THE TRUST leader

WHITE PAPER · FOR PEOPLE MANAGERS, HR AND L&D

How leaders' actions strengthen trust in your performance management process

People read the process as evidence about the people running it. What managers do between reviews decides what that evidence says.

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THE STARTING POINT

People read the process as evidence about you

A performance review asks an employee to rely on a judgement that can affect their recognition, development, opportunities and pay. Their manager needs an accurate account of the work and a useful basis for improvement. Both have something at stake.

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

My starting point is that people learn about their manager and their organisation through the way performance is managed. They notice whose contribution gets recognised, what happens when priorities change, and whether the final account reflects the work they actually did.

I want someone leaving a review to understand what mattered, how the judgement was reached and what happens next. They may still disagree. But the account should be open to evidence, and the commitments made in it should hold.

Three insights for the manager

- **A priority change needs to reach the assessment record.** Otherwise an employee can do the work you asked for and later be judged against the plan you replaced.
- **Your explanation must match the decision you can actually make.** Say when another person or a rule decides the outcome, and take a contradiction to the process owner.
- **A request for improvement creates a commitment for you too.** The employee needs the authority, time or support you agreed to provide.

Work on the behaviour within your control

This paper is about managers' behaviour inside an existing performance management process. Trust Leader's contribution is developmental: identify a concern, choose a behaviour others can see, and review what the people affected experience.

A manager can explain an assessment and listen to a correction. Someone with the right authority has to make sure that correction can be acted on. HR and process owners keep responsibility for ratings, reward, formal capability and employment procedures.

The practical question is simple: what does an employee need to see, again and again, to rely on the people responsible for the process?

THE EVIDENCE

Connect expectations with the evidence

Mayer and Davis ran a 14-month field study of employee trust in top management. Within it, a 9-month quasi-experiment found that introducing a more acceptable appraisal system increased trust in top management. Employees' views of management's ability, benevolence and integrity explained the link between how they saw the appraisal system and how much they trusted management.[1]

In other words, people read the appraisal arrangements as evidence about the people responsible. The link to capability, consideration and honesty in Trust Leader's framework is my interpretation of that finding.

Pichler's meta-analysis found the quality of the supervisor relationship, including support and trust, strongly associated with how people react to appraisal.[2] Brown, Hyatt and Benson found low-quality appraisal experiences associated with lower satisfaction and commitment and a greater intention to leave. They measured intentions, not actual departures.[3]

Give behaviour a meaning people can use

"Respect" is hard to assess fairly if each manager supplies their own meaning. For a decision that affects colleagues, the expectation might be: seek relevant views, consider concerns and explain the decision. Those actions can be discussed with reference to real events.

Descriptions still need judgement. Asking for views doesn't prove someone listened. Look at the action, the circumstances and the response, with examples from across the assessment period.

Managers also need a shared understanding of the standards. Roch and colleagues' meta-analysis found that training raters to use a common frame of reference improved rating accuracy.[4] Preparation matters when managers judge behaviour.

Explain the purpose before asking people to open up

CIPD's evidence review separates developmental appraisal from assessment used for pay or promotion, and recommends holding the conversations separately.[5] Say what the conversation is for, and how the information will be used, before asking someone to speak openly.

Before work begins, make the expected outcomes, behaviour standards and evidence clear. When priorities change, confirm what the change means for earlier commitments. At assessment, show how the evidence became a judgement and what can still be corrected. Those are behaviours a manager can practise. Where the rules prevent an accurate account, the process owner needs to act.

RULES AND HONESTY

Be honest about the rules you are applying

A rating rule can put a manager in the position of saying something they don't believe. Take a fictional team where everyone has met the stated standard, but a quota still puts someone in a category called "below expectations". The label no longer describes a standard that person failed to meet.

Do they believe what I say?

The employee can compare the explanation with the work they did. So can everyone watching.

A bell curve describes a pattern in data. A forced distribution requires a set share of people in each category. A quota constrains the overall pattern without deciding in advance who gets which rating.

Explain what the decision is really about

Assessment against a standard, ranking against colleagues and selection for limited opportunities are different judgements. Several people can perform their current role well while fewer can be promoted, so keep the account of current performance accurate when you explain a selection.

Moderation can test whether managers used consistent standards and comparable evidence. If a quota changes a well-supported rating, explain who changed it and why, and take the contradiction to the process owner.

The research gives reasons to look closely at these conditions. Schleicher, Bull and Green found raters reported more difficulty and lower fairness with forced distribution in their experiments.[6] Berger, Harbring and Sliwka reported productivity gains in some laboratory conditions, and a harmful effect where sabotage was possible.[7] Neither settles what a particular workplace arrangement asks people to accept.

Notice what gets recognised between reviews

Imagine an organisation that weights behaviour at 40% of the rating while repeatedly celebrating results achieved by dismissing colleagues' concerns. (A fictional example, not a recommended weighting.) Employees learn what really matters from recognition and opportunity throughout the year, not from the form.

Aubrey Daniels' work connects expected behaviour with measurement, feedback and reinforcement.[8] One practical idea from it: notice the action and its useful effect when it happens. If someone raises a delivery risk early, recognise what that made possible and act on the concern. A printed behaviour standard is hard to rely on when everyday responses reward its opposite.

THE TRUST LENS

Look from the employee's side

Direct trust comes from experience of someone's behaviour. Borrowed trust is carried by a role, title, brand or system before that experience exists. System trust is confidence in the surrounding standards, governance and accountability.

A review draws on all three. An employee can rely on their manager's fairness and still doubt the moderation process. Another may rely on the organisation's reputation at first, then become cautious when an agreed change disappears from the record.

The five Trust Questions help the manager look at their own part. Here, *I* is the manager and *they* is the employee.

TRUST QUESTION	WHAT TO CHECK, AND WHAT TO DO
Do they believe what I say?	Can the employee connect my explanation with the actual criteria and evidence? Explain the purpose and decision honestly, including any limit on my authority.
Do they believe I'll do what I said?	Have I confirmed revised expectations and provided the support I promised? Give an early update when a commitment is at risk, and agree what happens next.
Do they believe I can handle what's needed?	Have I prepared an account that reflects the work and the standards? Find missing information and get help before settling the judgement.
Do they feel I really understand them?	What has the employee told me, and how have I responded? Explain what their account changes, or what still needs checking.
Do they believe I act with their interests in mind?	Can I show how I weighed their contribution, circumstances and concerns alongside the organisation's needs? Explain how to challenge, and follow through on support.

Give participation a response

Cawley, Keeping and Levy's meta-analysis found participation strongly associated with how people react to appraisal, especially satisfaction.[9] An employee's account deserves real consideration, even when it doesn't change the outcome.

Be clear about what is still open, check the evidence and explain your response. Asking for views after everything is settled makes a promise the conversation can't keep. And explaining an unfair rule clearly doesn't make the rule fair.

IN PRACTICE

Practise one behaviour across real priority changes

Start with a concern people recognise: what happens when a manager changes an employee's priorities. The Trust Journey gives the development work its order: Identify, Design, Practise, Reflect.

THE PRIORITY CHANGE, STAGE BY STAGE

Identify the experience

Review recent changes with the people involved: what was agreed, what was recorded and what later appeared in assessment. Count the relevant changes and how many reached the record. Ask the employee what they needed to rely on, and keep their account alongside the record.

Design a behaviour people can see

When a priority changes, the manager confirms the revised outcome, timing and effect on earlier commitments. Set a recording deadline that fits the work and agree who can update the assessment record. Pass any process obstacle to someone with authority to fix it, with a date for a response.

Practise in ordinary work

Use the behaviour on real priority changes, and keep enough information to see whether the agreement and the record stay in step. Explain the purpose of the development work before asking people for feedback.

Reflect on action and experience

Count the priority changes and how many had an accurate revision recorded in time. A figure such as 7 of 10 makes the scale visible. Ask the employee whether the account reflects the agreement and what is still wrong. Then decide what to repeat, adjust or refer to someone else.

Feedback should help the person choose a next action. Kluger and DeNisi found positive average effects from feedback interventions, but more than a third of the effects were negative across their varied tasks and settings.[10] Check how feedback lands, rather than counting conversations alone.

BEFORE YOUR NEXT REVIEW

Three things to try

1. **The same-day priority note**

   When: you change someone's priority. **Say or write:** "We've agreed X now comes first. That moves Y to [date], and I'll update your objective by [day]."

   Check: count changes with an accurate note out of all relevant changes, for example 6 of 9, and how many promised record updates were done on time.

2. **The missing-evidence question**

   When: before you finalise an assessment. **Ask:** "What should I know that might change this account?"

   Check: record what changed, or why the account stayed the same, as x of y assessments.

3. **The Monday question**

   When: the last five minutes of the review. **Ask:** "What will you do differently this week, and what do you need from me?" Book the follow-up before you leave.

   Check: count support commitments you delivered by the agreed date. Discuss a missed one before asking the employee about limited progress.

Keep development evidence in its place

Development can support someone whose performance is a concern. It gives them a place to practise, reflect and improve. But development work can't become the evidence used to judge them.

Trust Maps record how a person believes they are experienced. Trust Maps, Reflections and Journal entries must not become evidence for ratings, pay or formal capability decisions.

Formal decisions need the organisation's own procedures and evidence. Agree the purpose, reporting and access to information before development begins. If the process can't honour a revised objective or consider a factual correction, raise that with its owner. Development helps a manager act more dependably inside the process; changing the process belongs to the people responsible for it.

Start with yourself

Trust Leader uses Identify, Design, Practise and Reflect to focus development on an experience that matters to another person.

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 alongside their development conversations.

Three things to try, a free template and Hub examples: **thetrustleader.com/insights/leaders-actions-and-performance-management**

SOURCES

References

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Scope. This narrative paper offers Trust Leader's developmental interpretation of selected studies, research syntheses and practitioner sources. It is not a systematic review, and reviews may share studies. Most sources were checked at abstract or record level, not fully appraised; for [7], the productivity and sabotage findings are taken from the published abstract and may come from different experimental conditions. The examples are fictional. Neither the five Trust Questions nor the practice counts are validated here as assessment measures, and the sources do not show results for Trust Leader or the Hub. Apply the ideas with attention to roles, language, hierarchy and working arrangements.

THE TRUST Leader

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

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