

Trust: The key to developing high-functioning teams

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In the modern Air Force, there is a large portion of attention and energy directed towards developing high-functioning teams. Following the Global Financial Crisis in 2010, the world went into a state of needing to do more with less. The militaries around the world were not exempt from these circumstances. As the ADF refined their practices, the do more with less mantra did not seem to fit as well as expected and a focus turned to prioritisation. After prioritising financially through the many facets of the ADF, the focus landed on its members. The Air Force raised the question, how can the Air Force develop high-functioning teams of technicians that achieve more with limited resources. This led to addressing some shortfalls within communication by implementing the Plan, Brief, Execute, Debrief system within the technical workforce. Following this, a directive was released on how memory base execution could be utilised within the technical environment, which seemed to impart a sense of trust within the technical workforce. One could argue, this sense of trust is what sparked the further growth in the technical workforce to become the high achievers they are today.

Description of Trust

Trust is a personal experience that is multifaceted and hard for the average person to put into words. Therefore, for this paper will refer to trust as being a belief in the reliability and ability of another individual or group. More importantly, is how it feels to be trusted.

Many years ago, there was a common phrase used; trust is something that is earned, not given. However, since the shift in mentality and the further development of leadership with Air Force, trust is seen as something that good leaders give freely until proven otherwise. One could argue what makes a great leader is; "the reason proving otherwise" is remediated, and then trust is once again freely given by the leader.

Why Trust is Important

Trust is suggested to be a key variable that leads to developing high-performance teams. [Simon Sinek](#) (2014) mentioned in his TED Talk "*Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe*" when trust does not exist within a team, members divert a portion of their attention to protecting themselves and justifying their actions. Which may look like concealing mistakes, covering up weaknesses and less quality communication ([Sinek](#), 2014). When trust does exist within a team, members divert that attention to ways to improve themselves and their environment ([Sinek](#), 2014). Within a trusting team, members feel safe to be vulnerable about mistakes or their weaknesses ([Sinek](#), 2014; [Lapshun & Fusch](#), 2021). When in a trusting team, members can have open task focused discussions on how to improve efficiency where the best idea wins, no matter who suggests it ([Sinek](#), 2014; [Hakanen, Häkkinen & Soudunsaari](#), 2015). A team that is consistently performing while optimising their methods or processes, is important for Air Force to deliver optimal capability with limited resources (Young, 2024).

Types of Trust

In the context of team dynamics, there are two main types of trust. Cognitive or competency based trust, and affective or emotional based trust (Burkus, 2022). Cognitive or competency based trust is the teams collective belief each members abilities (Burkus, 2022). More specifically, a confidence in each members being capable of completing their work related tasks effectively and efficiently. Affective or emotional trust is far deeper of a trust and is more personal (Burkus, 2022). This type of trust is the belief that each member cares for the wellbeing of one another and intentionally act with positive intent.

Developing Trust

In many ways, the leader sets the tone and trust may be no exception to the rule. However, trust is a two-way relationship that must be managed. Meaning the follower needs to be able to trust that the leader will provide them with the training, resources and information to enable them to carry out their tasks. Furthermore, the leader needs to trust that the follower will carry out tasks as directed and clearly articulate the limits of their skills and knowledge. Which is the formation of cognitive or competency based trust (Burkus, 2022; Hakanen & Soudunsaari, 2012). Additionally, this does required the leader to be approachable and seek to develop the follower to their full potential, which is a tone set by the leader (Sinek, 2014). This could be considered a demonstration of affective or emotional trust, which may be the key to forming an affective trusting relationship (Burkus, 2022; Hakanen & Soudunsaari, 2012). Therefore, with both forms of trust are something that is given first by the leader, and then reciprocated by the follower.

Summary

To conclude this piece, trust is an essential component of high-performance teams. Teams with cognitive and affective trust will operate more efficiently to start with, and with ever-increasing efficiency and performance (Burkus, 2022; Lapshun & Fusch, 2021). Trust is given by the leaders first through an action, which may include; granting permission to work from home, or remotely, allowing freedom to plan to an intent, or allowing the member to execute a plan unsupervised (the art of strategic absence) (Hakanen & Soudunsaari, 2012). The leader maintaining an honest and approachable relationship is key for members to develop affective trust in their followers, and a part of the two-way relationship. While investing resources and training into the follower, is the key to developing cognitive trust in their followers (Burkus, 2022). To maintain this two-way relationship of trust requires a shift in mentality of the leaders, which has been evident recently in the examples provided. No longer are members seen as a sponge to be squeezed to see what you can get out of them, but a fire that burns brighter and grows the more you put into them. Trust is a potent and essential fuel for this fire.

References

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