

Beware of the Potential Harms of Trust: Five Safeguards



In this article you will learn about the potential harms of trust and five safeguards or ground rules to prevent them. How we define trust is the important issue.

While it may not at first seem pertinent, driving in traffic can be a helpful metaphor for understanding different definitions of trust in the workplace.

A couple of years ago I was rear-ended at a stop light. I got very angry and leapt out of the car to confront the “reckless, inept” driver who hit me only to meet a tearful woman apologetic over the accident. She told me she had come from a medical appointment in which she had received bad news. Learning this, I was embarrassed at my impulsive road rage.

Two different definitions of trust

In the moment of stress, I leapt to flawed conclusions about the *inherent* reliability or trustworthiness of the other driver. Under stress or pressure, there is a strong tendency to treat trust as due to a personal trait of trustworthiness and make global, black or white judgments.

In the workplace, for example, when agreements appear broken or we feel treated poorly we might leap to a global, negative judgment and tell a person “You are not trustworthy” or “I don’t trust you.” Or, this judgment might lead us to withdraw from communication. Either way, both actions can be experienced as disrespectful and provoke defensiveness which harms collaboration.

In contrast, trust becomes less black or white if we see outcomes in specific situations as arising from complex, interacting factors. Breakdowns and mistakes are inevitable even when people are well-intentioned and skilled. From this perspective, trust is a state which is always changing and requires constant attention and adjustments from everyone involved to build and sustain.

In both driving and in the workplace we are *choosing* to make ourselves vulnerable to the actions of others. There is no absolute, risk-free trustworthiness. In driving, to help deal with the risks, there are safeguards or ground rules to guide behavior (e.g. “stop when the light is red”). In the workplace, all too frequently, ground rules for work agreements are not clear or are confused over time by competing demands and priorities.

Five safeguards or ground rules

Here are five ground rules or safeguards that approach trust as a constantly changing state which must be jointly managed. While not meant to be comprehensive, this guidance serves as a foundation for strengthening team collaboration over time.

1. Agree to assume everyone has good intentions.

2. For each task, define shared goals, roles, priorities, and timelines—that is, establish clarity about what is being agreed to and who will do what by when.
3. Define norms for communication, feedback, and decision making. For example, it is crucial that different views and troublesome issues are actively elicited and explored rather than debated or avoided. Feedback should emphasize referring to specific behaviors in specific situations as opposed to global judgments.
4. Assure regular check-in times to see how things are going. Assume that misalignment, miscommunication, and mistakes *will* happen.
5. Leaders need to assure clarity and consistent application of norms and activate performance intervention as appropriate when someone repeatedly will not follow them.

It is curious that some influential books on leadership and teamwork do not list the word “trust” in the index or as a major topic heading. Also, I have seen mission and values statements of highly successful organizations which do not include the word or mention it only very briefly. In these cases, terms such as fairness, respect, honesty, integrity and psychological safety are used which have much overlap and interdependency with trust. The five ground rules for trust also help in building all of these qualities of relationship.

The challenge of working with trust

Working with trust is challenging because, in response to stress and pressure, we may cause harm by leaping to flawed conclusions about the personal trait of trustworthiness in others. In fact, trust is a constantly changing state dependent on the quality of safeguards or ground rules we *mutually* negotiate with others to manage risk.

Additional resources for developing norms

- [An Easily Missed Ingredient for High Team Performance](#)
- [Don't wait. Apply principles for dialogue in every conversation.](#)
- [Five Barriers to Feedback and High Capacity for Transformation](#)
- [Are flaws in decision-making processes causing conflict and poor alignment?--a quick diagnostic](#)

Brief overview and list of references for “Beware of the Potential Harms of Trust”

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About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

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He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Currently, in addition to his consulting practice, he serves as faculty for the leadership track he created for the IHI—Project ECHO collaborative on improving access and office efficiency in primary care.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com.