

THE CAPACITY FOR TRUST – BOTH TO TRUST OTHERS AND TO INSPIRE TRUST – IS A FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTER TRAIT EVERY LEADER WITH GREAT RESPONSIBILITY MUST HAVE

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positivepace®

## Leading with Trust

### SCALING IMPACT BY EARNING AND EXTENDING TRUST

**T**wenty-twenty was a year of world-shifting events caused by a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. It tested everything we know and upended our paradigms about business and leadership. In our work with leaders, we have coached them about leading in complexity and having an adaptive mindset and approach. Enter 2020, which made a topic that can sound slightly conceptual very, very real. Suddenly, leaders everywhere were struggling with how to keep their business running and how to engage with a frightened, exhausted workforce. The map of how to do things was obsolete within a week. With assumptions and expectations thrown into chaos, people turned to those they trusted. Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister for New Zealand, emerged as a role model for earning and extending trust. Her “net trust score” is higher than any leader in that part of the world. Some have described her as the most influential national leader on the planet. Whether this is strictly true could be debated, but there is no doubt about the distinctive way she has led, the results she’s delivered, and how the people of New Zealand trust her. According to former Prime Minister Helen Clark, people feel that Ardern “doesn’t preach at them; she’s standing with them.” Ardern’s ability to build trust and interact with empathy is what has made her stand out as a highly effective leader during this time of unprecedented upheaval.

**Trust is earned,**  
not by having the right map, but  
by having a **strong inner compass** –  
one that can withstand the criticism that  
leadership attracts and has a tolerance for  
the vulnerability inherent in the position.

Essential to successful human relationships, leadership effectiveness, and organizational performance, trust can be challenging to define. It’s not a surprise that leaders often take for granted that it will occur spontaneously, without intention or disciplined practice. Under pressure, many leaders focus exclusively on results, believing that “winning” will solve all problems. They assume that their reliability and competence will be enough for their team to trust them and bring their discretionary effort to solving problems.

IN REALITY, EFFECTIVE LEADERS  
**CONSCIOUSLY BALANCE** THEIR  
ATTENTION AND EFFORTS ON BOTH  
PEOPLE AND RESULTS, WHICH  
MAKES THEM DEMONSTRABLY  
MORE EFFECTIVE.

They intentionally earn and extend trust to others, creating a competitive advantage that increases over time and makes it difficult for competitors to catch up. While trust may be hard to narrow down to a single, shared definition, its presence or absence drives behavior. According to research, **stock market returns are 2-3 times greater than the market average in high-trust environments, and turnover rates are 50% lower than at competing companies.** Leaders and organizations who are not intentional about building trust will not be able to hold on to high-performing talent. Who would choose to work in a high-stress, low-trust work situation over one that may be equally stressful but is high-trust and supportive?





In business,  
trust is  
everything.

– BILL GEORGE,

FORMER CHAIRMAN  
AND CEO OF MEDTRONIC

We instinctively know that a leader needs to be trustworthy to inspire followers. What we have paid less attention to, historically, is the willingness of leaders to extend trust to others. One of the stumbling blocks we commonly see is this reluctance to trust, which presents as an inability to delegate, as a tendency to micromanage, or as being overly critical of team members' abilities. Inevitably, when we explore what's driving this behavior (which many agree is counterproductive even as they're engaging in it), they eventually confide that it feels risky, uncertain, and uncomfortable to trust. The unwillingness to experience and manage the discomfort that accompanies vulnerability gets in their way. Leaders who avoid giving trust have difficulty building the kind of team that allows them to scale. They are held back by the need to control, and they remain too involved with day-to-day work details rather than taking a more strategic, outcome-focused stance.

## Case Study

Nahla, a very talented individual, was recently promoted to lead a team critical to an organization's success. The new position had a greater scope and more direct reports than she'd previously experienced, and the unique context made her low tolerance for vulnerability (and trusting others) a liability. Her attention centered on her performance and managing the perceptions of her boss and colleagues. She experienced even minor mistakes or feedback from her team as threats to her reputation. Nahla's boss asked us to work with her after the engagement scores on her team plummeted for the third month in a row. Her need to be involved in every decision and detail communicated her lack of trust to her group. Both morale and results suffered.

Increasing Nahla's ability to trust her team began with shifting her attention away from her fears and her limiting assumptions and toward the core values with which she wanted to guide her leadership. Her self-awareness about how her actions impacted those around her grew. She learned that how she dealt with mistakes or near misses had a profound impact on trust within the team. Over the next few months, Nahla made a sincere commitment to relationship-building with each stakeholder and to practicing transparent, open, and honest communication. As her trust in herself and the team grew, so did the engagement scores.

What is evident with both Jacinda Ardern and Nahla's stories – as with the stories of many of our clients – is that trust is relational and is built individual by individual. The benefit of trust is that it introduces grace into the system, which manifests as the belief that everyone has each other's best interest at heart, that they sincerely care about each other. And in that trusting, each team member extends generous assumptions and gives others the benefit of the doubt, even when things go wrong.



**TRUST IS FUNDAMENTAL TO OUR SENSE OF SAFETY, AUTONOMY, AND DIGNITY AS HUMAN BEINGS. IT IS ALSO AN INTEGRAL PART OF EVERY RELATIONSHIP WE HAVE. WORK RELATIONSHIPS BUILT ON TRUST ALLOW US TO GET BETTER, FASTER RESULTS WITH LESS STRESS.**

– CHARLES FELTMAN



LEADERS WHO CAN BUILD HIGH LEVELS OF TRUST WITH INDIVIDUALS, WITH TEAMS, AND ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION CONSISTENTLY DEMONSTRATE THESE MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS:

- They **genuinely care** about people and cultivate open, honest relationships.
- They ask people for **help**.
- They act with **courage, authenticity, and integrity**. Words and actions are congruent, guided by core values.
- They demonstrate **expertise** and are highly **competent** in their area of responsibility.
- They are **consistent**.

The research supports our observation that the following are the building blocks of trust, accelerated by **consistency** and **predictability**.

# Leading with Trust

*Earning & Extending*



### COMPETENCE (Ability)

Leaders demonstrate the knowledge, skill, and experience to achieve desired results in their area of responsibility. They are decisive in uncertainty, lead by example, and achieve results through others. While competence is vital to trust, it is overvalued in place of the more fundamental aspects of building trust, such as benevolence and integrity.

### INTEGRITY (Authenticity)

Leaders' words and actions are congruent. Authentic leaders know that character matters, and they are clear about and live by a core set of values. They share information transparently, are fair, and are willing to do what is right even when it's complicated or difficult. They are open, honest, and forthright. They manage expectations by setting clear boundaries. They challenge others constructively.

### BENEVOLENCE (Relating)

Leaders have others' best interests at heart and express goodwill and kindness towards others. They make time to build strong relationships and seek others' perspectives. They show empathy, make generous assumptions, and are personable and approachable. They listen well, actively seek feedback, and admit mistakes.

## TRUST AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Many leaders and organizations are considering how to create more psychological safety because of research confirming that the highest performing teams have this one thing – psychological safety – in common. As said earlier, when trust is present, everyone gives each other the benefit of the doubt and extends generous assumptions, particularly during challenges. The defining characteristic of psychological safety is the belief that the group will give each member the benefit of the doubt, particularly when mistakes happen. If a leader wants to create psychological safety within their group, it's not only about what they do individually: they must be equally invested in encouraging trust between members of their team. Trust has a significant, positive impact on psychological safety, and without it, psychological safety is impossible.

Leaders are under more pressure than ever, doing their best to navigate uncertain conditions and, in some cases, crisis after crisis. It's a brave move, and it can feel counterintuitive to intentionally slow down enough to focus on connection, listen deeply, challenge constructively, and delegate work. Trust is the currency of leadership, and a leader is either investing wisely or making unconscious withdrawals. Jacinda Arden serves as a powerful example. Her ability to earn trust as well as extend it is key to her success. She leads with empathy and authenticity. She communicates transparently, sharing what she knows and what she doesn't. She takes decisive action and inspires her people to believe that "we can do this." **The opportunity is to be a wildly effective leader who unleashes the discretionary effort and creativity of people and teams, ensuring increasing returns organizationally, professionally, and personally. To lead through others as effectively as you lead others. P.**

TO ME, LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT NECESSARILY BEING THE LOUDEST IN THE ROOM, BUT INSTEAD BEING THE BRIDGE, OR THE THING THAT IS MISSING IN THE DISCUSSION AND TRYING TO BUILD A CONSENSUS FROM THERE.

*Jacinda Arden*

PRIME MINISTER OF NEW ZEALAND  
AND THE WORLD'S YOUNGEST HEAD OF GOVERNMENT  
WHEN SHE TOOK OFFICE AT 37 YEARS OLD

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## Attributions

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pLink Leadership®

ACCELERATING POSITIVE CHANGE. IN A BIG WAY.

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pLink Leadership has one big goal: to accelerate positive change by fusing the sciences of human nature with the discipline of leadership to transform the world of work. We call this "the positivity link," and it is the origin story of our name - and our daily practice.

Positive leadership is not rainbows and unicorns. It takes courageous curiosity, a high tolerance for vulnerability, self-awareness, perspective, and perseverance. We exist to inspire our clients to become deliberately-developing positive leaders, and to walk that path alongside them, providing a steady source of creative tension between what is and what can be.

We believe positive leaders are a multiplier effect - positive leadership is good business.

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