start to exhibit the seven articles of belonging: authenticity, awareness, attention, acceptance, appreciation, affirmation and affection. To those seven add agreement (when needed) and action (always). Winning adds adrenalin. Character captures commitment.

A sense of belonging means being mindful of others. That, in turn, is about the quality of the conversation: rapport, humility, small talk, listening, drawing others in, disclosure, shedding defensiveness and being open to input. The right question injects learning. You'll know it's the right question when the listener has to reach for the answer.

What has that all got to do with building trust? If a stranger gives you a meal when you are hungry, you instantly develop a bond. If you are lost and you are handed a map, you are drawn to the individual who gave it to you. If one of your children is struggling in school and the teacher offers you meaningful guidance, you respect them. And if the team is struggling and you can provide a wider sense of purpose and belonging, you are building trust. Keep in mind the comment made earlier in the text: change the content and the team will do little more than play the same old game in a somewhat different way. To change the game you have to change the context.

The text highlights moving into a less than exemplary team. Even if you have joined an outstanding team, being an advocate for and helping the team connect to a deeper sense of meaning will help to make you a star. Maya Angelou put it this way, "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning."

Trust building: (1) be an advocate for the organization's purpose; (2) reinforce the issues that create a sense of meaning; and (3) personally demonstrate the seven articles of belonging outlined.

6. Support Psychological Safety

To be a leader is to support and nurture psychological safety. Advocating the comfortable option, avoiding the tough question(s), doing your best to avoid conflict won't win trust, at least not from those you most want to build trust with.

Even if you are not the team leader — it won't be day one but relatively early in the integration process — you will be faced with a binary choice. Do I want to be a follower or a leader? A follower goes along to get along. They sidestep the difficult conversation. They leave speaking to power to someone else. Conversely, a leader sees challenging the status quo,



at the right time and in the right way, as a leader's birthright – a natural and essential part of the role.

Starting in 2012, a two-year study by Google, involving hundreds of interviews, looked at the factors that made up a successful team. “Project Aristotle” identified 250 team attributes. Five were discovered to have primacy: (1) psychological safety; (2) team members trust each other to achieve goals at a level of excellence; (3) clear roles and goals; (4) personal meaning in the work; and (5) overall purpose. Although clearly linked, of the five, psychological safety was deemed, by far, the most significant.

The Google study found that team members who felt safe with each other were willing to speak out, challenge one another and take personal risk. They also, admitted mistakes, were more likely to partner with each other, took on a new role, were open to new ideas and asked challenging questions. No less important, there was also a strong correlation with retention.

Psychological safety goes beyond the belief that you can speak up without being punished. It's the courage to speak to power. It's an invitation to grab the stick that stirs the contentious pot. It's to fill the space when the tension in the room carries a message “step carefully.” It's to bring the maverick on the team into the conversation.

Psychological safety shouldn't be confused with being compliant, accepting mediocrity or avoiding conflict. It defines an informed, balanced and respectful dialogue where, unless there is a good reason, nothing is off the table. Those who make a difference not only state





their concerns, but they also have an answer when someone else on the team asks, “What do you think we should do about it?” And the best way to ensure people take note of what you have to say? Pave the way by showing that the success of the team transcends personal success. In a great team altruistic behaviour is alive and well.

Five or six team behaviours (simple criteria) that define what it means to be a successful team – agreed by the team and reviewed regularly – set the scene.¹¹ Psychological safety is reinforced when: the team leader speaks last; new team members are given a voice; the body language of the informal leaders in the room invites input; those who prefer to stay out of the periphery of the team are drawn into the conversation; provocative questions are affirmed; and appropriate humour enters the picture. The right humour, at the right time, can defuse tension, stimulate people’s more playful self, reinforce recognition and lower the emotional temperature in the room. But it’s got to be the right humour at the right time.

It’s worth emphasising that psychological safety isn’t just another way to say, “Be nice to each other.” Teams that play together, stay together. That doesn’t mean they are playing lawn bowls.¹² There are times, in a successful team, when it’s more like rugby football: scrums, hard tackles and an occasional elbow in the ribs included. Once described as “a game of ruffians played by gentlemen,”¹³ one of the enduring traditions of rugby is that after the rough and tumble everyone meets in the bar. “Shake hands and drink up.”

In his book, *Think Again* (2021), Adam Grant describes his research with hundreds of new teams in Silicon Valley. Building on the work of Australian psychologist, Karen Jehn, he studied two kinds of conflict: relationship and task. What he found was: (1) successful teams had low relationship conflict and high task conflict; and (2) poor performing teams were held back by interpersonal conflict. If you are the team leader and “when” or “how” is the issue – let the team work it out. If it’s about relationships, however, address the issue *before* the conflict becomes entrenched.

Psychological safety isn’t just about the nature of the conversation in the room. It is an invaluable attribute that:

- i. Builds resilience;
- ii. Is a catalyst in inclusion and diversity;
- iii. Lies at the centre of employee engagement;
- iv. Is a critical component in ongoing change;

¹¹ A simple but essential process that is missing from the vast majority of teams.

¹² Bowls, or lawn bowls, is a popular sport in which the objective is to roll biased balls so that they stop close to a smaller ball called a “jack.” It is played on a grass bowling green. Highly skilled, it tends to be a sport that attracts players who are in the Autumn of their life. Sir Francis Drake is reputed to have been playing bowls when the Spanish Armada was spotted.

¹³ Now played at a very high standard by women.



- v. Is the energy in innovation;
- vi. Fuels personal growth; and
- vii. Is a “must have” dimension of vibrant and meaningful team chemistry.

If you are new to the team and want to help build the kind of organization you need in the future, challenging the status quo has to be your default behaviour. As someone new to the organization, you may not be leading the charge, but if you are not on board, if you are not supporting, facilitating and prompting psychological safety, you have turned your back on what it means to be a leader. There are three kinds of leaders. Those that make it happen. Those who pontificate about what should happen. And those who ask, “What happened?” You can’t build the trust and with it the constituency you need without an action bias.

Trust building: if you are the team leader, psychological safety lies at the heart of positive team chemistry. If you are new to the team or part of a new team, facilitating psychological safety, not just in spirit but through your actions, is a “must-do” behaviour.

7. Display Leadership Balance



Trust building, in no small measure, is how you turn up. It’s a shared mindset and common belief system about what it means to be a leader. It’s opting to be a full partner in the ongoing leadership conversation.



Long gone are the days when if a leader delivered results everything else could be overlooked. No less redundant is the image of the team leader as the all-knowing boss. Agility, shared know-how, the challenge of growth and retention dictate a very different team ethos. One where, in many respects, the team leader is but first among equals. Where key decisions draw on input from everyone on the team. Where, as warranted, the subject expert on the team is asked to take the lead. We are describing an environment where “leadership balance” isn’t merely desirable, it’s essential.

Leadership balance speaks to five, interrelated, domains of leadership. A successful new entrant – be they team leader or team member – strives: (1) for mastery in each domain; and (2) to integrate each of the domains into a synergistic whole. See **Figure two**. Consider the five domains of leadership balance:

1. **Direction. A focus on the future.** Where are we heading? How will the business environment evolve? What is the emerging business model? Where and how is technology going to change the business? What will tomorrow look, sound and feel like? Who is tomorrow’s customer? What is our unique point of differentiation? *Employ the head. Cognitive intelligence. Critical capability: make tomorrow come alive in the room, today.*
2. **The discipline of delivery. Agility in action.** A cadence, a rhythm, a regular and continuing pattern of behaviour where the agreed outcomes and feedback regarding those outcomes are always in sharp focus. It’s about an organization that, by way of design, is agile enough to support tomorrow’s needed speed of delivery. In performance terms, it’s the need for everyone on the team to know what is expected of them and where they stand. *Empower the hand. Practical intelligence. Critical capability: ability to adapt to the situation.*
3. **Development. An investment in inclusion.** Grow self and the team. To provide and/or contribute to a learning environment – mentoring, coaching, stretch, a focus on learning how to learn. Team members coaching each other. Fast track women, minorities and other, historically disadvantaged, groups. *Engage the heart. Interpersonal intelligence. Critical capability: masterful coaching.*
4. **Day-to-day dialogue. The courage to care.** Self-awareness. A willingness to be vulnerable. Leadership that is consistent, authentic, affirming, empathetic, displays humility, demands fairness, keeps everyone informed, is tough-minded when needed and, regardless of the circumstances, displays great listening. *Enrich the spirit. Intrapersonal intelligence. Critical capability: self-awareness.*
5. **Dedication. Make sustainability sacrosanct.** A total commitment to the environment. To be fully aware of the footprint each of us leaves on the planet. An ever more



critical dimension of leadership that our indigenous kith and kin have never lost. The existential threat posed by our ongoing destruction of the planet puts the environment at the very centre of the emerging leadership challenge. Addressing the environment draws on and, as a result, demands nothing short of excellence in the other four domains. Environmental, social and governance that fails, for example, to engage the heart and enrich the spirit of all the stakeholders is destined to become a contentious issue.¹⁴ *Embrace the environment. Ecological intelligence. Critical capability: recognise how everything is connected to everything else.*

To be new to the team is to recognise that organizations that sustain manage the business from the outside-in. The head implies being fully informed as to where the customer's business is heading. It's to understand the customer's emerging value proposition. It's to see opportunity through the eyes of the customer's customer. The hand means getting inside the customer's business processes, delivering on time and maintaining the highest level of quality. The heart recognises that the buy-decision is based on emotion. Selling is



¹⁴ Shutting down coal makes sense for one group of stakeholders, but if those who are laid off end up on the unemployment line, future resistance is assured.



not simply how well you get across what you do or even how well you do it – it's, ultimately, how you make the customer feel. It's no less about fairness. The spirit is found in altruism, truth, authenticity and collaboration. Spirit comes to the fore in passion, perseverance and, when needed, patience. Dedication is working in partnership with employees, customers and suppliers to put a real dent in the climate crisis.

In a complex and uncertain world, decision-making draws heavily on all five leadership domains. Lack of leadership balance – behaviour skewed towards one of the domains – and agility, inclusion, innovation and speed of responsiveness become what the competition is really good at. Meanwhile, fail to invest in learning, appear to lack fairness and/or show little progress on the environment and, for a whole lot of employees, the grass will look greener elsewhere. Guaranteed!

In the midst of the human adventures that AI, robotics, cobotics, blockchain, 3D-printers, autonomous vehicles and their like represent, members of the team, more than ever, need to know where they are heading, how they are doing, that they are growing, that caring is ever-present and the environment is a priority. The greater the degree of uncertainty, the greater the need for leadership balance. Be found wanting when it comes to leadership balance and the ability to build trust falls away.

If they don't share a common leadership philosophy, a group embarking on a difficult journey across new terrain is already lost. As someone new to the team, if you don't embrace that philosophy, expect to remain on the outside looking in.

Trust building: be a full partner in the leadership conversation. Ensure that you regularly conduct a robust self-assessment of your capability against all five dimensions of leadership balance. Learn how to learn.



Conclusion

You were brought into the role to create strategic value, solve problems and play a role in shaping the culture the organization needs. You were also hired to provide leadership. The trust issue here is uncomplicated. Act like a leader and those whose support you need will start to trust you. Fail to accept the mantle of leadership and even the most generous of your colleagues will start to wonder why you were hired.

We are not talking about looking good, reaching for power or playing corporate politics. Without trust you are standing on a bridge to nowhere. Without it, you can't survive. Most established notions of trust speak to authenticity, humility, honesty, being vulnerable and keeping people informed. While they are certainly features of trust, a successful leader goes wider and deeper. They work the emerging context.

Good luck as you move into your new role. There are a good many integration issues not addressed here. Understanding your life priorities, letting go, developing the performance





scorecard, understanding the culture, starting to coach and developing the team are central success factors. That understood, trust is the one characteristic of integration success you can't do without. It fills the white space on the organization chart, it's at the heart of risk, the wind in the sails of relationships, the glue that allows the network organization to flourish, the unspoken voice in the organization's guiding principles, the critical factor that makes psychological safety "safe," and is an essential ingredient in any sense of belonging. The shift to hybrid employment only emphasises the need for and the value of trust.

They are not all-encompassing but the seven leadership issues identified are central to building trust. If you don't embrace the organization's guiding principles, you are on a collision course with what it is that makes the organization special. If you side-line the customer, before too long the customer will side-line you. If you don't deliver on the promises you make, fail now, it will save time later. If you don't build rapport, the relationships you need to develop will never be realised. If you set aside the opportunity to connect the team to a deeper sense of meaning, your potential will remain unfilled. If you fail to play a supportive and proactive role in psychological safety, you will never build or be part of a great team. And if you don't display leadership balance, you are trapped by a presumption of excellence that defined success in the last century.

You can recover from a lost sale; a missed objective isn't career ending; and we have all delivered a presentation we would prefer to forget. Get trust building wrong, however, and there may well be no way back. Simply put, without trust, you really ain't got much!

Finally, in closing, I offer three elements of integration wisdom. One: "Fail to plan and plan to fail. Invest time to mentally rehearse every meeting (play the video in your mind)." Two: "There is no learning without reflection." Three: "Go out of your way to make your team leader and manager-one-level-up look good." And if you only find time to work on one of those, make sure it's the third.



Principles to be guided by:

“Being comfortable with being uncomfortable in the new reality.”

“Every story is a new story and every problem is a new problem.”

“Organizations that sustain, manage the business from the outside-in.”

“Diversity isn’t a target, it’s an action.”

“Unless we grow the talent within our business, we can’t grow the business.”

“The environment is everyone’s responsibility.”

“At the end of the day, it’s all about trust.”





John O. Burdett

*“If you can’t
clearly
differentiate
yourself from the
competition, fail
now – it will save
time later.”*

– J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached

numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs. Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award.

John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 15 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His *Leadership Beyond Crisis Series* came out in 2021. More recently, he brought out a totally revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

