

The Trust Trap Worksheet

What we know about groups

Research shows that groups, including medical teams, often experience dysfunctions as they work together. There are many reasons for this but some of the most common causes include:

- Poor communication where information is misinterpreted or not shared clearly
- Ambiguous KPIs or goals where criteria are vague or timeframes not specified
- Changing group membership where new personalities disrupt the group dynamic
- External factors and demands from patients, suppliers, clients or regulators

Additionally, under stress and time pressure, these risks can become magnified. Yet you as the leader of your practice or work area need people to work smoothly, flexibly and adaptively to achieve the best patient outcomes.

Research from Healthcare

Team and group effectiveness in medical settings is particularly prone to dysfunction given the nature of the work, where procedures are complex and errors can have serious consequences on patient wellbeing. In these situations, the quality of leadership – that is, your ability to effectively direct others – is the critical factor in avoiding group dysfunctions. Leadership expert Professor Amy Edmondson at Harvard has studied group dynamics in the medical context for many years and found:

- Groups with identical hierarchies can perform statistically differently from each other
- The key differentiator is Psychological Safety that allows open, non-judgmental challenge
- The role of the leader in creating this joint problem-solving orientation is essential

Yet as she says: *“Human nature makes the right behaviors really hard”*, meaning that in the absence of focused and deliberate leadership, dysfunctions and disconnects are likely to occur, leading to lower performance and more mistakes.

The Trust Trap

One key requirement for psychological safety and joint problem-solving is high trust. As a leader, if you can enhance trust between group members you will be taking an important step towards disarming common group dysfunctions. The Trust Equation is a reliable and proven method leaders can use to do this.

$$\text{Trustworthiness} = \frac{\text{Credibility} + \text{Reliability} + \text{Intimacy}}{\text{Self-Orientation}}$$

Source: Maister, D. "The Trusted Advisor" 2002

Explanation

Research has identified four measurable attributes that create trust. Here is how each factor works in practical terms.

What is Credibility?

- A believable biography with correct qualifications and experience to deliver the task
- Competent skills that are clearly visible and deployed by the person in question
- A track record that shows strong results and patient outcomes

What is Reliability?

- Someone who "walks the talk" and does what they say they will do
- Situations where expectations match execution
- Behaviors that are clear and consistent

What is Intimacy?

- The relationship extends beyond the task at hand
- Behaviors that show people are available and interested in collaborating
- Warmth and care towards others that are genuine and generous

What is Self-Orientation?

- With "good" self-orientation, effort is aimed at common rather than personal goals
- Information is shared and communicated openly with others
- When trade-offs are needed, the reasons are clear and understood by all

Avoiding the Trust Trap

If trust is low and group performance is suffering, here is how you can apply the Trust Equation.

- Identify the team member or working group that has a trust issue
- Assign a score between 1 (low) - 10 (high) to each factor based on your own perception
- Calculate the result e.g. C (8) + R (5) + I (3) / SO (2) = 8 out of a possible 30 (10+10+10/1)
- Now plan how to engage a conversation about the lower scores with the other person or group
- Since trust must be mutual, ask open questions and seek to understand the other's perspectives
- Take each factor and explore together why your perceived scores are low
- Then discuss and agree actions and behaviors that will increase results over time
- If you are brave, you can also apply the equation to yourself to see how much others trust you!

Actions you can take

- Recognize trust as the basis of all group dynamics
- To address trust openly, make debate and difference a strength rather than a weakness
- Allow a diversity of views and try to hear quiet voices to generate options about improving trust
- Retest: relationships are constantly evolving, so maintaining trust needs constant attention

Key takeaways

- Research shows that trust is the foundation of all working relationships
- Yet trust is also hard to build: *"Trust arrives on foot and leaves on a horse"*
- Self-orientation is the most difficult factor to measure, but has the greatest impact if addressed
- Remember that a conversation is the only way to begin addressing issues of trust in groups
- Be tolerant: scoring highly on all factors is hard, and any result above 10 is good
- The Trust Equation is a proven method to avoid Trust Traps and improve effectiveness in groups

Questions for reflection

- What is the current level of trust in your team, practice or professional group?
- What factors are the weakest and why might this be true?
- What could be the impact of higher trust (beyond the feelgood factor?)
- How could more disclosure and dialogue strengthen your leadership and relationships?
- What might be possible in your team or practice if trust measurably improved (>20?)