



# Brains Trust

In upswings and times of uncertainty, trust is a bedrock for organisational success. Neuroscience helps us to understand insights into employee behaviour. These eight processes will enable you to build leadership trust.

If we expected the post-pandemic era to be a settling period in employee/employer relationships, we were mistaken. Working From Home, Hybrid Working, the Great Resignation, Quiet Quitting, declines in employee engagement, staff shortages in service sectors, wellbeing challenges and the advent of AI, all present challenges to organisation cultures and leadership. These demands can also impact the engagement, purpose and satisfaction that managers themselves feel. According to Gallup research, disaffected or poor leaders are 70% of the reason employees choose whether to engage or not. People don't leave organisations, they leave managers.

Paul J. Zak, neuroscientist and author of "Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies", in a HBR article entitled "The Neuroscience of Trust", shares how employees in high trust companies enjoy their jobs 60% more, are 70% more aligned with their organisations purpose and feel 66% closer to their colleagues. Empathy and a sense of accomplishment is higher in such firms, while burnout is 40% lower than in low trust cultures. Not only does trust improve organisation performance but employees in high trust companies were paid an average of 17% higher than those in other firms.

In his research, Zak identified eight management processes that build trust for leaders. They are measurable, can be learned behaviours and contribute collectively to higher organisation performance:

## 1. RECOGNISE EXCELLENCE

Neuroscience indicates that recognition has most impact when it occurs immediately after the task or goal has been achieved. It is most powerful when personalised but occurs in a public setting.



## **2. ASSIGN DIFFICULT BUT ACHIEVABLE CHALLENGES TO TEAMS**

Pressure to achieve, releases neurochemicals which intensify employee focus and strengthen social connections. Zak explains, that when team members need to work together to reach a desired outcome, this brain activity co-ordinates their behaviours efficiently.

## **3. GIVE PEOPLE DISCRETION IN HOW THEY DO THEIR WORK**

Autonomy promotes innovation that management control inhibits. Being trusted to find solutions to problems is a big factor in an employee's engagement. Encourage employees to challenge how things are done, especially if they have been done that way for years.

## **4. ENABLE JOB CRAFTING**

When possible, enable employees to focus their energies on work or projects they care most about, albeit with clear expectations, accountability and 360-degree evaluations.

## **5. SHARE INFORMATION BROADLY**

Poor management communication remains one of the big employee bugbears. Uncertainty about company direction can lead to stress, which in turn inhibits the release of oxytocin, a natural hormone which drives the social connections necessary for collaboration. Organisations that communicate plans broadly, reduce uncertainty and increase teamwork effectiveness.

## **6. INTENTIONALLY BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Too often managers send the message, "focus on your tasks", rather than making social connections. Zak cites neuroscientific experiments that show when people intentionally build social bonds at work, their engagement and performance improves. Social events, which may appear to some to be "forced fun", make a significant difference to the connectivity of employees and in particular, when that event has a competitive team elements to it.

## **7. FACILITATE WHOLE-PERSON GROWTH**

High trust workplaces help people develop personally as well as professionally. Though setting goals, learning plans and reviewing progress are key to professional growth, understanding how an employee is managing work life integration or wellbeing, is equally important. Leaders aware of personal challenges their employees face can often help through flexibility, rather than lose a valued contributor.

## **8. SHOW VULNERABILITY**

Asking for help from colleagues is a sign of a secure leader and increases trust and cooperation from those colleagues. It indicates, Zak shares, that the leader is the type of person who engages everyone to reach goals, while valuing the opinions and expertise of others.

*Building trust is a continuous process and many colleagues and reports will start from different points in their willingness to believe the trust is authentic. Taking the time to understand that starting point and being patient while the trust emerges is essential. Being self-serving, not meeting commitments, being assumptive and jumping to conclusions are sure ways to breach any trust built. A culture to which trust is high is more inclusive, higher performing and central to organisation success.*