

Building Executive Team Trust That Stays Sturdy Under Pressure

The CEO of a large operating company had every reason to feel confident in his executive team. The business had exceeded its targets quarter after quarter, and the team appeared to be at the top of its game.

Then the company began to lose momentum. Results slipped below expectations. Employee engagement weakened. As pressure mounted, tensions within the executive team became harder to ignore. Leaders pointed fingers more readily. Ideas were increasingly tested within small inner circles before reaching the broader team. Some of the most difficult conversations stopped happening around the executive table, surfacing instead in hallways and side conversations.

Looking back, the CEO realized this growing trust problem hadn't appeared overnight. Some were present well before performance declined, but strong results made them easier to overlook. The team had grown accustomed to agreeing to short-term decisions without fully debating their longer-term implications. When issues arose, leaders often deferred to the CEO to make the call. They remained highly capable and accountable for their own areas but were less willing to challenge each other, expose disagreement or take collective ownership for decisions affecting the whole business.

As conditions became more challenging, the weakness in the team's foundations became apparent. What appeared as alignment and efficient decision-making actually reflected an absence of open disagreement and a tendency toward deference. The team hadn't built enough trust to have the candid conversations, constructive debate, and shared accountability required for long-term success.

For many executive teams, trust appears strong when the organization is performing well. However, underlying weaknesses become visible when that performance comes under pressure.

Despite the widely recognized importance of trust, many leadership teams don't work on it and instead expect it to develop naturally as leaders work together over time. It's often treated as a by-product of effective teamwork rather than something requiring deliberate attention.

That approach is risky: **If teams begin paying close attention to trust only after it's been damaged, rebuilding it can be remarkably difficult.**

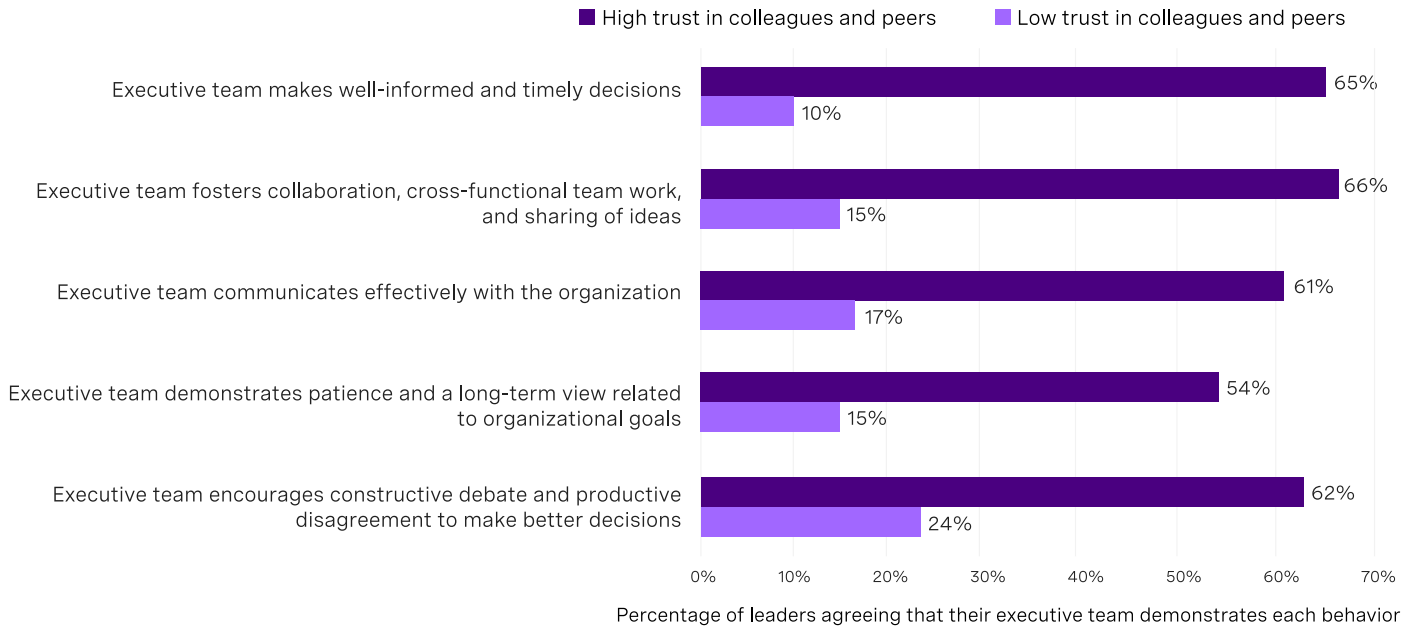
Teams that treat trust as a leadership practice pay attention to how it's built, strengthen it through how they work together and intentionally repair it when it comes under strain.

How trust affects performance

It's easy for teams to put trust on the back burner and hope it will endure when contention arises. That's partly because the consequences of imperfect trust aren't always immediately visible. Executive teams can continue to perform even amid strained trust. A successful business can absorb considerable friction within its leadership team, and imperfect trust does not preclude strong results in the short term.

That can make weak trust easy to tolerate, particularly while performance remains strong. Yet studies show a strong link between high trust and long-term team performance, even after accounting for prior team outcomes.[1] RRA's research finds substantial differences in executive team effectiveness in leaders with low and high trust in their peers. For example, teams with high trust are 6.5 times more likely than those with low trust to say their team makes well-informed, timely decisions (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparison of Executive Team Effectiveness by Level of Trust in Peers[2]



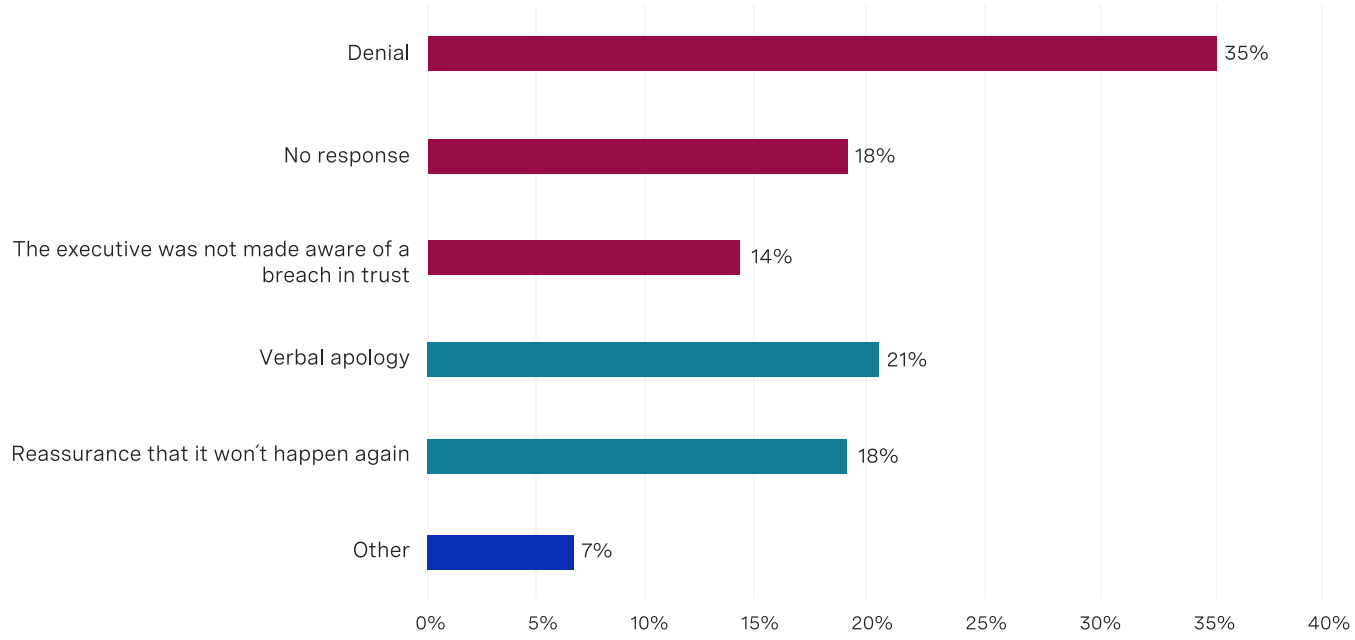
Source: RRA Transformational Leadership and Engagement Survey 2025, n=572 CEOs, C-level and next-generation leaders

Trust is widely recognized as essential to executive team performance, yet many teams invest relatively little in sustaining it until it comes under strain.

When trust begins to fray

Breaches of trust are more common than many executive teams might imagine. Nearly four in 10 senior executives report that someone on their team has breached their trust within the past six months.[3] Even when breaches surface, they aren't always repaired well, as leaders report that they're more likely to encounter denial than apologies or reassurance (Figure 2).

Figure 2: What Happens After a Trust Breach[4]



Source: RRA Transformational Leadership and Engagement Survey 2025, n=395 CEOs, C-level and next-generation leaders

While leaders might be tempted to categorize a trust breach as a one-time event, the effects of even one instance can last well beyond the incident itself. More than seven in 10 leaders reported that their level of trust never returned to where it was before the breach.[5] In some situations—particularly where the breakdown reflects deeper questions of intent, values or integrity—trust may never recover.

How executive teams can sustain trust

While trust is experienced collectively, it is shaped through what individual leaders do in their everyday interactions with each other. That puts it within the influence of every member of the executive team. The practices below show what this looks like across building, reinforcing and repairing trust.

1. Build trust

Trust grows from understanding. Executive teams build trust by developing a deeper understanding of themselves, each other and the principles that guide how they lead together.

Humanize the team. Executive teams often spend significant time together while knowing surprisingly little about each other beyond functional responsibilities and performance expectations. In stronger teams, individuals create space to learn more about each other's backgrounds, leadership journeys and experiences in previous roles. This helps colleagues understand the person behind the title and the experiences that have shaped how they lead.

In practice: Give colleagues greater insight into the experiences and leadership path that have shaped you. Be curious about your colleagues beyond their immediate roles and responsibilities, particularly those on the team you know less well. Greater familiarity with each other creates a stronger foundation for working together when pressure increases or perspectives differ.

Make your trust profile explicit. People differ in how they build trust. Some extend it by default and adjust if it's broken; others begin more cautiously and expect trust to be earned over time. Leaders also vary in what strengthens or weakens trust for them and in the behaviors they look for from colleagues over time. Sharing those preferences gives colleagues a clearer understanding of how trust develops with each other.

In practice: Reflect on your own assumptions about trust and what strengthens or weakens it for you. Recognize that colleagues may operate with very different assumptions. Rather than leaving these differences implicit, make your expectations visible and create space for colleagues to articulate theirs, establishing clearer foundations for how you work together.

Build awareness of stress and derailer patterns. Trust is often tested when pressure is highest. Pressure can change how leaders respond to colleagues and difficult situations. Some may become more directive or defensive, while others may withdraw or become less willing to engage in dissent. High-trust teams make these patterns discussable.

In practice: Build awareness of how your behavior is likely to change under pressure, the situations most likely to trigger these patterns, and make these tendencies clear to colleagues. That gives them more context for interpreting your response, rather than assuming it's deliberate or personal.

Make values a practical guide for decision-making. Trust is earned through the decisions leaders make, especially when the stakes are high and there's no obvious right answer. High-trust executive teams develop a shared understanding of the values that matter to them and use these to guide difficult trade-offs when commercial, operational or stakeholder priorities compete. Understanding not only what matters to colleagues but why it matters gives leaders greater confidence in each other's judgment and intentions, even when they disagree on the right course of action.

In practice: When facing a difficult trade-off, pause to identify the value you're trying to protect, then bring that into the conversation. Explain not just the position you're taking but what matters most to you in reaching it and where you see the key tension. This helps colleagues understand the reasoning behind your judgment, even when they see the trade-off differently.

2. Reinforce trust

Trust is reinforced through everyday interactions. Small moments of consistency, openness and follow-through strengthen trust long before it's tested.

Normalize constructive challenge. High-trust teams don't equate harmony with trust. They create an environment where leaders can challenge each other, give candid feedback and raise issues without worrying that disagreement will damage the relationship.

In practice: The next time you disagree with a colleague, raise the issue in the room. Be specific about what you see differently and why. Just as importantly, when someone challenges you, show that the disagreement is welcome by staying curious rather than becoming defensive.

Distinguish between intent and impact. Trust can erode quickly when leaders begin assigning motives to each other's behavior. A missed follow-up becomes interpreted as disregard. Direct feedback becomes seen as deliberately undermining. High-trust teams resist those assumptions and create space to understand what happened before drawing conclusions about each other's motives.

In practice: When a colleague's behavior frustrates you, describe the impact on you before assuming poor intent. Ask for their perspective on the action and their purpose in taking it. That simple pause can prevent a misunderstanding from hardening into a judgment about intent.

Avoid placating behaviors. Agreeing quickly just to avoid friction or committing to actions without genuine intention to follow through can create the appearance of alignment while slowly eroding trust. Trust is reinforced when leaders can rely on each other to mean what they say and follow through on their commitments.

In practice: Before agreeing to a decision or commitment, ask yourself whether you genuinely intend to follow through. If the answer is no, say so in the room and explain what would need to change for you to truly commit.

Make competing incentives discussable. Executive teams naturally face competing priorities for resources, investment, talent, organizational visibility and influence. While these dynamics aren't inherently unhealthy, they can erode trust when specific interests remain unspoken and begin shaping behavior behind the scenes.

In practice: Be open about how a decision affects your function and the broader enterprise considerations shaping your view. Discuss where incentives, visibility or competition may influence behavior, and set clear expectations for how the team navigates those trade-offs.

Invest in relationships beyond the meeting room. Trust is easier to sustain when relationships aren't confined to formal meetings and agendas. Informal time together gives leaders opportunities to connect outside the immediate demands of the work.

In practice: Make a point of spending time with colleagues outside the formal agenda. A coffee, lunch or informal conversation can help maintain these connections over time. Team leaders also can create space for this, particularly during high-pressure periods, when it's most likely to be squeezed out.

Revisit team norms regularly. The behaviors that build trust can slip as teams change and pressure increases. High-trust teams periodically revisit their expectations of each other, including how they challenge, communicate, make trade-offs and hold each other accountable. This helps prevent small behavior shifts from subtly reshaping accepted ways of working.

In practice: If the team starts drifting from an agreed norm, bring it back into the conversation using the team's own commitments. For example: "We said we wanted to challenge more directly. Is there anything we should address here before we move on?" Framing the reminder this way makes it easier for any member to raise a potential issue.

3. Repair trust

Once trust has been damaged, acknowledgement alone is rarely enough to restore it. Trust is rebuilt through observable behaviors that reduce uncertainty and demonstrate reliability over time. Executive teams that address tensions and breaches directly have a better chance of preventing them from becoming lasting fractures.

Address tensions while they're still small. Conversations that teams avoid rarely disappear. Left unresolved, small tensions can harden into resentment, guardedness or negative assumptions about each other, making trust progressively more difficult to sustain. High-trust teams surface concerns early and address them directly, before they become embedded in how leaders relate to each other.

In practice: Raise concerns with the other person while the incident is still fresh and specific. Describe what happened, explain the impact it had on you, and ask how the other person saw the situation. Addressing the moment itself is often easier than waiting until frustration becomes a broader judgment about the relationship.

Repair deliberately. Leaders may avoid addressing broken trust directly, assuming time will repair the damage. However, trust rarely recovers without direct effort and sustained behavioral change. Repair starts with acknowledging what happened, understanding its impact, and taking responsibility where needed. Rebuilding trust then depends on consistent follow-through over time that gives colleagues reason to trust again.

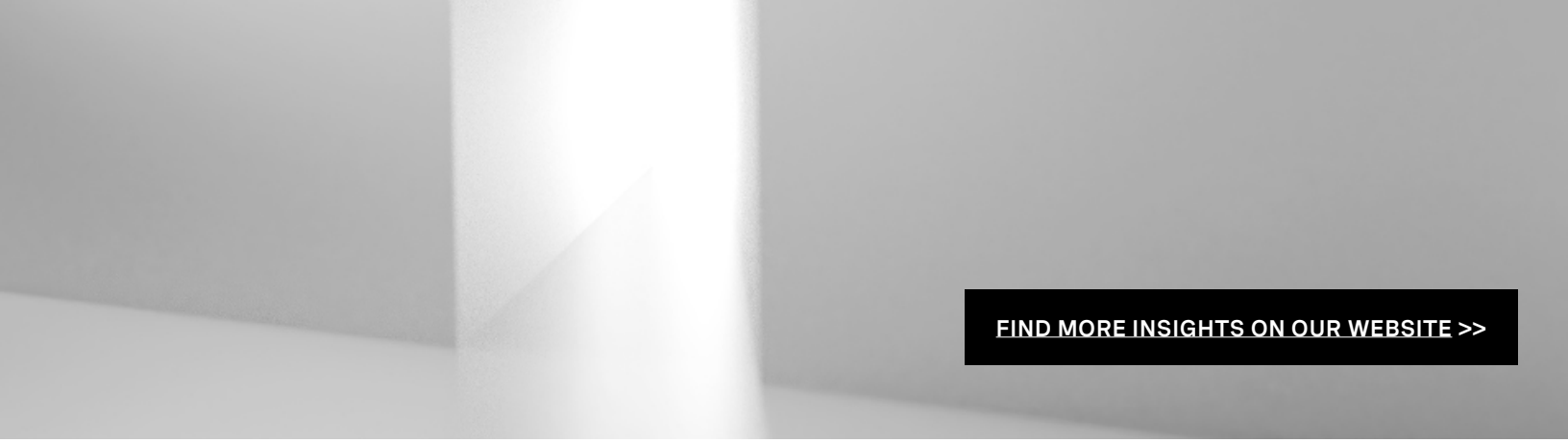
In practice: If trust has been damaged, be willing to start the conversation. Make the breach explicit with the other person and be clear about what would need to change to rebuild confidence. Consider reflecting on and acknowledging your own contribution to what happened, even if you believe the other person bears more responsibility.

Trust as an ongoing practice

For the executive team at the start of this article, the turning point came when trust became something they worked on deliberately. They surfaced the patterns that had been undermining how they worked together and became more intentional about how they challenged, made decisions and led as a team. Over time, those changes strengthened trust, and performance eventually recovered.

Trust isn't the only determinant of performance, and organizations can succeed when trust at the top is imperfect, but strong leadership team trust becomes more consequential when business conditions become more complicated.

That's why trust is best treated as an everyday leadership practice, not something to address only after it's been damaged. Building, reinforcing and repairing trust over time gives teams a stronger foundation to draw on when they need it most.



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Sources

[1] De Jong, B. A., Dirks, K. T., & Gillespie, N. (2016). Trust and team performance: A meta-analysis of main effects, moderators, and covariates. Journal of Applied Psychology, 101(8), 1134-1150.

[2] RRA Transformational Leadership and Engagement Survey 2025, n=572 CEOs, C-level and next-generation leaders

[3] RRA Transformational Leadership and Engagement Survey 2025, n=1,048 CEOs, C-level and next-generation leaders

[4] RRA Transformational Leadership and Engagement Survey 2025, n=395 CEOs, C-level and next-generation leaders

[5] RRA Transformational Leadership and Engagement Survey 2025, n=311 CEOs, C-level and next-generation leaders

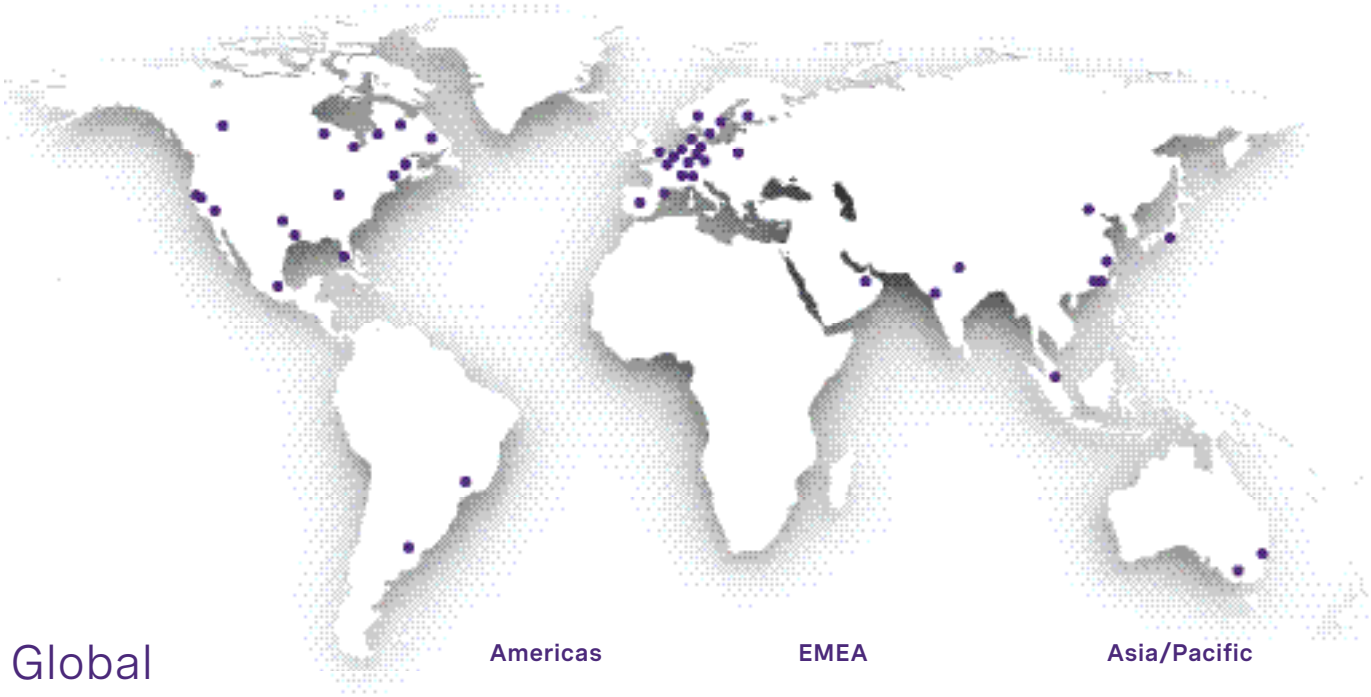
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