THE TRUST leader

WHITE PAPER · FOR COACHES AND COACHING PROVIDERS

Coaching through a trust lens

Start with the participant's goal. Look at it from the side of the person whose support they need. Follow the change into real work.

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THE STARTING POINT

You don't decide if you're trusted

You don't decide if you're trusted. My book starts with that idea. You know your intention. Other people experience your words and actions, then decide what they can rely on you for.

You may intend to help by checking someone's progress. They may experience the checking as a lack of confidence in them. The gap between intention and experience gives coaching something to explore.

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

The five Trust Questions

The five Trust Questions offer a way to look at a situation from the other person's side. They focus attention on how that person experiences the participant and what they feel able to rely on them for. Here, *I* is the participant and *they* is a particular person in their working life.

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?**

A participant may want a colleague to involve them earlier, support a proposal or give them more room to make decisions. The five Trust Questions help explore what the colleague needs to experience for that relationship to work differently.

The coaching starts with the participant's goal. Where progress depends on other people, the framework connects the support needed with those people's interests and the participant's behaviour.

We identify behaviours, we manage patterns.

What people do next is where I look first for evidence that they are experiencing us differently. Their actions and what they tell us help us understand the pattern across similar situations. The participant changes their behaviour, then explores how others respond and what difference it makes to their goal.

THE FRAMEWORK

The four stages of the Trust Journey

The Trust Journey is Identify, Design, Practise and Reflect. It gives coaches a framework they can use within their own approach.

STAGE	FOCUS
Identify	The people whose support matters, what matters to them and how they experience the participant now.
Design	A behaviour the participant wants to change and the response they would expect from the other person.
Practise	Using that behaviour in the situations where it matters.
Reflect	What changed in the participant's behaviour, the other person's response and progress towards the goal.

How it fits together

The participant's goal gives the work its purpose. The five Trust Questions help explore the relationships involved. The four stages connect that understanding with behaviour, practice and review.

A goal might depend on several stakeholders. The framework can help the participant consider each person's perspective and choose where to focus. One relationship may involve several of the five Trust Questions, with a particular behaviour becoming the focus for practice.

POSSIBLE STARTING QUESTIONS

- What do you want to achieve?
- What would success look like in the work, and what would you see?
- Whose support matters to that goal?

STAGE 1 · IDENTIFY

Identify the people and what matters to them

Identify connects the participant's goal with the people whose support matters. It considers what the participant needs from each person and what offering that support would mean for them.

- Who are the key people involved in your goal?
- What do you need each of them to do?
- Which relationship would be most useful to focus on?

What support would mean for them

Why would they want to? Someone's support may require time, effort or risk. A colleague asked to back a proposal will want to understand how it could affect their team. Looking from their side helps the participant consider what would make that support worthwhile. Their interests still count if they decide not to support you.

- **Why would they want to?**
- What do they care about here?
- What would supporting you mean for them?
- What risks would supporting you create for them?
- What have they told you they need?

How they experience the participant now

The starting point is the relationship as it stands. The five Trust Questions help the participant explore what the other person currently relies on them for and where their behaviour may need attention.

- What do they currently rely on you for?
- What do they say about working with you?
- What patterns do you notice in how they respond to you?
- Which of the five Trust Questions seems most relevant to this situation?

Where their confidence comes from

Their confidence may have several sources, and these can operate together in the same relationship.

Direct trust	Comes from their experience of the participant's behaviour.
Borrowed trust	Comes through a role, title, brand or system before direct experience.
System trust	Comes from the rules and checks around the work, including how people are held accountable.

STAGE 2 · DESIGN

Design the behaviour and the expected response

Design connects what the other person needs to experience with a behaviour the participant can practise. The focus is on an action within the participant's influence.

A participant seeking more room to make decisions might focus on raising delivery risks earlier and explaining their response. That gives their colleague a different experience of how they handle responsibility.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- What would they need to experience differently from you?
- What would you change in your behaviour?
- What would that sound like in your first sentence?
- What support would help you make that change?
- Where could you put it into practice?

The response the participant expects

Knowing what support is needed helps the participant recognise progress. Before practice, they can consider the response they would expect from the other person.

- **If you do this, what would you expect them to do differently?**
- How would that help you move towards your goal?

The expected response is a possibility to explore. What the other person does and says will help explain what happens.

Choose a behaviour you would stand behind even if their support doesn't follow.

STAGE 3 · PRACTISE

Practise where the behaviour matters

Practise takes the intended change into everyday work. The participant uses the behaviour with the person involved, across the situations where it matters.

That might mean raising a concern earlier, involving someone before a decision or following through on an agreement. Repeated experience gives the other person something new to base their confidence on.

The participant can also explore how the other person experiences those moments. Questions could include:

QUESTIONS THE PARTICIPANT CAN ASK THE OTHER PERSON

- What's something you wish you'd heard from me sooner?
- What, if anything, from me has caught you by surprise?
- What part did you feel you had in making that decision?
- What would help you work with me on this?

Their response can reveal a difference between what the participant intended and what the person experienced. That gives the coaching further material to explore.

STAGE 4 · REFLECT

Reflect on the pattern and the goal

Reflect brings attention back to the participant's behaviour, the other person's experience and the goal. It considers what happened across relevant opportunities and how that compares with the response expected.

- What did you do differently?
- How consistently were you able to use that behaviour?
- What is changing in how this person responds to you?
- What did you hear them say mattered most?
- How has their response affected progress towards your goal?
- What else is contributing to that progress?

The review helps the participant decide what to continue or change. Someone's response can have several causes. Their account and the circumstances help make sense of it.

The relationship may improve while the goal remains difficult. Management support, resources or a process may also need to change. Understanding those contributions helps the participant see where further action is needed.

A FICTIONAL EXAMPLE: THE SCHEDULING PROCESS

Goal

A participant wants a new scheduling process adopted across two teams by March. The operations lead is one of the people whose support matters.

Identify

The process could reduce overtime for his team. He is concerned that they will carry the blame if it fails. The participant wants to understand what he needs before he can support the proposal.

Design

The participant chooses to involve him before settling the proposal. They could ask, “What would this mean for your team?” and explain how his concerns have shaped the next version. The response they hope to see is more direct discussion of concerns and joint work on the proposal.

Practise

The participant uses that approach in the next planning conversations. The focus is on giving the operations lead a say while there is still room to change the proposal.

Reflect

The coaching explores how the conversations differed, what the operations lead said and how he responded afterwards. It also considers whether the scheduling work moved forward. Further conversations show whether a pattern is emerging.

The example follows the same thread throughout: the participant's goal, the stakeholder's interests, a change in behaviour and the response that follows.

TRY IT IN YOUR NEXT SESSION

Three steps

1. **Open with the person**

   After agreeing the goal, ask: “Who do you need, and why would they want to?”

   Notice: did the conversation move to one named person and their side of it?

2. **End with an expected response**

   Before agreeing practice, ask: “If you do this, what would you expect them to do differently?”

   Notice: did the participant leave with a behaviour, a real opportunity and a response to look for?

3. **Start the next session with what happened**

   Ask “What did they do?” before “How did it go?”

   Notice: is the participant describing the other person's actions and words, or only their own feelings?

EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

What the research adds

Graßmann, Schölmerich and Schermuly found a stronger working alliance associated with better coaching outcomes.[1] In de Haan and colleagues' retrospective survey, agreement on goals and tasks predicted perceived effectiveness more strongly than the relationship bond did.[2]

De Haan and Nilsson's review of randomised controlled trials found positive average coaching effects, with signs of publication bias and larger effects for self-reported than observed outcomes.[3] For me, that supports following the intended change into the work, alongside the participant's experience of coaching.

Alongside GROW

GROW covers Goal, Reality, Options and Will. Its Will stage already includes action, accountability and measures of progress.[4] The trust lens adds a particular focus on the person being asked to rely on the participant. It can sit alongside GROW, with practice and reflection continuing between conversations.

IN PRACTICE

The framework within a coaching programme

The same lens applies to the coach's own relationships. Participants experience how the coach follows through, understands their situation and considers their interests. The five Trust Questions can support reflection on that work too.

Sponsor agreements and information

The coach, participant and sponsor need a shared understanding of the purpose of the work and how information will be used. This includes confidentiality, its limits, progress reporting and support needed from the organisation. The ICF Code of Ethics addresses these agreements and information responsibilities for those within its scope.[5]

A participant's opportunity to review a written sponsor summary is something to agree. It is not a universal reporting rule.

An account of progress can distinguish four things: what the participant did, what others experienced, what difference it made to work and what contributed. This leaves room for the programme's contribution alongside management support, resources and changes to processes.

Manager and coach roles

A manager coaching a direct report still holds management authority. The role and information boundaries need to be clear. The Jones, Woods and Guillaume review found positive average workplace coaching effects but excluded manager–subordinate and peer coaching.[6] It does not directly validate that arrangement.

Development can support someone whose performance is a concern. Trust Maps, Reflections and Journal entries remain development records. They must not become evidence for ratings, pay or formal capability decisions, which need the organisation's appropriate evidence and procedures.

Bozer and Jones' review treats trust as one contributor to coaching effectiveness alongside goals, feedback, motivation and support.[7] That is the position I would take: the relationship matters alongside whether the work helps the participant act differently and move towards their goal.

Start with yourself

Trust Leader uses Identify, Design, Practise and Reflect to connect a concern with behaviour practice.

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 others, Practitioners can assign prepared Behaviour Playlists to individuals or groups, with each participant working through them between sessions.

Three steps, a one-page quick guide and examples from the Hub:
thetrustleader.com/insights/coaching-through-a-trust-lens

SOURCES

References

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[3] de Haan, E. and Nilsson, V. O. (2023). What can we know about the effectiveness of coaching? A meta-analysis based only on randomized controlled trials. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 22(4), 641–661. doi:10.5465/amle.2022.0107

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

[5] International Coaching Federation (2025). *ICF Code of Ethics*, effective 1 April 2025, standards 1.1 and 2.1 to 2.5. coachingfederation.org

[6] Jones, R. J., Woods, S. A. and Guillaume, Y. R. F. (2016). The effectiveness of workplace coaching: A meta-analysis of learning and performance outcomes from coaching. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 89(2), 249–277. doi:10.1111/joop.12119

[7] Bozer, G. and Jones, R. J. (2018). Understanding the factors that determine workplace coaching effectiveness: A systematic literature review. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 27(3), 342–361. doi:10.1080/1359432X.2018.1446946

Question source: three prompts on goals, first words and listening are adapted from ISCL, *365 Safety Coaching Questions* (undated), questions 5, 115 and 257. A practitioner resource, not evidence of effectiveness.

Scope. This narrative paper offers Trust Leader's practical interpretation of selected research. Sources [1] to [3], [6] and [7] were checked at abstract or record level, not fully appraised, and reviews may share studies. It does not validate the five Trust Questions or this framework as measures of coaching effectiveness, or establish results for Trust Leader or the Hub. The scheduling example is fictional. Apply the questions with attention to roles, language, hierarchy, opportunity and agreed use of information.

THE TRUST Leader

Trust Leader helps leaders practise the behaviours that strengthen trust through everyday work.

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