

Trust

Trust is an outcome, not a product. It comes through struggle, not team-building exercises.

It is well known that an attribute of high performing teams is a high level of trust. Numerous studies have shown that teams with high trust get measurably better outcomes. I'm glad there are studies that validate this, but it is obvious to the point of conducting a study to demonstrate that the sky is blue. We know this intuitively because the inverse is so obviously true. Teams with low trust exhibit all the characteristics of dysfunctional teams.

The question obviously becomes, how do you generate trust? And of course that is the problem. Trust is not something that can be 'generated'. Trust is an outcome, not a product. No amount of team-builds, trust falls, or sharing your childhood trauma with your teammates will create an environment of trust. So many team-builds I have had the misfortune of attending ended up as naval-gazing rituals that did little to generate anything other than a deep concern for when lunch will start.

Ok, so if sharing awful childhood experiences doesn't generate trust, then what does?

The simple and uncomfortable answer is suffering. Ok – suffering might be too strong. Struggle might be a better word.

I have had a dream of dropping an executive team off in the woods 200 miles from civilization with instructions that their objective is to figure out how to get back. I guarantee you that whoever made it back, if they made it back, would be a high functioning team.

And why is this so? Because the important work of survival would require them to divest themselves of their pretense, and every façade they currently cling to that inhibits trust on the team. All of their positional and political aspirations, all of their posturing, and all of their insecurities and anxieties would melt away. In that kind of environment, it quickly becomes apparent who people are.

I was once a furniture mover back in college for the summer. I have never worked harder and have never been paid less. What I learned very quickly was that carrying furniture in 98-degree heat armed only with a jug of water and a Snickers bar does not allow you to hide. In that environment it quickly becomes apparent who is lazy, who is trustworthy, who has your back, and who does not. The difficulty of the work burned away every mask.

Truly, if you want teamwork, then give the team work. In that sense, the struggle is the point. We view struggle as something to avoid and something to mitigate. But trust comes to us no other way. Trust comes to us through consistent truth-telling and consistent action under pressure.

I am not advocating for contrived misery to build trust. But I am arguing that trust comes to us when we are engaged together in something important and difficult. We can design work in our organizations such that trust is the outcome of the struggle to accomplish it.

Important Work in the Courage Economy Framework is just that. Work that significantly moves the needle and work that genuinely differentiates our place in the market. If you want to genuinely differentiate yourself in the market or move the needle, then that work is definitionally important and difficult. Otherwise, everyone would do it.

When we design our work this way we get two great outcomes – output that moves the needle and trust. Win.

So, the next time you think about a team build to create trust. Don't. Instead, get the team together and design a body of work or stretch goal that is important and difficult to achieve. The work itself is your team build.