Start with Trust

How to give and earn trust in your organization

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The last 19 months have turned the workforce—and most of its traditional communication, accountability, and team structures—on its head. Work is now more virtual, geographically dispersed, and flexible. As 2022 approaches, HR leaders are moving past firefighting and focused on establishing long-term strategies that incorporate opportunities and learnings needed for future success. These strategies range from enabling the skill sets required in the future, to supporting the evolving needs of the workforce, to activating the agility necessary to navigate change.[1] Much has been written about the changes demanded for the future, but it's critical to focus on one essential tenet underlying these efforts—trust. For businesses to thrive, a strong foundation of trust between employees, managers, and organizations is vital.

The pandemic has exposed gaps in trust in a myriad of ways. Employees are worried about employers' ability to ensure their safety and career development. Managers are confounded about how to measure productivity without in person interaction. Leaders are questioning whether their workforce has the skill sets required for the future.[2] And while most organizations have long strived to foster trust in the workplace, today's task of building trust is more urgent than ever. In a new study by Workplace Intelligence, at least 80% of respondents believe being able to trust coworkers, managers, and senior leadership is important for their happiness at work.[3] However, while 92% of respondents say the past year has positively impacted them in different ways, 40% feel they've lost control of their career, 83% want to make changes in their career over the next year, and 85% aren't satisfied with their employer's support.[4]

> Trust has changed over the pandemic, and I think our notion of trust has evolved. Today, people are asking 'Am I safe at work? Is my employer taking care of me? Are they helping me take care of my family? Are they providing a workplace I can be confident that if I have to go in, I'm not going to be exposed to the virus?'
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> **Pamela Stroko**
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HR leaders have an opportunity and responsibility to address this trust gap by ensuring that trust is manifested and earned through every aspect of their people strategy. By investing in equitable programs, communicating consistently, demonstrating strong leadership, and providing growth, organizations can build trust in each interaction. This enables their existing teams to do their best work and empowers their increasingly digital and distributed workforce.

Underlying all this is the recognition that trust helps create the commitment, investment, accountability, and passion required for companies and employees to thrive in the future.

Pamela Stroko, Vice President, HCM Transformation and Thought Leadership at Oracle, puts the trust imperative simply for HR leaders: “Build trust as aggressively and fervently with employees as you do with your customers.”

An evolving understanding of trust

Trust is a concept most of us recognize as an important part of every relationship we have. Much like in personal relationships, trust in the workplace is a two-way street—a collaboration between employees and employers, with both sides showing up, giving their best, and being consistent. While the recent conversations on workplace trust have often centered on the need for organizations to trust employees, especially in a remote environment where in-person interaction is limited, HR leaders must shift the conversation to one of reciprocity—building trust both across and within every level of the organization.

This shift in perspective is especially critical because employee expectations have shifted dramatically in a talent market that has become increasingly competitive, and employees who don't trust their employers to support their new personal and work goals will vote with their feet.[5] In July of 2021, there were a record 11.1 million job openings in the U.S.[6] In the same month, Monster reported that 93% of people are thinking about quitting their job, with one-third of people pointing to burnout as the reason.[7] The Workplace Intelligence study further shows that 7 out of 10 people are feeling stuck in their jobs.[8] As a result of these feelings of stagnation and burnout, 83% of study respondents say they want to make some type of career change—everything from switching jobs to learning new skills to starting their own business. Disappointingly, however, these same people don't trust their employers to help them, with a startling 85% saying their employers aren't doing enough to support them in these transitions.[9]

It's easy to see where these disparities could lead. A lack of leadership creates distrust, which leads to low productivity, resentment, and retention.[10] These issues combine to create bad outcomes for the company and the individual, but that isn't what has to happen. But that isn't what has to happen. In fact, there is now an opportunity for employers and employees to rethink trust and build better organizations from the top-down and the bottom-up. Stroko emphasizes that to truly make trust an anchor of an organization, it must be fostered at and between the organizational, leadership, and employee levels.

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There are many levels of trust. There's organizational trust. Do I trust my company to do the right thing? Do I trust them to act honorably and equitably in the market? Do I trust them to treat me fairly? And then there's the next level, which is trust in leadership. Do I trust upper management in this company? Are they going to lead us in the right direction? Are they going to make the right choices? Am I going to have the right environment here? From there, you get to your direct manager, where people in companies experienced the most trust or not.

Pamela Stroko

Vice President, HCM Transformation and Thought Leadership, Oracle

The core drivers of workplace trust

The decision to trust or not trust is made by individuals at daily interaction points at the workplace. As HR leaders look to build trust across the organization, it's important to keep in mind some of the main dimensions and behaviors that create or dilute trust. Author and consultant Charles Feldman highlights four critical factors:[11]

Drivers of Trust

Care—Do you have the other person's interests in mind as well as your own?

Sincerity—Do you say what you mean and can you be taken seriously?

Reliability—Do you keep your commitments and honor your promises?

Competence—Do you have the capacity, knowledge, and resources to do a particular job?[12]

Stroko points to the value of this paradigm in understanding the trust dynamics in organizations, especially over the last 19-months. Trust is ultimately revealed in the day-to-day interactions across the people in an organization, including employee job security, remote work reliability, and workforce dependability.

Nine ways to build trust in your organization

As HR leaders work to recruit and retain top talent, upskill and reskill their workforce, and drive growth and profitability, it's clear building trust must be a core part of every strategy. Here are nine tactics HR leaders should implement today.

1. Take care of the fundamentals

Since the start of the pandemic, safety naturally became one of the biggest organizational trust issues. Employees wanted to know that their organization supported them and their choices—that it valued its employees' lives and welfare and was taking active steps to ensure everyone's well-being. Some organizations fell short and suffered the consequences, one of which has been a big impact on employee retention. In August 2021, nearly 4.3 million people left their jobs—the highest monthly exodus in the U.S. since December 2000—and millions more have been voluntarily severing ties each month.[13] While there are multiple reasons for this trend, one major factor has been employees' lack of confidence that their employers could support their safety and well-being.[14]

Today, the definition of safety has expanded. Employees at all levels want to know that their organization is founded on principles of protecting them from harm and actively advocating for their health and safety on every level: physically, emotionally, mentally, and financially.[15]

2. Move from monitoring activity to driving accountability

The conversation around trust has also expanded to emphasize accountability, connections, and relationships in the new workplace. Old ways of working, including closely monitored work, work hours, meeting schedules, and more, are no longer effective—nor valuable. Instead, employers must trust their employees to hold themselves accountable.

The conversation is transitioning from activity to accountability," says Stroko. When managers view trust narrowly, they give employees the wrong message. Stroko adds, "Employees don't want to be monitored. They'd like to be given a goal and left to their own devices on how to achieve it."

Stroko says employees rightly want to know: "What am I really being measured on here? Am I being measured on hours at a laptop, or am I being measured on where I am on this project?" Accountability is more results-driven and holistic than traditional workforce notions of trust. It's not about monitoring people; it's about inspiring and mentoring them—recognizing employees' talents, their needs, and the motivation they need to stay passionate and engaged.

And employees want to be engaged. 73% of Workplace Intelligence study respondents say that they are motivated to make a career change, and they want company support.[16] Meeting team members' needs means moving away from enforcement and towards trust and leadership. It could look like offering employees more flexible work hours, hybrid work, or allowing parents to duck out to pick up their kids from school—as long as they get the job done. "If we actually trusted people, we could have had flexible work years ago," Stroko says. "We had the technology to do it, but we don't trust people enough to have flexible work. And to some degree up until we went into the pandemic, that was probably true for a lot of people."

3. Building trust in all levels of leadership

All levels of management in an organization play a critical role in fostering trust. Stroko calls this dimension "body of leaders" trust and says employees want to know some basic things about the people in charge of them: "Do I trust upper management in this company? Are they going to lead us in the right direction? Are they going to make the right choices? Am I going to be in the right environment here?"

Direct managers also play an outsized role. The relationship between employees and direct managers is one of the most important factors for employee engagement and satisfaction.[17] The start of the pandemic often diluted trust in this relationship, as managers scrambled to better understand how to effectively run remote teams, often without adequate training or tools, and turned to micromanaging or monitoring employee time.[18] As time has gone on, managers are starting to understand that whether it's supporting employees in their career development, coaching, communicating in real-time, or setting clear metrics, their role in fostering trust isn't about oversight; it's about partnership.

Stroko discusses how trust in leadership manifests in greater retention, effort, passion, and ultimately, better business outcomes. She notes, "One of the key factors in trust is really simple: Employees feel their managers keep their promises. And when employees trust their managers, they become more emotionally committed to the company. I think you can feel it in your own job when you are more committed. You may go above and beyond regularly, but when you're more committed, it's effortless. And when companies are not turning over key employees, they actually create greater growth and profitability."

4. Deliver consistent communication

Clear communication is the bedrock of any trusting relationship, especially at work. Managers and employees need to create a culture where they follow through on promises, speaking honestly about what they can do and then doing it. This should occur at the day-to-day team level, of course, but also on a company-wide level—making clear brand promises and commitments and then meeting or exceeding them.

At its core, trust is about helping employees understand their job and their potential. Stroko says this means "communicating in such a way that everyone on the team knows what's expected of them and knows that you can help them get there." Instead of hiring someone on a vague premise and only clarifying their jobs at their first-year reviews, Stroko says you need to tell people clearly, early, and often what you want them to do. "If you want to build trust with somebody on day one," she says, "tell them what's expected and tell them what good looks like."

5. Embrace shifting views of success

To earn employees' trust, employers need to commit to transparent, effective business strategies that give workers a sense of stability. They also need to make decisions that consider the well-being of every employee, creating good jobs with defined expectations with opportunities to learn, advance, and grow. And they need to realize their employees' ideas about success are shifting. In the Workplace Intelligence study, 88% of respondents said that their view of success has changed in the last year, with 42% identifying work-life balance as a top priority and 33% wanting more flexibility and control over when and where they worked.[19] To build trust, organizational leaders need to hear their employees' new needs and concerns and rise to the challenge of meeting them.

6. Acknowledge mistakes

Company leaders need to earn their employees' trust by being honest and consistent. This means doing the right thing whenever possible. As Stroko urges, "Whatever promises you make, you keep them. You do what you say. You deliver what you promise. You have the integrity of a straight message." But sometimes, leaders don't deliver on their promises. And building trust also means admitting when you've done the wrong thing. "If you make a bold mistake, make a bold apology," Stroko says. "There is nothing more trust-building than somebody saying, 'We shouldn't have done that'."

> Communication doesn't always have to be words—it can be presence. It can also be knowing that one is supported.
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7. Leverage technology to empower employees

Creating a culture of trust can be enabled by technology. The workplace of the future will use AI responsibly to empower employees in their day-to-day work, support their careers, enable flexible work environments, improve productivity, and build connections.

At first, it might sound surprising that AI can help with such high-level tasks as assisting employees with their career goals, but AI has grown exponentially in the past several years. Today, employees see it as a help, not a hindrance.

That doesn't mean that humans aren't important, of course. Respondents still wanted leaders to help them with the more personal aspects of career-building, with 46% indicating humans can better offer advice based on personal experience, 44% saying humans can better identify their strengths and weaknesses, and 38% wanting personal recommendations for new jobs or roles.[20] Stroko says the key skill leaders need to have is knowing when to deploy technology and when to step in themselves.

"We have to look at where AI is going to drive employee experience in a positive way and where people want that human connection and that human relationship," she says. "Figure out where technology enables trust and figure out where you need human connections because both are necessary for your success moving forward."

8. Foster equitable relationships and standards across the organization

One of the most important things a company can do to improve trust and productivity is to avoid favoritism and invest in every employee's talent equally. Stroko says favoritism is the first thing she looks for when she consults with companies on building office-wide trust. The reason is simple: If someone is not included, they feel like an outsider. "And the minute somebody is an outsider, you can't really have trust with that person because they're not connected to you. They're not sharing the accountability for the results of the business. They're focused on becoming an insider."

Successful companies not only resist the urge to favor some employees over others, but they actively invest in employees at every level, helping them achieve their goals and make the next step in their careers. However, many companies are still trapped in old patterns of recognizing a select few people with the most talent and shepherding them towards upper management while ignoring the rest. "Some organizations make very obvious investments in certain people," Stroko says. "You're the future of the company. You're 'high potential.' And for everyone else, we need you to come in and get the work done, but we're never going to invest in you."

Stroko points out that this approach creates resentment and poor performance. The antidote is to identify each employee's talents and goals and ensure their value to the company is recognized, whether they have C-suite potential or not. At every level, organizations should invest in employees' learning, develop them for the next role, and in some cases, have honest conversations where there isn't a great fit. Not everyone will become the next CEO, but every individual has the potential to grow. Ultimately, organizations should see each person as a contributor in their own sphere. "And that's really how you get from all the squabbling to a better, more effective organization," Stroko says. "Do you have a place where everyone can shine?"

9. Invest in learning and development of employees

Future forward HR leaders recognize that investing in the development of employees is both a moral and business imperative. Organizations have an opportunity to play a role in supporting employees to reach their personal goals and be their best selves.

This requires knowing what your employees need. And according to the Workplace Intelligence survey, employees want to make big changes—with support from their leaders. Almost three-quarters of respondents report that they are motivated to make big changes in their careers in the next year, but only 55% know how to do this. Many identify common obstacles to achieving their full potential. One-fifth say they feel uncertainty around what career path or change made sense for them, and another fifth say they lack the confidence to make the change, lack growth opportunities in their company, or are afraid to fail. Furthermore, 17% say that their company doesn't offer the right career development tools.[21]

Companies serious about thriving in the future of work need to be just as serious about investing in their employees. They can offer paid time off for learning opportunities, deploy skills-building programs informed by employee needs, use AI to identify and fill skills gaps, create mentorship programs, or focus on internal hiring and employee development. But whatever they do, it has to be a priority. "Always invest in learning and developing people," Stroko says. "You want to create an organization that's compelling for people. Help them learn and grow and develop your managers to support them."

> People see when you make distinctions of investing somewhere and not investing elsewhere. I would say organizations should invest everywhere, but they should make the right investment. You probably aren't going to send somebody that's a manager right now to run a business line, but you can develop them for the next role. And that's what you need to focus on.
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> **Pamela Stroko**
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Conclusion

For HR leaders and employers to build a culture of trust in an evolving workplace reality, they must take an approach that focuses on building trust in every dimension of work life. Building trust on the organizational level looks like investing in employees as much as the brand and delivering safe, secure, and stable work. At the management level, it requires clear communication, empathy, and flexibility—trusting workers to show up in a way that makes sense for their life and career goals. And finally, it means attracting and retaining valuable talent by investing in workers, identifying their goals and aspirations, and creating real paths to achieving that. Going forward, organizations have an opportunity to build a new kind of trust: one that's better for employers, employees, and for business growth.

Learn more

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