

## QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY IRC

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# Levels of Trust in Workplace Relationships

## The Starting Point for Building a Trust Plan

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How do you define trust? How do you describe what trust means to you? Ask ten people and you will likely hear ten different responses. Because trust is personal. Our past experiences with building, keeping or losing trust really shape how we define trust.

For me, I define trust as having the belief that someone, or a company, will do what they say they will do and in with my best interest in mind. A tall order? Maybe, but never have the stakes been higher than in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times - just think how fast social media posts move and how quickly information in spread. It's no wonder that trust levels can come into question more than ever.

With this I mind, it is critical to consider what organizations can do to strengthen trust with their employees. What if trust could be viewed as objective instead of just feeling so personal? What if we could mark where trust is now, identify where we want to take it and map out a plan to do that? We tackle this question in our newly expanded [Building Trust in the Workplace](#) Program.

Trust relationships can be established between people, between people and organizations, organization to organization, and within society in general such as networks, systems and government institutions. Regardless of the parties, in my experience there are three levels of trust in any given relationship, and, due to various actions, the levels of trust can shift. A starting point is to know where the trust relationship level currently stands and then, to identify what level one would like the trust relationship to move towards.

Let's consider these three levels of trust in relationships. As you read the descriptions, think of a specific relationship you have with a person in your workplace.

## **Level 1: Governance and Rules-Based Trust**

This is the most basic level of trust in relationships. It includes things like the law, policies, procedures, and contracts. If a relationship is at this level, then a quote that captures it is

*"I know you will follow the rules and it governs our behavior with each other."*

An example where this level can show up: Renewing your vehicle license with your insurance provider because you trust the provider that the fees are correct and that the provincial system will accurately be updated that you are driving a legal vehicle! In this example, one may not need to go beyond this level of trust to be satisfied with the relationship. Both parties are getting what they need at the most basic level.

## Level 2: Experience and Confidence-Based Trust

This level of trust in relationships represents most day-to-day work related and professional type relationships developed over time. A quote that demonstrates a relationship is at this trust level is:

*“I know you have my best interest in mind. I have proven experience with you to know that you will do what you say you will do.”*

An example where this level can show up in the workplace: An employee shares a workplace challenge with his manager. He asks his manager for ideas for how to deal with the continuously late turnaround time from another department because it is impacting his ability to meet his deadlines. She responds with acknowledgement that he brought it to her attention and she initiates a coaching conversation with him to explore the situation and possible solutions for a mutually agreed upon path forward. It's more than the basic level 1 because he trusts her to collaborate and help without knowing the outcome right away, rather than solve it for him or to think it is a poor reflection on his competence. This workplace relationship is one based on experience and confidence.

## Level 3: Established and vulnerability-based trust

This level of trust in relationships is reserved for the most important connections in life, often created over time from relationships that began at Level 2. A quote that demonstrates a relationship is at this trust level is:

*“I personally know you understand my dream, goals, and fears, and this would never be misused. Trust flows easily between both parties.”*

An example is where relationships evolve organically and where trust flows throughout an organization. Google's massive two-year study on team performance revealed that the highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety, the belief that you won't be punished when you make a mistake. This is an example of a level 3 trust relationship in an organization, when your creativity and the ability to speak up for the good of the team project **is respected and valued**. Extreme examples of level 3 trust relationships are your best friend, your spouse, and other close intimate relationships that truly are reserved for a select few outside of the workplace.

In my experience, great focus comes with being clear on what trust relationships need to change (move from Level 1 to Level 2, for example) and what trust relationships are ok where they are because both parties in the relationship are satisfied with the results.

It is useful to first reflect on what trust is and how it is evolving in these complex, changing times. Take a look at trust within your own organization and identify what level of trust relationships exist and how it serves the organization, or how it doesn't and needs to shift. You may decide that a Level 1 trust between two parties is working well and needs to be maintained.

Also, take a look at your own impact on the trust-based relationships in your own experience. Think about what your role has been in establishing a level of trust in your various relationships. How self-aware are you of how you are seen by others?

Bottom line – Organizational culture can take a monumental shift when leaders intentionally assess the current and desired level of trust relationships in their organization. Resetting the culture isn't a quick fix. Behaviour can change so think of how to influence the behavior change. To create more trustworthy relationships that you want – know where you are starting from.

## About the Author



**Linda Allen-Hardisty** is an ICF-certified executive coach, a senior OD professional, a chair at The Executive Committee (TEC) Canada, and a contributing member of Forbes Coaches Council. She's built a reputation as a vibrant, contemporary voice in the business world by blending her grounding in organizational development with a practical approach to addressing business challenges. Over her 20-year OD career, she has helped many leaders - from corporate executives to entrepreneurs - improve their personal and professional success. She is a sought-after facilitator for executive development, organizational change and culture, team effectiveness, and emotional intelligence. With a Masters of Education from the University of Regina and a certificate in Organizational Development from Queen's IRC, Linda's uniqueness is that, prior to private practice, she fulfilled corporate leadership roles including the Director of Organizational Development in a company listed on the Hewitt Top 50 Employers in Canada, and became the first Manager of Strategy and Performance for a municipal government undertaking cultural transformation.

*Linda is the lead facilitator for the Queen's IRC [Building Trust in the Workplace](#) program.*