

# TRUSTED TO THRIVE

How leaders create **connected**  
and **accountable** teams



MARIE-CLAIRE ROSS

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# Table of Contents

About the Author .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	3
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Basics .....</b>	<b>11</b>
From Apathy to Achievement .....	13
Trust – The Rocket Fuel to the Achievement Zone.....	25
Three Oppositional and Supporting Trust Forces.....	37
How to Embed a System of Trust in your Teams .....	55
The Roadmap – 9 Trust Building Strategies .....	71
<b>Practice 1: Fostering Safety .....</b>	<b>73</b>
The Importance of Physically Safe Workplaces .....	76
The Importance of Psychological Safety .....	78
The Difference Between Trust and Psychological Safety .....	80
Strategy 1: Reducing Interpersonal Risk .....	83
Strategy 2: Showing Support.....	95
Strategy 3. Fostering Learning .....	105
Key Interaction: Meetings and One-on-Ones.....	111

**Practice 2: Creating Connection ..... 127**  
    The Challenges with Connection .....130  
    Connecting the Pieces .....131  
    Strategy 1: Linking Personal Impact .....133  
    Strategy 2: Understanding Beneficiaries .....143  
    Strategy 3: Focusing on People and Parts .....165  
    Key Interaction: Visibility.....187

**Practice 3: Stepping into a Meaningful Future ..... 195**  
    Craving Certainty .....198  
    Communicating to Create Certainty .....200  
    Leveraging the Gap .....201  
    Strategy 1: Understanding the Current State .....205  
    Strategy 2: Identifying the Gap .....221  
    Strategy 3: Working Towards a Future State .....229  
    Key Interaction: Accountability .....243

**Wrapping Up and Next Steps ..... 257**

**Further Resources ..... 263**

**Connect with Me ..... 265**

**Book List ..... 269**

## About the Author

**M**arie-Claire Ross is a trust leadership speaker, facilitator and coach.

She started her career undertaking market research for some of Australia's biggest brands. Then, co-founded a video production house with her husband filming live television and creating safety induction videos. During her time leading Digicast Productions, she also wrote the book, *Transform your Safety Communication*.

Learning how to build businesses and lead staff became a quest. In the end, she realised video production wasn't her passion. In 2014, she took the leap and started the company, Trustologie®, which helps senior executives, leadership teams and middle managers build trust within their teams and improve performance. She works around the world in organisations such as QANTAS, Novartis, Petronas, Pitcher Partners, Australian Tax Office and Seasol International.

Marie-Claire lives with her family in Melbourne. When she is not training or writing, she can be found running, cooking vegan meals, renovating heritage homes or out in nature.



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# Introduction

In a hip, Melbourne hotel cafe, I am sitting in a dimly lit booth opposite Damian, CEO of a midsize company. Upbeat dance music is blaring and it is hard to hear the soft-spoken man who has made a career of turning around poor performing companies into star performers.

We are at the end of my interview about high performance teams and our coffees are all consumed. Taking a deep breath to collect his thoughts, his voice gets stronger as he reminisces, ‘When I think of a high performance team, I think back to the most successful team I ever led. We grew the organisation from \$110 million to \$280 million, in just under three years. It was a really tough competitive environment and we didn’t think we could do it. We would get together and brainstorm new strategies and then get to work executing them. I didn’t lose one key person throughout those intense years. We had camaraderie where we all trusted one another to do the right thing. Everyone knew what everyone was doing and there was mutual respect and care for one another. We’d work long hours during the week and then we would even catch up socially on weekends. One of the managers died last week. The whole team was at the funeral, many of us flying in from all over the country. It has been years since we have worked together. Seeing everyone again, it was almost like we hadn’t been apart. I miss being in that team and I want that in my current team. You can’t beat it.’

Damian isn't the only leader to passionately tell me their experience of being on a team that kicked goals, despite the odds. Over the years, speaking on stage about high achievement teams, I often get pulled aside by leaders who want to tell me their experience. Their eyes are lit up, electric. Their luminance only fading when they quietly despair that they haven't been able to recreate that experience.

As humans, we want to be with other humans and be part of something bigger and better than we can create on our own.

***We love being part of an energetic team  
that has plenty of solutions,  
excited discussions and productive activity.***

But the world has changed. The pandemic has separated teams, as it has separated friends and families. We no longer have the luxury of impromptu water cooler conversations, celebratory dinners or face-to-face brainstorming sessions.

Many people are in survival mode. Ground down by the relentless uncertainty, adherence to lockdown rules and the inability to be around people.

Leading a team effectively has been turned on its head. And it's unlikely that we will go back to how things used to be. Now, leaders need to know how to engage teams that are a mix of both remote and office-based employees.

This requires a shift in leadership style. One that fosters connection, when team members are disconnected by location.

And the question is, how do we create an organisation that enables employees to feel inspired, energised and innovative, when they are not connected face-to-face?

## INTRODUCTION

It is a question I asked myself back in 2004, a couple of months before I had my first child. Back then, I worked in a video production company that I co-founded with my husband. We had staff in regional Victoria who helped us film and broadcast live greyhound racing. I knew that once our baby was born I was unlikely to regularly travel a six-hour return journey to catch up with them.

I had to work hard at building connection with my young employees, many of whom were from disadvantaged families. Back then, that meant monthly phone calls to check that they were all right – not just with the work, but in their personal life – and sending them inspirational books or food when things got tough in their world.

And what I learnt was that it doesn't matter where you or your team work. What matters most is the energy and focus you put into creating your team culture. And the most successful team leaders work on building a foundation of trust. You build connection through building trust. Trust is the beating heart of your team.

***When you build trust as the team environment,  
you can put your team anywhere and under  
any conditions and they will thrive.***

A team that trusts one another, and their leader, creates magical team coherence. That wonderful space where you are all in flow, moving as one, reading each other's intent and body language. Like a group of professional dancers effortlessly moving in harmony, in tune to the rhythm of a song.

It creates a positive buzz, a hum, an energy that we crave. And it's a place where we thrive as human beings, where we feel energised and empowered, connected and aligned through shared identity and

purpose. We feel valued, creative and safe to share our opinion. It's a place where we feel that all is possible, that we're in this together and that the hard work is worth it.

Despite the trials and tribulations, it's an unforgettable experience that we hold deep in our hearts for the rest of our life. Feeling trusted makes us proud of our achievements and motivates us to keep going when things get tough.

In her book *Powerful*, Patty McCord credits Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix, as saying, 'What people most want from work: to be able to come in and work with the right team of people – colleagues they trust and admire – and to focus like crazy on doing a great job together.'

The good news is that even when teams are dispersed, you can still create thriving teams where people feel at ease, and as a result are happier, healthier and more productive overall.

And that's what this book is about. How to create that wonderful, supportive environment where we feel trusted, and equally importantly, where our direct reports feel trusted.

***As a team leader, you have the power to lead others into that beautiful place where we become better human beings.***

In this place we care and support one another, leaving our personal insecurities aside, in service of making the world a better place.

Over the last eight years, I have undertaken research inside companies and interviewed hundreds of CEOs and executives about how they build connection and trust with their employees. I've also

interviewed hundreds of team leaders and employees about how they need leadership to build trust with them. I've read countless research papers and books on the topic. And I have coached leaders and facilitated training inside organisations, testing my theories and models to find out what works in today's workplaces.

What I have found is that building trust is all about a leader who has consistently practised the right combination of skills that fosters a thriving workplace environment. It's about a leader who has taken the time to understand and observe the human condition – what drives people to be their best and what shuts people down – and who compassionately responds to each individual in a manner that suits them best.

This is what this book will help you achieve: a deeper understanding of the human condition and what you can do to create an environment from which motivated people can flourish.

### **How to Use this Book**

The backbone of this book is my *Integrated Trust Building System*, which I have developed and refined over the past eight years working with clients. You may be familiar with a similar model first proposed by Christine Comaford in her book *Smart Tribes*, and more recently popularised by Daniel Coyle in *The Culture Code*.

While their models have done an excellent job of explaining the factors our brains require to feel safe at work (safety, connection, future), my research within companies found that employees need specific interactions to build trust in dispersed workforces.

There is no right way to build trust, but this book describes the best way I know how. It draws on neuroscience, biology, psychology and sociology research.

My contribution is a synthesis of the best ideas clever leaders have uncovered, as well as what I have found works well in my leadership training and coaching practice. The strategies I cover will be relevant to anyone looking to create high performance with dispersed teams during change and uncertainty.

The book is broken down into four sections. The first section, The Basics, provides the context that you need to understand before we go deep into the *Integrated Trust Building System*. The remaining three sections all relate to the main components of the model. At the end of each section, there are activities and case studies to help embed the learning. You will find self-reflection questions, implementation ideas or a summary. You also have access to extra resources at the end of the book, which you can apply.

Thank you for picking up this book and being willing to take this journey. I look forward to being your guide.

Are you ready?

# **The Basics**

Why Improving our Interactions  
Makes a Big Difference





# From Apathy to Achievement

Leading a high performance team is a bit like taking a team on an exhilarating elevator ride to the 150th floor of a building: encouraging your teammates that you are going to reach the top – fast.

Imagine a team where the leader encourages everyone to meet at the ground floor. The lift arrives and they all enthusiastically jump onboard. Even though the journey might be a bit scary, employees know they have the support of one other and their leader. People talk excitedly about where they are all going and what it will look like. The result is the team reaches goals almost effortlessly – riding express all the way to the top, without any stops or breakdowns.

In contrast, imagine a team where only 80% turn up on the ground floor to get onboard. People get in, but they avoid looking at each other and there isn't much talking. A couple of them are anxious, but instead of talking about it, they secretly push some of the floor buttons, so the team has to stop every other minute. Others join at different floors, missing out on important information or the opportunity to connect to others. No one takes responsibility for slowing the team down nor asks questions about where they are going and why. Everyone is too frightened about the future.

What's happening here is that interpersonal risk is at play. Interpersonal risk is a fear that people won't think highly of us or will reject

us altogether. It stops people from sharing ideas, raising concerns or feeling connected to others. It impacts psychological safety, which is our ability to take risks and make mistakes, knowing that we will still be supported in our team.

In a highly popular TEDx video, Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor, talks through her research on the impact of accountability and psychological safety in teams. She discovered that when high levels of psychological safety and accountability collide it leads to high performance.

Ensuring people feel safe isn't enough to lift performance, nor is solely focusing on results; there needs to be a balance between the two.

A study by Zenger and Folkman analysed 400,000 360-degree survey results. They found that the most successful leaders possessed a powerful combination of competencies. Of leaders in the top quartile, 66% possessed both a focus on *results* and *interpersonal skills* (the ability to develop and maintain relationships). Meanwhile, only 13% of leaders who focused on *results alone* and only 9% of leaders who focused on *interpersonal skills alone* reached the 90% percentile.

***Focusing on both results and interpersonal skills ensures there are fewer people issues to handle. In other words, there is less friction on the journey to the top.***

Both psychological safety and accountability are modelled and managed by the team leader. The way a leader models and rewards behaviour creates the culture in which a team operates.

To help leaders better understand psychological safety, I have created the Achievement Zone Model (Figure 1 overleaf). Amy

Edmondson’s work has been the genesis for four zones of team performance, as well as some of the work I have done with teams over the years.

These four zones represent where we are currently performing and the impact that has on our teams. You might notice the zones also represent where team members are located and the overall performance of your team. Let’s unpack these four zones in more detail.

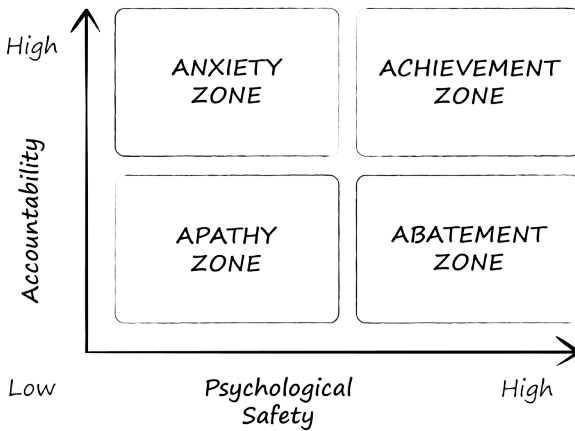


Figure 1: Achievement Zone Model

### Apathy zone

When leaders create low psychological safety and low accountability, you will often find employees who are pretty disengaged. This can be one of the riskiest teams to work in, which results in employees not working too hard. Energy is spent on self-preservation – either because they are afraid of doing the wrong thing or they are exhausted and burnt out.

In this team, there’s a lot of blame, cynicism, gossip and disdain towards leadership.

There are a couple of reasons for teams being in the apathy zone.

Sometimes it can often be the result of an authoritative, emotionally volatile leader who is closed off to their direct reports and who unwittingly creates a psychologically unsafe team culture, a leader who doesn't particularly enjoy leading people or prefers doing the technical work themselves.

Other times it can be the result of under-management. Under-management and micromanagement are on the opposite sides of the management spectrum. But they are both devastating to team and company performance.

Under-management occurs when a manager does not supervise their direct reports enough. It's when they avoid performance conversations, don't show up to meetings or ignore important issues. They rarely communicate or train people and are noticeably absent.

This can be due to a variety of reasons, such as having too many projects to juggle, feeling overwhelmed with work, or not having the right leadership competencies to supervise employees. Sometimes it could be that the leader feels uncomfortable calling out poor performance issues and doesn't want to be labelled a micromanager. They just want to be liked – by everyone.

Under-managed employees may appear to have more freedom and autonomy, but they feel ignored, unsupported and unsure as to whether their work is right or not. The onus is on the employee to manage client expectations, engage their manager and get them involved – a leader who they don't trust to be there for them.

What's interesting is that under-management is an expensive problem that most organisations don't really understand. And the difference is trust. Under-managed employees tend to under-perform

because they are not guided on how to properly care for customers. It ends up that customers become frustrated and don't trust the company to do a good job. It shows up as a reduction in repeat sales and an upswing in customer complaints. It can even mean increased liability costs.

Apathy zone teams can also occur in an organisation that's had a poorly planned merger or where there has been some toxic behaviours played out at the top. This zone is incredibly low in trust and high in turnover.

But not only can our teams be in this zone, so can we. This is when you wake up in the morning dreading work. Not so much because of the work itself, but usually because you don't want to have to deal with customers or certain colleagues.

We can also fall into this zone when we are actively looking for another job or have found it.

## **Abatement zone**

In this zone, leaders are often uncomfortable improving themselves and subsequently are uncomfortable pulling people up for poor performance. Or they are not being held accountable themselves. I come across a lot of teams in this zone that have had a big success in the past and are still coasting on their past achievements.

This comfortable and mind-numbingly boring place is when leaders create psychological safety, but don't hold their employees accountable for excellence. This is the confusing employee engagement result that points to high employee engagement in a team, despite poor productivity. In this environment, employees have no incentive to stretch themselves, be proactive or creative.

Performance here is abating. Employees believe they're doing a good job but have no desire to improve or even think differently. They feel comfortable in processes and rules, refusing to improve them, even when they are outdated and cumbersome.

As Joseph Grenny, a social scientist, discovered in his research, bosses are the source of accountability in mediocre teams. Team members will escalate problems to their boss to solve, only work nine-to-five and lack the motivation to move beyond their task list. It is a particularly difficult zone for high performers, who resent the lack of work ethic and the low competency levels of their peers.

Sometimes we feel that working in a comfort zone is a good place to be. But it's where ideas go to die, people coast, problems don't get solved and where groupthink reigns supreme.

Interestingly, trust across teams here is a big issue because other teams cannot rely on those in the abatement zone to meet deadlines and/or produce high quality work.

If you are taking the easy road in your work, you are in this zone. This could be because you still feel exhausted from a previous win, or perhaps you have personal or health issues that you are struggling with. The result is you take it easy because you don't have the energy to learn new things, work differently or encourage your people to be accountable. This can mean you get frustrated by directives to change and you justify the status quo. Sometimes you are in this zone if you have a boss that doesn't challenge you, so you start making excuses as to why you haven't met your goals.

## **Anxiety zone**

Teams in this zone are high performing and can often be lauded throughout an organisation for their work ethic and focus on results.

But this is a psychologically damaging work environment as the focus is on outputs, rather than people.

I have found that there are two types of anxiety zones. The first one is where employees are worked hard, criticised profusely and have little support from their leader, teammates or other teams. Typically, it's a competitive environment where staff are pitted against each other due to the false belief that this will make them do better work. Employees often complain about 'feeling bashed up' when they present ideas at meetings.

There can also be a lot of micromanagement, which breaks trust with employees. Constant interference by a leader results in poor employee engagement, low productivity and high turnover.

It can even be when the organisation itself keeps a close watch on employee activities. Examples include using artificial intelligence to assess the work of employees working from home by tracking the amount of time spent clicking links and opening software. Other times, it's when individual results are rewarded rather than organisational outcomes. It's where busy work or time in seat is prized, rather than improving the system.

The second type of anxiety zone is where resources are stretched and the team has to do the bulk of work under difficult conditions in limited time. This has been prevalent for a lot of teams during the pandemic.

In either of these cases, stress, burnout and workplace injuries are major issues. Feelings of not being valued or appreciated also rise to the top.

This zone is common in demanding environments such as IT, legal, finance and medical. Interestingly, some purpose-driven organisations

can often be found here because they reward behaviours that are aligned to the purpose. However, they often confuse rewarding achieving purposeful outcomes as being a success indicator, rather than the right behaviours to achieving them. Meaning that toxic behaviours can run rampant as they hide under the guise of purpose, therefore, masking the real impact to staff wellbeing.

I have even found teams in this zone who are in safe environments, but due to old legacy issues, have taken it upon themselves to work hard. Even when management has changed and they're working in a completely different environment, they still feel disconnected and unsafe.

The anxiety zone is often full of watermelons. This is when the progress of a project goes from red straight to green, instead of the regular red, amber then green. Typically, people are too fearful to report when a project is going amber because they're not going to make a deadline.

You really feel it when you're in this zone. This is when you feel quite anxious and under pressure to deliver. You're working long hours and don't feel valued. Sometimes you even feel misunderstood by leadership and wish they understood your workloads and challenges. Your mental health and wellbeing suffers, which can take a big toll on your family or personal life.

## **Achievement zone**

This occurs when a team leader creates stretch goals, challenges direct reports to improve and strongly believes they can achieve. A lot of leaders approve small incremental improvements to goals. But a leader in this zone treats employees like athletes pushing them to continually



improve – breaking their best records, not by a few degrees but through dramatic improvement.

Achievement zone leaders foster a supportive environment where employees learn and work together, focus on continuous improvement and explore exciting new possibilities. After all, people don't tend to spontaneously stretch themselves, but need the support of a leader who fosters the right environment to grow and learn. In this environment, people are not only encouraged but also thrive on the autonomy to work how they want and contribute to high level decisions.

An achievement team is all about attunement – shared goals, shared risk, shared work, people helping each other out and collaborating at a high level.

This zone is where things start to shift and you reach a powerful tipping point in performance. Efficiency improves dramatically and your team is regularly kicking goals.

Candour is also high in this zone. You can talk about performance issues and people embrace feedback. It's where people are learning, adapting and open to change. This is where you can introduce a new strategy that you've developed with your team and people will work as long as it takes, without complaining, to get it done because they know they have the support of everyone around them.

The achievement zone team only occurs when the leader leads by example, works hard to ensure they are trusted by the team and encourages team members to trust one another. For hybrid teams, this has become critical.

You know when you're in this zone when you feel excited about going to work in the morning. You look forward to solving problems with others and making progress. You love to learn, share new insights

and envision an engaging future. It's when work feels like play and you are so engrossed in your work that you lose track of time. In fact, you would even turn up to work for free because it is so enjoyable.

Life here is really amazing, almost spiritual – reverential, even. This is where we trust the world. It's where we feel so connected to the vision that we know we're making the world a better place. This is the zone where happy memories are made. It's a time that we look back fondly on for years to come.

Unfortunately, we don't stay at this level for long. It's unstable. Forces outside of our control can slam us without any warning, our team members can freak out and create unnecessary drama. And we can often drop out of this zone when there are too many unknowns rocking our world.

Not only that, for driven leaders, if we are here for too long, we get bored. And the tendency here is to meddle and cause chaos. That's because in this zone you don't get the immediate feedback loops of improving things like you do in the other team zones. This requires leaders to regularly reinvent their leadership and take on side projects that can re-energise their enthusiasm.

The truth is that how we get to this zone, and remain here, is through trust. It all comes down to the leader creating a collaborative, thriving environment that lowers people's innate fear of being rejected by the team. It's where we trust our leaders, our team members and ourselves.

If you don't feel that you have your team in the achievement zone, or you want to know how to stay there for longer, this book will show you what to do.

## Reflection

- Where are you right now? What could you achieve if you could move yourself up into the next zone? How would it feel to more easily access the achievement zone?
- Where is your team? If you could get your team from apathy/abatement/anxiety to achievement, what impact would that have on your overall productivity? What about your happiness levels?
- Where are your team members right now? If you think about the median person on your team and the way they are engaging, what would moving them into a higher zone have on teamwork? And what about your job satisfaction levels?