

THE 5 PILLARS OF TRUST

# HIGH-TRUST LEADERSHIP

BUILDING HIGH  
PERFORMANCE TEAMS



CAPTAIN GEORGE DOM

FOREWORD BY DR. JIM LOEHR

Founder, Human Performance Institute

*High Trust Leadership: Building High Performance Teams*



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# FOREWORD



*Figure 1 - Dr. Loehr watching Blue Angels practice*

**W**hen George Dom invited me into the culture of the Blue Angels, I was ecstatic. And I was just as mesmerized as I had been as a young boy, filled with the thunderous joy I experienced at every Blue Angel airshow I attended with my family.

As a performance psychologist, I've worked in many high stress, extreme environments, but I was completely unprepared for and shocked by the Blue Angels. My understanding of team dynamics, risk tolerance, leadership, precision under pressure, trust, unconscious competence, full engagement, commitment to a noble mission, character, and the importance of honest, straightforward communication was changed forever. And this was not my first experience working with and learning from elite military teams.

For example, I was flown onto the deck of the USS Harry Truman aircraft carrier in a V-22 Osprey, witnessed numerous day and night landings from the carrier deck, observed brave men and women putting themselves repeatedly in harm's way, and deck officers making life and death decisions moment to moment. When I flew off the carrier in a COD aircraft (Carrier Onboard Delivery), I concluded that this high-performance culture represented the absolute zenith of teamwork, courage, precision under pressure, leadership, and commitment to excellence. However, after my experience with the Blue Angels, I realized their culture took these traits and values to an even higher level of excellence. I can say quite honestly that my time with the Blues was the single greatest learning experience of my entire career.

The formal name of the Blue Angels is the US Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron. Formed in 1946 by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Chester Nimitz, the mission of the Blue Angels is to showcase the pride and professionalism of the United States Navy and Marine Corp by inspiring a culture of excellence and service to America through demonstrations and community outreach. A sobering statistic highlights the risk involved in what the Blues do day-in and day-out: a total of 26 pilots have died during training or airshow accidents in the 78 years they have been performing formation flight demonstrations. It's important to point out that the majority of those deaths occurred in the early years of the squadron's history. With increasingly advanced training protocols, more precise training methods, and strict adherence to safety measures, the fatality rate in recent history has vastly improved. However, the fact remains that significant risk still exists. Flying up to speeds of nearly 700 mph, conducting aerobatic maneuvers with only 18–24 inches separating wingtips, and doing so in winds and afternoon thermals over unfamiliar terrain demand nearly superhuman skills and teamwork.



As impressive as the six demonstration pilots are, they are the tip of the iceberg of this world-class example of organizational excellence. The Blue Angels are a team of 125 professionals in aircraft maintenance, logistics, public affairs, medical, administration, and training. Their 2–3-year assignments to the Blues results in an astounding 50% annual turnover among the 16 officers and 33% turnover among the 109 enlisted personnel!

When clients ask me how to build a truly extraordinary, high-performance culture, my answer is always the same: study the Blue Angels.

Whether the application is business, sports, or the military, the Blues have built a tested blueprint for taking human performance to unprecedented levels of excellence. I've learned that culture is everything in high performance, and with the right culture, amazing things are possible. And that's what HIGH-TRUST Leadership is all about. It's a deep dive into the cultural blueprint that enables the Blues to produce performance magic. Issues of purpose, mission, accountability, humility, deep trust, unconscious competence, total commitment, and authentic communication through the prism of the Blue Angel's culture represents the essence of this book. It's about the lessons learned since 1946 from the most performance demanding culture I've experienced in my life.

I strongly believe if you want to learn something truly important and challenging, you should seek out the best possible source in that space. The qualifier is tested, demonstrated excellence, year after year. Learning from the best is the shortest path to becoming the best. And, in my experience, the Blue Angels represent the best high-performance culture to learn from, bar none.

— GEORGE DOM —

Anyone seeking to build a world class team and a world class performance culture should find this book intoxicating.

— Dr. Jim Loehr

# PREFACE

In my 26-year Navy career, I flew Navy strike-fighters as a carrier air wing strike leader, TOPGUN instructor, F/A-18 squadron commander, commanding officer/flight leader of the Blue Angels, and air wing commander on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS John F. Kennedy.<sup>1</sup> I logged over 5,000 hours in Navy jets and I completed more than 1,000 aircraft carrier landings. Not bad for someone who considers himself an average pilot. My simple secret? What I lacked in natural ability, I overcame by hard work and dedication to earn the trust of everyone I worked and flew with. I struggled mightily at times: I almost quit during flight school, and I made many mistakes along the way. Thankfully, I was blessed to serve with principled role models who showed me how to succeed through their personal examples and willingness to let me learn from my setbacks.

After leaving the military and joining the business world, people frequently asked about our planning, organization, and training in naval aviation. The key to success in every strike-fighter squadron and aircraft carrier where I served—whether in peacetime or during combat, at TOPGUN, and in the Blue Angels—was a culture based on HIGH-TRUST. Trust was never assumed to be the inevitable byproduct of putting talented people together. Rather, it was a core value and strategic imperative. We recruited for it. We trained to build it every

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<sup>1</sup> TOPGUN's official name is the U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School. TOPGUN trains Strike-Fighter Tactics Instructors (SFTI) in graduate-level tactics in USN and USMC air warfare.

day. If you had it, you were rewarded and promoted. If you lost it and couldn't regain it quickly, you were sidelined or gone.

Soon, I found myself speaking to leaders of various organizations across the U.S., including the public, private, for-profit, and non-profit sectors. My thoughts on HIGH-TRUST leadership and teamwork resonated with all of them—from fast-paced, aggressive sales teams to senior leaders in the tech sector, blue collar plant managers, law enforcement, insurance companies, sports teams, and many others.

At the same time, I watched the levels of trust in all dimensions of modern life erode to the lowest levels in my lifetime: politicians and public figures, media companies, government and religious institutions, police, public health officials, sports, science, and our elected officials all suffer from low levels of public trust. We're in a trust crisis that has resulted in extreme polarization, cynicism, and disillusionment.

Nevertheless, every crisis presents an opportunity. Individuals and organizations who do the hard work to build and sustain high levels of trust will break out of the pack and enjoy great success, both individually and collectively.

Everything I learned about leadership and teamwork to excel in the air as a military flight leader and commanding officer is readily applicable on the ground, in businesses, families, and communities. Building and sustaining cultures and relationships of HIGH-TRUST is where the magic happens.

Let's get on with it.

# INTRODUCTION



*Figure 2 - Blue Angels 6-plane Delta formation*

**I**magine six F/A-18 strike-fighter pilots: four flying together in perilously close aerobatic formations while two solo pilots conduct a series of violent maneuvers with near head-on collisions at 1,000 mph of closure, operating in complete unison, literally placing their lives in each other's hands, nearly every day of the year. This extreme performance occurs safely, up close and personal, below the skyscrapers, down at treetop level, in front of millions of spectators annually. Buffeted by winds and dueling with hot summer afternoon thermals, these six pilots—and their dedicated traveling support team—push their limits every day: growing, learning, adapting, seeking perfection.

When flying just a couple feet apart at 300, 400, 500 mph at very low altitude performing three-dimensional aerobatics in formation, the

wingmen aren't looking around enjoying the scenery. They are intently focused on the jet in front of them to avoid colliding while making small, timely corrections to stay in position. There are no fancy computers; it's all old-fashioned eye-hand coordination and steely concentration for 40 intense minutes of flying. During my two years flying the Blue Angels' #1 jet, I never forgot the tragic mishap suffered by the USAF Thunderbirds on January 18, 1982, while practicing a formation looping maneuver. Flying only a few feet apart, the wingmen were totally focused on the leader's jet. When the flight leader didn't pull out soon enough to complete the loop, all four fighter jets impacted the desert floor, symmetrically spaced, tragically killing all four pilots.

For our team to be successful flying Blue Angel maneuvers, I had to earn and maintain the unconditional trust of my wingmen—and they with me and each other—such that we would enthusiastically take to the sky six days a week throughout the year to push the limits of human capability. What would it take to build such a high level of trust? And what can we learn that could be applied to ALL our relationships—at work, at home, and with everyone we care about?

Looking back, I realized that my wingmen were asking five simple questions about me as their leader. Depending on the answers, they'd make a conscious or unconscious decision about how much to trust me. I believe your team, your prospects, your clients, your families, and your friends are consciously or unconsciously asking these same five questions about you:

Character — “Do you walk your talk?”

Commitment — “Will you be with us when times are tough?”

Competence — “Are you skilled and relevant?”

Connection — “Do you understand me?”

Communication — “Can I understand you?”

As we journey through the exploration of trust, these five pillars will serve as our guideposts, illuminating the path to understanding the intricate dynamics that make trust the foundation of success that elevates the performance of leaders and teams to the pinnacle of precision and excellence. The lessons I share to help you proactively build and maintain a high level of enduring trust are far from the complex, esoteric prescriptions of academics and 9-to-5 leaders. Mine are born out of the extreme and unforgiving environments of long deployments on aircraft carriers at sea, deadly air combat missions, and high-speed, close-formation jet aerobatics at very low altitudes. The lessons are hard-won in these environments because there is no room for compromise. To be effective, they must be simple and straight-forward, and they must work. But that doesn't mean they are easy.

The principles in this book apply to all leaders and teams, including businesses, government agencies, sports teams, and organizations, as well as families and couples—literally anywhere that relationships are important, because trust is the psychological water in which all relationships swim.

Although the Blue Angels are an iconic example of the highest level of human teamwork and precision, spectators often miss the essence of the Blue Angels because they make it look too easy. The profound insight on display is a team of common people achieving far beyond what they originally believed was possible by fully committing to building and sustaining an uncommon level of trust.

In this book, I will help you build trust proactively and authentically. There are no shortcuts. But with a focus on five universal principles and dedicated effort, you will learn and grow as a **HIGH-TRUST** Leader. It's not quick and easy. The path is not always straight forward. It's not "set it and forget it." Building trust takes time, effort, and intention. And

it's worth it, because the results and benefits can be profound. It also provides a method to evaluate when NOT to trust a person or an organization, which is critically important when hiring, promoting, or considering a partnership or acquisition.

My HIGH-TRUST framework provides the building blocks to establish the foundation for individual and collective high performance. Throughout this book, I describe each pillar in general terms with illustrations to help convey my meaning. Then, I offer exercises you can apply immediately. Each one of the five pillars of trust can be viewed and studied in much greater depth. Take character. Philosophers, teachers, parents, and coaches have written and spoken about the importance of an honorable character for millennia. Although the material in this book stays at a foundational level, I hope you use it as a springboard for further study, as each dimension of trust is a rich and rewarding topic for investigation. But first, begin by applying each principle in small, daily doses and you will enjoy the benefit and satisfaction of authentically deepening every relationship in your life.



# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT IS TRUST?



*Figure 3 - "Boss" Dom climbing into the #1 jet*

Trust is the emotional glue  
that holds teams together.

**A**s I climbed the ladder of my F/A-18 Hornet and settled onto the ejection seat for my first airshow as Blue Angel #1, I marveled at the training process that prepared me for this moment. A hundred intense training flights and innumerable hours of study, briefings, and candid post-flight debriefs. My cockpit was meticulously set up by my crew chief, AO1(AW) Derrick Robinson, USN.<sup>2</sup> Every

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<sup>2</sup> AO1(AW) stands for Aviation Ordnanceman Petty Officer 1st Class (Air Warfare).

switch in the right place, my flight gloves on the glare shield, the parachute harness and seat restraints ready to buckle-in. So familiar. No distractions. Perched next to me on the canopy rail, Petty Officer “Robbie” Robinson handed me my helmet. I slipped it on, adjusted the boom mic, and lowered the gold visor. As we shook hands, Robbie said, as he always did, “Boss, have a good one!” This brief ritual epitomized the special relationship between Blue Angel pilots and their crew chiefs. In over 40 years of military and civilian flying, my two years as a Blue Angel was the only time I didn’t perform a preflight inspection of my aircraft. The crew chiefs ensured the jets were ready to fly and we trusted them completely.

## **DEFINING TRUST**

Trust can be a fuzzy concept. It’s dynamic, continually tested, and changes depending on many variables. You can be trusted by some, but not by others. You can be trusted in some areas, but not in others. But for Navy SEALs, Blue Angels, aircraft carrier pilots, high performance sports teams, Olympians and their coaches, a young child and its mother, trust isn’t fuzzy or touchy-feely, it is real and tangible.

At its core, trust is a willingness to be vulnerable with our physical safety, our feelings, our finances, and our success.

Willing to be vulnerable means your success depends to some degree on someone else. It is inherently necessary in any lasting relationship and especially in a team setting. Let’s face it, nothing of significance is accomplished in any sphere of life without the support and help of others. Even world-class solo performers require a cadre of supporters to propel them to new records and achievements. No one can do it alone.

But vulnerability does not mean weakness.

Think of great NFL quarterbacks like Joe Montana, Steve Young, Aaron Rodgers, Tom Brady, Brett Favre, John Elway, Patrick Mahomes. Does anyone think of them as being weak? Yet their success depended on their willingness to be vulnerable—at the beginning of every play, they are handed the football and concentrate on the play opening before them, bringing all their athletic talent to bear while exposing themselves to ferocious opponents who want to tackle them with the highest possible velocity. They trust their teammates will protect them. Is that weakness?

## TRUST IS A PASSPORT

Trust is the key that unlocks deeper connections with those who really matter to us. Think of it like a passport—not to enter a foreign country, but as a special invitation to places where you're not automatically accepted.<sup>3</sup> In relationships, it's the green light people give you to enter their world, share their thoughts, discuss their struggles, and permission to give them advice and feedback.

If you want to be let into someone's life and truly connect with them, you need to earn their trust passport. It's not a physical document, but an emotional visa that comes from genuine interactions. The journey to earning their trust can be boiled down to three key questions. These questions encompass all the things people think about before deciding whether to open up to you:

**Can I feel safe with you?** If I show you my mistakes, will you still see me in a positive light or will you judge me? Will you give me a chance or assume the worst without listening to me?

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of trust as a passport comes from a May 26, 2021 blog post by Ken Sande, [rw360.org](http://rw360.org).

**Do you really care about me or are you simply going through the motions?** Do you have a genuine desire to assist me? Will you take the time to hear me out? Will you be there for me when I need you?

**Are you capable of addressing my issues?** How are you handling your own struggles and challenges? Have you been successful in tackling similar problems?

Too many leaders mistakenly think they were issued a passport with their promotion or their new title. Too many parents think they were automatically granted a passport with their child's birth certificate.

Be a HIGH-TRUST Leader: Earn your passports to the hearts and minds of those who matter. And don't let them expire through neglect.

## **TRUST IS THE AIR THAT ALL RELATIONSHIPS BREATHE**

Trust is the air that breathes life into all great relationships. When trust is high, the air is sparkling clean and clear, and relationships flourish. When trust is low, relationships become hazy and tentative, with gasps of misunderstanding and pangs of disconnection. If the air becomes toxic with mistrust, the relationship perishes.

Like fish, who don't think about the water they swim in, we don't often think about trust proactively. When we do think about trust, it is usually in the context of damage control.

No trust, no collaboration.

No trust, no positive influence.

No trust, no leadership.

No trust, no teamwork.

No trust, no intimacy.

No trust, no love.

But what if we thought about trust in a new way? About intentionally and proactively developing trust to seek its extraordinary benefits? How cool would it be if:

- Everyone calms down during a crisis because you've arrived.
- Your name came up during discussions about seizing a terrific new opportunity.
- Your child's first thought when facing a crisis is to get your advice.
- You could make even your very best relationships even better!

What if we worked on the level of trust in our most important relationships proactively on a daily basis? How many people do you deeply trust? What if you had five or six more? What difference would that make?

Here's the best part: trust is infinite. No matter how good your team or your relationships are now, you can make them even better by deepening the level of trust. There is always more room to grow the relationship. No one was ever faulted for being too trustworthy.

But measuring your own trustworthiness is tricky:

- We may be trusted by some, but not by others.
- We can be trusted today, but not tomorrow.
- We often judge our own trustworthiness based on the person who trusts us most. Too often we think that if we're trusted by one, we should be trusted by all. "John trusts me, therefore, I'm trustworthy. Bob doesn't trust me, so he must have trust issues."

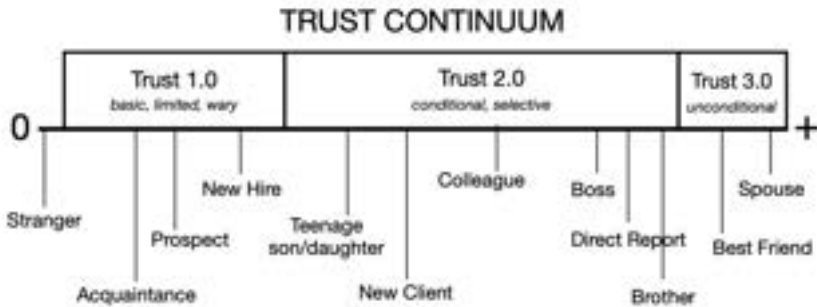
# CHAPTER 2

## THE TRUST CONTINUUM



In order to be trusted, you must be trustworthy.

**T**rust is not binary, yes or no, black or white. It is analog, complex, and dynamic; it is a continuum. We are at different places on others' trust continuum depending on our interactions with them. You may be trusted by some but not others; you may be trusted in some areas, but not in others; you may be trusted at some times but not others.



## **TRUST 1.0: BASIC TRUST**

This is your garden-variety trust. You have a basic level of trust in someone because they have a college degree, certification, had a similar job, or were referred by your cousin. Or you assess trust based on past performance. Think about it: Why do you trust other drivers to stay on their side of a painted yellow line? Why do you trust an airliner to fly seven miles above the ground in frigid temperatures and bad weather? How about that new guy who just joined your team? And how quickly do you question your trust when the car ahead swerves slightly, the airplane is jolted by turbulence, or the new guy behaves in an odd way?

I joined the Blue Angels as the commanding officer and flight leader after commanding a fleet F/A-18 squadron embarked on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. I had significantly more flight time, more aircraft carrier landings, and more air combat experience than my new wingmen, but I didn't have any Blue Angels experience. As we began our preseason training, Major Pat "Kato" Cooke, Blue Angel #2, said, "Boss, study the procedures, fly your jet safely, and we'll work together to have you ready to lead the flight demonstration." I was at Trust 1.0 and the beginning of my journey.

### *Learning to Talk and Fly*

Flying on and off aircraft carriers, naval aviators take pride in minimizing radio transmissions, and for good reason: a critical radio call could be missed if someone is chattering on the frequency. The combination of standard procedures, a thorough preflight briefing, and the disciplined use of defined terminology to minimize misunderstandings allows for complex tactics and procedures to be conducted with little-to-no radio communication. For example, during daylight operations, naval aviators routinely land 15–20 jets on aircraft

carriers every 45 seconds without a single radio transmission! It's called a "zip-lip" recovery. Even at night, we can land a jet every 60 seconds with minimal transmissions.

Blue Angels communications are quite different. In order to fly within a couple feet of each other while turning, rolling, and looping in formation, the leader must make routine transmissions on the radio. Before I moved the throttles or the control stick in my cockpit, I gave my wingmen a preparatory radio call followed by a call to execute. To roll the formation, I'd say, "OK," but drawn out a bit: "OooooooooK." The "Ooooo" was preparatory, and on the "K," we'd all move the sticks in our cockpits to the left in unison and the jets would roll to the left with the wingmen making small, continuous corrections to stay in position. On the first few days of learning to talk and fly, after moving the controls without first making the correct radio call, I quickly realized I had a long way to go.

At this point, our team was at Trust 1.0. We trusted each other to fly safely, but we were only doing basic maneuvers with wide separation because we hadn't yet demonstrated the consistency necessary to earn greater trust.

## **TRUST 2.0: CONDITIONAL AND SELECTIVE TRUST**

Conditional trust is where people spend most of their time (i.e., "If you do A, B, and C, I'll trust you with D."). For example, in the business world, contracts artificially raise the level of trust by lowering the level of vulnerability. They explain what each party is responsible for and state what will happen if either party doesn't meet the letter of the contract. Alternately, there is selective trust "I trust you with this, but not with that."



We worked very hard during Winter Training, memorizing the standard Blue Angel procedures and terminology and the various maneuver profiles and parameters, with exhausting repetition during each flight. As we improved, we tightened the formations, lowered the altitudes, and introduced more dynamic maneuvers.

As the Commanding Officer and Flight Leader, I thought of Bill Russell, who coached and played on the NBA's Boston Celtics championship teams in the 1960s. Not only did I have all the responsibilities of being the squadron's commanding officer, but I also had to don my flight suit, climb in the jet, and lead the formation every day. My job was to fly as smoothly and consistently as humanly possible every single day to allow my wingmen to fly to Blue Angels standards.

When I was the commanding officer of a fleet squadron, I could pick and choose my flights, but with the Blues, I had no choice but to fly every flight. If one of the wingmen couldn't fly, we'd fly a 5-plane practice or show. If I couldn't fly, none of us would fly. In my two years on the team, I missed one practice flight due to illness.

As we completed Winter Training and began the airshow season, we had done the hard work to develop the HIGH-TRUST culture necessary to put on a Blue Angels airshow, to fly to the highest standards set by all the teams beginning in 1946. But we still had a ways to go. By then, I was at conditional Trust 2.0—I could fly a Blue Angels airshow, but I was operating with all the procedures and maneuvers in cognitive conscious memory. My wingmen were wary that a distraction could negatively affect my performance with significant consequences.

## **TRUST 3.0: UNCONDITIONAL TRUST**

By mid-season in July, we had gelled as a Team. Everyone had mastered their roles at every level of the squadron. We were no longer climbing into our jets; we were strapping them on. Many of the procedures and details we needed to fly the demo had moved from conscious to unconscious memory. Having invested in our relationships with each other during weeks on the road at different show sites and weather conditions each weekend, we moved from Trust 2.0 to 3.0.

Trust 3.0 is when you've done the work, made the investments in time, consistency, transparency, connection, and communication to reach a point in a relationship where the other person feels unconditional trust and thinks, "I trust you, period."

Trust 2.0 feels transactional, like a contract. You wonder, "What do they want from me?" "What do I need to do?" "What will it take to make this work?"

Trust 3.0 is transformational. "What do they have for me?" It's values-based: "What should I do?" "I feel safe to be myself, my real self; not play a role, not hide some of my cards."

Trust 3.0 is a covenant between people.

We moved the formations to their tightest positions and continued to lower the altitudes of the maneuvers. At this point in the season, I could:

- Accurately judge altitude by the colors and textures on the ground.
- Discern the effect of wind at different altitudes during a maneuver and adjust the template of our airshow profiles to fit the local terrain and buildings.

- Feel when my wingmen were in position as the airflow over their canopies pushed my wings.
- Change the trajectory of a maneuver by adjusting the inflection of my voice on the radio—not the words I said, but how I said the words.
- Pull harder than usual at the bottom of a loop to avoid a ridgeline; tighten a turn around a skyscraper; or speed the roll of the formation to stay below the clouds—and my wingmen would stay with me in tight Blue Angels formation.

As we raised our game little by little each week, it didn't get easier. It still required steely concentration as well as physically and mentally exhausting work to avoid complacency. But it was worth it.

The same was true on the ground. I proudly watched the high activity of our support personnel completing the thousands of tasks necessary to prepare the jets and do all the work behind the scenes to give the crowd a Blue Angels experience each weekend. From early morning until late at night, they worked the countless routine details, responded to surprises, and overcame every challenge with great enthusiasm and efficiency. Just like the pilots in the air, they could practically read each other's minds, knowing what needed to be done, and making it happen. It was inspiring to see them look out for one another, sharing burdens, filling in wherever needed, always punctuated with laughter and good-natured ribbing.

The magic of HIGH-TRUST requires continuous work, sacrifice, and diligence. And when people are involved, progress is not a straight line. It's never "set it and forget it." We had to work on it every day, and as the leader, I had to set an example, which is often humbling.

## TRUST 2.0 vs. 3.0

### *Wariness vs. Anticipation*

Trust 2.0, there is a sense of wariness, “What did I miss in the contract?”, “What will I do if he does the very minimum, but not the level of quality or excellence that we discussed?” “What does she want from me?”

Trust 3.0, there are pleasant surprises as the result of compounding everyone’s efforts. Synergy, creativity, and collaboration are unleashed. There is eager anticipation: “I can’t wait to see the progress we make today,” and, “What does she have for me?”

### *Rules-based vs. Values-based*

Trust 2.0 is rules-based. While parsing the words in the contract to protect yourself, you wonder, “What am I required to do?”

Trust 3.0 is values-based, “What is the right thing to do?”

### *Pragmatic vs. Principled*

Trust 2.0 is a pragmatic mindset, “What will work?” “What is good enough?”

Trust 3.0 is a principled mindset, “Does this fulfill the spirit of our agreement?”

### *Transactional vs. Transformational*

Trust 2.0 feels transactional; it’s a contract, a quid pro quo.

Trust 3.0 is transformational; it’s a covenant, with a sum much greater than its parts.

At Trust 3.0, everyone feels safe to be themselves, their real selves, and bring their whole selves to work every day. They accept responsibility for their performance and don't shy away from admitting their mistakes to preserve trust and help others avoid the same. More on this later in the postflight debrief.

## **TRAINING TO BUILD TRUST**

The thing most people miss when they leave the military is the deep feeling of being able to trust the person next to them. They knew they could depend on their teammates to carry out the mission in accordance with what they're supposed to do. Lives depended on it. Once you've experienced that level of trust as the norm, you never forget it.

We can develop that same feeling of trust in business, government, communities, and families. We can be better and do more through trust. We have the tools. We just have to practice. And it is never too late for training, especially leadership training. In the military we're all about training. Because it works.

So, how do we proactively train for leadership?

When it comes to the big stuff, I believe we will do the right thing when everyone is watching—but what about the little things every day? That's where we can really make a difference.

## **TRAINING EXERCISE: LOW TRUST VS. HIGH TRUST**

Grab a pen and paper or open a Word document. Let's do some writing to slow down, focus, and reflect on your experiences with low trust and high trust situations.

*Exploring Low Trust*

Step 1: Identify a time when you were on a team or in a relationship with very low trust.

Step 2: Reflect on that situation. Think about where you were, who you were with, and what happened.

Step 3: How did that low-trust situation feel? Describe it.

Step 4: What was the effect of low trust? What happened—or didn't happen—because there was very little trust?

STOP here until you written answers to the prompts and questions above.

I've asked these questions of hundreds of people. The words most often used to describe the feelings when there is low trust or mistrust:

Afraid and Anxious

Frustrated

Marginalized

Angry

Unappreciated

Defensive

Micro-managed

Sad and Cynical

Disengage and Apathetic

And the effects of a low trust environment:

Depleted and burned-out

Turf battles

Politics and keeping score

Guarded communications  
No loyalty  
“It’s a job”  
Slow — Everything seems hard  
Lousy retention  
Divorce!

*Exploring HIGH-TRUST*

Step 1: Identify a time when you were on a team, or in a relationship, with very high trust.

Step 2: Reflect on that situation. Think about where you were, who you were with, what happened.

Step 3: How did that HIGH-TRUST situation feel? Describe it.

Step 4: What was the effect of HIGH-TRUST? What happened—or didn’t happen—because there was very high trust?

STOP here until you've written about the prompts and questions above before comparing your answers to words below.

Here are the words most often used to describe the feelings of HIGH-TRUST:

Safe  
Respected  
Understood  
Creative  
Confident  
Appreciated  
Challenged  
Self-Directed and Autonomous

## Energized and Engaged

And the results of a high trust environment:

Honesty and Candor

Accountability

Speed, Agility, Innovation

Increased Productivity

Determination and Resilience

Loyalty and Camaraderie

Fun

“Hardest work I’ve ever done”

“We were a true team”

Let’s briefly address each of these feelings:

**Safe.** Safe to be yourself—your real self, your whole self. Safe to share your ideas, concerns, stories, hopes, fears. You don’t have to wear a mask at work or play a role. You can be yourself.

**Respected.** You are valued, regardless of your role. Your teammates see the best in you and help you grow.

**Understood.** Your teammates take time and truly listen to understand you. We’ll discuss this a lot more in the coming chapter on CONNECTION.

**Creative.** Because you are allowed to share your crazy ideas, a HIGH-TRUST culture opens the window for people to think differently, to see new patterns, and connections.

**Confident.** Because you feel safe to try new things, stumble, and grow, you become confident and not afraid of failing, because your teammates won’t let you feel like a failure.



**Appreciated.** Your efforts are noticed and recognized as valuable to the team's success.

**Challenged.** Being given the precious gift of trust, you feel a duty not to let them down. You strive harder in order to be worthy of the gift.

**Self-Directed and Autonomous.** You are trusted to fulfill your duties and responsibilities in the best way possible. No one is looking over your shoulder or doing your work for you. You own it; it's yours.

**Energized and Engaged.** Feeling needed, respected, and appreciated, you come to work every day full of energy and the desire to knock it out of the park.

The results of a HIGH-TRUST culture:

**Honesty and Candor.** In a HIGH-TRUST culture, everyone feels safe to be honest with each other. No dancing around on eggshells, afraid of igniting fight-or-flight defensiveness in your teammates. But HIGH-TRUST evokes more than honesty, it inspires candor. What's the difference?

- Here's a basic depiction of honesty: I ask you a question and you tell me the truth. The problem is, if I have to ask for the truth, it slows us down and prevents us from operating at peak speed. Flying in the Blue Angels #1 jet at 500 mph, if I had to ask for the truth, it would've been too late.
- The solution is candor: tell me the truth when I need to hear it. The challenge with candor is if you allow someone to bring you the truth, you'll get it once, and depending on how you react to the truth, you may never receive it again. More on this and the need for truth-tellers ahead.

**Accountability.** In a HIGH-TRUST environment, people aren't afraid of the scoreboard. If they miss the target, their teammates are there to help them raise their game. My favorite definition of a team: "A group of people with a common mission who try to make each other look good."

**Speed, Agility, and Innovation.** In a HIGH-TRUST environment, everything moves quickly because trust is the air teams fly in. When the air is bright and clear, the team flies fast, adapts quickly to challenges and opportunities, innovating often (see Creativity above). Conversely, when the trust is low, the air is dark and toxic, everyone is wary, and progress slows.

**Increased Productivity.** With speed, accountability, and engagement, work is completed with a high level of both quantity and quality.

**Determination and Resilience.** HIGH-TRUST teams support each other, encourage each other, and help each other. They remind each other why the work they're doing is important and help each other overcome setbacks and mistakes. A low-trust team is brittle: when faced with significant adversity, everyone cowers in a defensive, self-serving posture, and inevitably, the team shatters. A HIGH-TRUST team can take a punch, come together, and grow stronger from the shared experience of overcoming adversity. More on this when we discuss COMMITMENT.

**Loyalty and Camaraderie.** When teammates are looking out for each other, it inspires loyalty and a willingness to give the benefit of the doubt, and to forgive mistakes. Very often, people develop strong bonds of friendship on HIGH-TRUST

teams, but as you'll see later, friendship and camaraderie are not required to achieve high performance.

**Fun.** Hanging around trustworthy people who share a common purpose is just plain fun. Depending on the difficulty of the mission and conditions, it may not be pleasurable, but it results in a feeling of deep satisfaction.

**“Hardest work I’ve ever done.”** HIGH-TRUST

teammates are encouraged to get outside their comfort zone in order to learn and grow. They suffer the pangs of learning a new skill, but their engagement reaches new heights as they gain confidence and increase the level of their performance. (See “Challenged” above.)

**“We were a true team.”** By definition, to become a HIGH-TRUST team, there has to be interdependence, coordination, and collaboration with shared purpose and sacrifice — all ingredients required for teamwork.