THE TRUST leader

WHITE PAPER · FOR COACHES OF SOLO AND SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

Nobody should leave a session with only a good intention

Insight happens in the session. Change happens when your client acts differently in their business.

Scott Hunter
Founder, Trust Leader

November 2026
thetrustleader.com

THE STARTING POINT

Know, like, trust is the wrong way round

Every networking meeting says it: get known, get liked, and trust will follow. So owners work on being known and being liked. All three are about them.

Turn it round. **Know them first**: what they care about, and what backing you would risk for them. Good marketing starts there anyway. **Then do what you said**, in a way that shows you can handle it. That is where trust comes from. Liking often follows. People warm to someone they can rely on, but liking someone doesn't make them reliable.

> TRUST LEADER DEFINITION
>
> Trust is someone's confidence in you with something they care about.

You don't decide if you're trusted. Your client knows what they mean to do. The people their business depends on only see what they do, and decide what they can rely on them for.

So my test for coaching someone who is building a business is simple: **nobody should leave a session with only a good intention.**

That doesn't mean every attempt works.

It means every client leaves with three things: one named person their business needs, one thing they will do differently in a real moment before the next session, and the response they would expect from that person. Some attempts will go badly. That is useful, if the next session asks what happened.

We identify behaviours, we manage patterns. One response proves nothing. People have bad weeks, or your client was the only option. A pattern across similar moments is the evidence.

A GOOD INTENTION: A FICTIONAL EXAMPLE

A client has left her job to start a business helping local food producers stop using plastic packaging. She needs a manufacturer who will make small runs. She met one at a networking breakfast. He knows her and he likes her. In the session she decides to "follow him up". Nothing more specific is agreed. Over the next month he takes ten days to reply and quotes his standard minimum order, far more than she can sell yet. The next session is spent on her frustration with him.

Known and liked, and still no small run. The session produced real insight. It didn't produce a moment, a behaviour or anything to look for.

Why it matters

Clarity said out loud goes with growth. Studies that followed 183 and then 229 owners found that the owner's vision, and how clearly they communicated it, was linked to later growth of the business.[1][2] Both were in one industry. That is why we start with the Manifesto: what your client wants to do, with who, and why, in words they can say to someone else.

An owner's relationships are the business's relationships. A review of 61 samples linked owners' personal networks to small firm performance.[3] In a small firm, the owner is the one dealing with the supplier, the customer and the lender. The research measures networks, not trust: a contact only helps if they are confident enough in your client to act.

Support can change a small business, but the change has to live outside the sessions. In a randomised trial with 432 small firms in Mexico, a year of consulting (not coaching, in a different economy) raised productivity and owner confidence, with about 50 percent more employees five years later.[4] In another study, some new owners' confidence from mentoring faded once the mentoring ended.[5] What lasts is what the client does with their own people.

Coaching for owners sits between workplace coaching and start-up consultancy.[6] There is no body of randomised trials for it yet, so this paper doesn't borrow results from workplace coaching.

THREE PROBLEMS BUSINESS COACHES KNOW WELL

- **A clear plan, and the people it needs aren't moving.** Fixed by knowing them first: naming the person and what they would need to see.
- **Good sessions, little change between them.** Fixed by what the client leaves with.
- **No way to show what changed.** Fixed by three simple counts a coach can keep alone.

WHAT PEOPLE DO

Six actions that stop good intentions staying intentions

None needs new software. Each is something a named person does, and someone else can see.

THE COACH

1. Open with the person

After the Manifesto, or once the goal is clear, go to its last box: "Who do I need, and why would they want to?" Then ask: "What would they be risking by backing you?" This is knowing them first. Work on one relationship at a time. Without their side of it, the plan becomes a sales plan, not trust.

2. End with an expected response

Before the session closes, ask: "If you do this, what would you expect them to do differently?" Write down four things together:

BEFORE THE CLIENT LEAVES

- The person: who this is about.
- The behaviour: what they will do differently.
- The moment: the next real chance to do it.
- **The response: what they would expect that person to do.**

3. Start the next session with what happened

Ask "What did you do, and what did they do?" before "How did it go?" If nothing happened, ask what got in the way, not why they didn't try.

THE CLIENT

4. Use it in a real moment before the next session

The next call, the next quote, the next meeting. Not "when the chance comes up".

5. Watch what the other person does next, and keep their words

What they did is the evidence. How the client felt about it is useful, but it isn't the same thing.

6. Ask them, where it fits

"What would you need to see from me to make this worth it for you?" Their answer often shows a gap between what the client thinks they have shown and what the other person still needs.

"My clients are busy running everything." They are. So the ask is small: one person, one moment, one response to look for. About ten minutes of the session, and it gives the next session something real to start with.

HOW YOU KNOW IT IS WORKING

Change is a chain. Check each link.

Your client gets a real chance. They act differently. The other person responds. The business moves.

If one link breaks, the business doesn't move, however good the session was. So check each link. When a count is low, you know where it broke and what to do next.

Three checks a coach can run alone

No survey tool, no dashboard. Three counts, each with a clear next step.

1. **The named-person count: does each client know who, and what to look for?**
   When: at the end of each session, across your current clients. **Count:** how many clients left with the person, the behaviour, the moment and the expected response written down.
   For example, 5 of 8. Three clients left with a good intention. **Next step:** open their next session with "Who do I need, and why would they want to?"

2. **The "what did they do" count: did they act, and did anything happen?**
   When: at every session opening over a month, across your current clients. **Count:** how many openings start with something the client did and what the other person did next, rather than only how it felt.
   For example, 4 of 9. Ask about the other five: "What got in the way?" The answers fall into two groups:
   No chance. The call was cancelled, the person was away, or the work changed. Agree a new moment.
   Had the chance, but didn't try or got stuck. Not sure how to start, not confident, or the behaviour didn't fit the situation. Make it smaller or more specific, and rehearse the first sentence in the session.

3 **The pattern check: is the expected response appearing?**

When: across the next three real moments with the same person. Your client notes each one as it happens, so you don't wait three sessions to see a pattern. **Count:** how often the expected response appeared, and how often the old pattern did.

For example: the manufacturer took 10 days to reply, then 4, then 2. He quoted his standard minimum the first time, asked what volume she expected the second time, and offered a trial run of 500 the third time.

Then two tests. Did their behaviour change? If not, check the behaviour fits what this person needs, using the five Trust Questions. Did it move the business? If the relationship moved but the business didn't, something else is in the way: cash, pricing, timing, a missing skill. That isn't a coaching failure. It shows the client where to act next.

These are practical counts for improving coaching, not validated assessment measures. Keep the numbers, not just the impression.

What the client sees

The client sees their own pattern, in their own words and counts: what they did, what the other person did, what difference it made to the business, and what else helped. For example: "Over six weeks she changed how she worked with the manufacturer. He now replies within days and has offered a trial run. Her first three producers have agreed to order. A local grant also helped."

If a funded programme or business support scheme pays for the coaching, agree at the start, with the client, what the programme will see and in what form.

Running it with owners

Coaching and advice

Many business coaches also advise, on pricing, marketing or money. That's fine. Keep the six actions about what the client does with the people their business needs, even when you also advise on the plan.

Owners hear less than they think

Staff, a first hire, a new partner or a small supplier may depend on the owner, and customers are often polite. So the honest answer is harder to get. When your client asks action 6's question, it helps to ask it in a way that makes a straight answer easy, and to thank them for it.

Notes and Reflections name real people: the manufacturer, a partner, a first hire. They belong to the client. Agree at the start what you will see, and never use what a client writes about someone else in your own marketing without both people's permission.

THE TRUST LENS

The work through the other person's eyes

The five Trust Questions look at one relationship from the other person's side. Here, I is the client and they is the person their business needs.

01	**Do they believe what I say?**
02	**Do they believe I'll do what I said?**
03	**Do they believe I can handle what's needed?**
04	**Do they feel I really understand them?**
05	**Do they believe I act with their interests in mind?**

Which question would this person hesitate over? That points to the behaviour worth practising. Knowing them first is question 4. Being liked rarely answers questions 2 and 3, and that is often where the order waits.

The Trust Journey alongside GROW

GROW covers Goal, Reality, Options and Will, and its Will stage already includes action, accountability and measures of progress.[7] The trust lens keeps the same shape, seen from the other person's side, and names the part that happens after the session.

GROW	TRUST JOURNEY: WHAT HAPPENS
Goal	**Goal (the Manifesto).** What the client wants to do, with who, and why.
Reality	IDENTIFY Who they need, why those people would want to help, and how they act towards the client now.
Options, Will	DESIGN One behaviour, one real moment, and the response to expect.
(not named)	PRACTISE Doing it in the business between sessions.
(not named)	REFLECT Opening the next session: is the pattern appearing, and is the business moving?

IN PRACTICE

The example, worked through

THE PACKAGING BUSINESS, STAGE BY STAGE (FICTIONAL)

Goal

Three local producers ordering by spring. Her Manifesto says what, with who and why.

Identify

She needs the manufacturer first. Why would he want to? Steady small orders in a quiet part of his year. What is he risking? Setting up his line for a run that never repeats. How does he act now? Ten days to reply, standard minimum quoted. The question he would hesitate over: "Do they believe I can handle what's needed?"

Design

Before the next call, send him the volumes two producers have agreed in principle, and ask "What would you need to see from me to make a small run worth it?" Then do the first thing he names. Expected response: he replies within the week and offers options rather than his standard minimum.

Practise

The next three exchanges with him before the session after next.

Reflect

How quickly did he reply? What did he offer? Are producers ordering?

START THIS WEEK

Start with one client

Pick one current client. At the end of your next session, check the four things are written down: the person, the behaviour, the moment and the expected response.

Open the next session with "What did you do, and what did they do?" Keep the three counts for a month. You will know which link breaks most often, and what to change in your own sessions.

Start with the Manifesto, then yourself

The Manifesto canvas (free). Use it in first sessions: what your client wants to do, with who, and why. Its last box, "Who do I need, and why would they want to?", is action 1.
thetrustleader.com/insights/manifesto-canvas-for-coaches

28-DAY FREE TRIAL

Try the trust lens on one of your own working relationships: map it, choose one behaviour, practise it through a Behaviour Playlist and reflect on what changed.

PRACTITIONER

When you want to use it with clients, assign Purpose playlists. Your client writes their answers into their own digital Manifesto in the Hub, and you see the boxes they choose to share. They can switch sharing off at any time. Not in the trial.

The three checks, the Manifesto canvas and Hub examples:
thetrustleader.com/insights/business-coaching-through-a-trust-lens

SOURCES

References

[1] Baum, J. R., Locke, E. A. and Kirkpatrick, S. A. (1998). A longitudinal study of the relation of vision and vision communication to venture growth in entrepreneurial firms. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83(1), 43–54. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.83.1.43

[2] Baum, J. R. and Locke, E. A. (2004). The relationship of entrepreneurial traits, skill, and motivation to subsequent venture growth. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(4), 587–598. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.89.4.587

[3] Stam, W., Arzlanian, S. and Elfring, T. (2014). Social capital of entrepreneurs and small firm performance: A meta-analysis of contextual and methodological moderators. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 29(1), 152–173. doi:10.1016/j.jbusvent.2013.01.002

[4] Bruhn, M., Karlan, D. and Schoar, A. (2018). The impact of consulting services on small and medium enterprises: Evidence from a randomized trial in Mexico. *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(2), 635–687. doi:10.1086/696154

[5] St-Jean, É. and Tremblay, M. (2020). Mentoring for entrepreneurs: A boost or a crutch? Long-term effect of mentoring on self-efficacy. *International Small Business Journal*, 38(5), 424–448. doi:10.1177/0266242619901058

[6] Kotte, S., Diermann, I., Rosing, K. and Möller, H. (2021). Entrepreneurial coaching: A two-dimensional framework in context. *Applied Psychology*, 70(2), 518–555. doi:10.1111/apps.12264

[7] Whitmore, J. *Coaching for Performance.* First published 1992. GROW was developed with colleagues and popularised through this book. The comparison with the trust lens is Trust Leader's interpretation. performanceconsultants.com/resources/the-grow-model

"Know, like, trust" is a common saying in business networking and marketing. It is used here as a saying, not as evidence; the reversed order is Trust Leader's view.

Scope. This narrative paper offers Trust Leader's practical interpretation of selected research. Sources were checked at abstract or record level, not fully appraised. Most of the research is about owners, networks and mentoring or consulting, not coaching specifically. It does not validate the five Trust Questions, the Trust Journey or the three checks as measures of coaching effectiveness, or establish results for Trust Leader or the Hub. The packaging example and all figures in it are fictional.

THE TRUST leader

Trust Leader helps leaders practise the behaviours that strengthen trust through everyday work.
Every week, the Trust Telegraph: one short, practical idea on trust at work. thetrustleader.com/trust-telegraph
thetrustleader.com · © 2026 Trust Leader, a trading name of Venandi Solutions Ltd.