



# Trust in Turbulence™: A Leader's Field Guide to Trust



## WHY WE CREATED THIS GUIDE

As a leader, you carry more influence than you may realize. SparkEffect's 2025 Trust Research shows that employees place the highest trust in their direct manager, more than in executives or the organization as a whole. But that trust is also the most fragile, and it is tested most during times of disruption.

Your team isn't just listening to big announcements from the top. They are watching you. How you explain decisions, how you respond under pressure, and how you show care in everyday moments are the signals your people use to decide whether they can trust your organization.

We created this guide to provide you with practical tools that you can use right away. It's not about being perfect; it's about being consistent. A few small, repeatable actions can build the clarity, fairness, and care your team needs to stay engaged and confident, regardless of the changes that come.

# Contents

## 1. Trust Is Not Soft – It's Strategic

Explore why trust is a critical business imperative, not just a soft skill, and how it directly impacts organizational performance and resilience.

## 2. Trust in Your Circle of Influence

Understand how to cultivate trust within your immediate team and direct reports, recognizing the profound impact of your daily interactions.

## 3. Everyday Practices to Build Trust

Discover actionable, practical habits and behaviors leaders can implement daily to build and reinforce trust with their teams consistently.

## 4. Muscle Memory for Trust

Learn how to embed trust-building principles into your leadership approach, making instinctive reactions rather than conscious efforts.

## 5. Disruption and the First 48 Hours

Prepare for moments of crisis by understanding how to respond effectively in the immediate aftermath of a disruption, thereby maintaining and restoring trust.

## 6. Tap Into Your Inner Coach

Develop coaching skills that empower your team, fostering growth and demonstrating your belief in their capabilities, thereby strengthening trust.

## 7. Transparency Is Not Everything

Delve into the nuances of transparency, understanding when and how much information to share to build trust without causing overwhelm or anxiety.

## 8. The CFC Check Model

An introduction to the CFC (Clarity, Fairness, Consistency) model, a robust framework for leaders to assess and enhance trust in their interactions.

## 9. Trust as a Core Leadership Competency

Synthesize your understanding of trust, recognizing its central role in effective leadership and its ongoing development as a vital professional skill.

## Trust Is Not Soft – It's Strategic

When trust is strong, people move with you. When trust fractures, progress stalls. SparkEffect quantified what was once intuitive: **trust can be built, measured, and managed with the same rigor as revenue and cost.**

Leaders who treat trust like capital, who invest and govern it, earn a compounding return. We call this the trust dividend. Use this field guide to move from belief to practice. It provides your team with a common language, a straightforward operating cycle, and tools you can implement today

Trust is not a soft skill. It directly shapes retention, reputation, and revenue, and there is a clear distinction between High-Trust and Low-Trust Organizations.



### High-Trust Organizations

These organizations, ranking in the top quartile with scores of **86 and above on the SparkEffect Trust Index**, are characterized by environments where employees consistently report high levels of **clarity, fairness**, and a strong sense of **psychological safety** and **belonging**. This fosters a proactive and confident workforce.



### Low-Trust Organizations

Conversely, organizations in the bottom quartile, scoring **65 or below**, exhibit environments where employees frequently experience **confusion, fear**, and perceptions of **unfairness**, particularly during periods of change or disruption. This can lead to hesitation and resistance.



The operational and cultural disparities between these two groups are dramatic, directly impacting employee confidence and organizational outcomes:

METRIC	HIGH-TRUST ORGS	LOW-TRUST ORGS
Confidence in company's strategy	93%	40%
Confidence in financial performance	97%	46%

Beyond these metrics, high-trust organizations consistently demonstrate superior ability to retain key talent and recover more rapidly after disruptions. In stark contrast, low-trust organizations frequently experience significant erosion in both employee retention and overall reputation during challenging times.



#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Trust is not about achieving perfection. It's about leaders consistently showing up with **clarity, fairness, and genuine care in the moments that matter most.**

#### NOTES:

---

---

---

---

## What the Research Shows

### Manager trust is critical but fragile



It begins higher than trust in executives **but collapses fastest during disruption**. That makes manager enablement one of the most important investments an organization can make.

### Care preserves elasticity



Organizations that show fairness and care during a crisis are **6.5× more likely** to report clarity in future strategy. Care is the foundation of resilience.

### Trust defines performance



High-trust organizations report significantly stronger confidence in their financial performance, strategy, and sense of belonging, and retain more of their top talent.

### Elasticity is the moat



Trust elasticity is the ability to absorb disruption and rebound stronger. **High-elasticity organizations protect their people, brand, and customers.** Low-elasticity organizations fracture.

### NOTES:

---

---

---

## Why Trust Matters to the 3Rs

### REVENUE

Trust accelerates the adoption of strategy and reduces organizational friction. When leaders act with clarity and fairness, teams execute more efficiently, and productivity remains high even under stress.

### REPUTATION

Trust-defining moments, such as layoffs, leadership transitions, or reorganizations, shape how employees, customers, and investors perceive the organization. Handling them with fairness and care protects the employer brand and credibility in the market.

### RETENTION

Psychological safety and a sense of belonging predict whether top talent stays. High-trust organizations achieve dramatically higher retention, protecting institutional knowledge and leadership pipelines.

## Why This Matters for You?

Now that you see how high-trust and low-trust organizations differ, the next step is to understand where you personally have the most influence.

**Spoiler:** it's not in the all-hands memo. It's in the everyday relationship with your team. That's your circle of influence — and it's where trust is built or broken first.

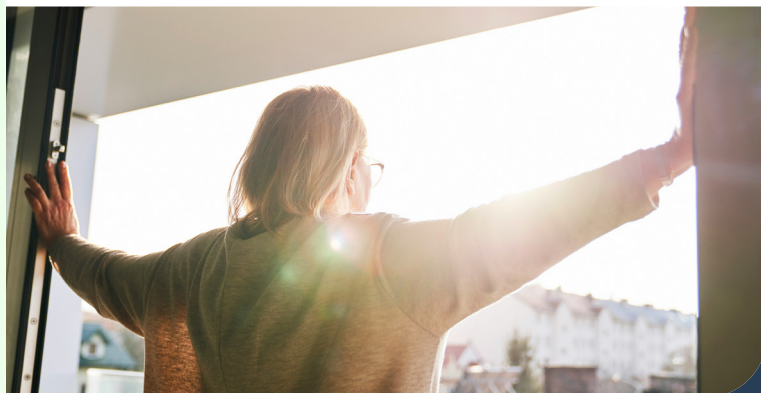
### NOTES:

---

---

---

---



## 2 | Trust in Your Circle of Influence

Trust lives closest to home. For your team, that means you. Relationships with direct managers scored highest in our Trust Index, while trust in organizational leadership lagged.



As a manager, you have the most direct influence on psychological safety and a sense of belonging. You also play a critical role in translating strategic clarity into plain language so direction does not feel abstract or disconnected.

**“Teams move at the speed of trust, and organizations move at the speed of their teams.”**

**- SparkEffect's Chief Coaching Officer, Rod Bacon,**

### How to Use this Guide

Knowing that trust lives closest to home, your role as a manager becomes less about being perfect and more about being intentional.

The everyday practices in the next section give you small, repeatable moves that build credibility with your team. Use them as habits, not one-offs.



### 3 | Everyday Practices to Build Trust

Trust is not built in one moment. It is built into your daily habits.

<b>Translate the big picture</b>	Connect organizational goals to your team's work
<b>Be fair and transparent</b>	Explain your why when assigning work, giving recognition, or handling promotions and exits
<b>Model openness</b>	Admit what you do not know, ask for input
<b>Show up consistently</b>	Follow through, own mistakes, and be steady under pressure
<b>Invest in connection</b>	Small acts compound, celebrate milestones, check in beyond the work



#### PRO TIP

Pick one practice each week. Small, visible actions add up to strong credibility.

### Why This Matters in Disruption:

Daily habits give you the foundation, but disruption raises the stakes. When things get bumpy, you won't have time to invent a response; you'll fall back on whatever muscle memory you've built. That's why the following section focuses on practice and repetition, so you're ready when the pressure is on.

#### NOTES:

---

---

---

---

---





## 4 | Muscle Memory for Trust

Trust during disruption is not instinctive; it is a skill that somebody must practice. Leaders who prepare and rehearse for disruption build higher trust elasticity, the ability to absorb shocks and snap back stronger. Leaders must build trust through everyday moments so that presence, fairness, and clarity come naturally when it matters most.

### Here is how to build that muscle:

#### Practice with Small Disruptions

A missed deadline, a project pivot, or a team conflict is your chance to learn and grow. Please do not gloss over these moments; use them to practice fairness, transparency, and empathy. Treat each one as a micro disruption that builds your readiness for the larger storms

#### Prepare for Difficult Conversations

Tough conversations should never be left to improvisation. **Use the Clarity Fairness Care Check to ground yourself before you deliver the message.**

See below for how to do that!

#### Anchor in Realistic Reps

Muscle memory does not come from one-off interactions. It comes from repetition. Embed small practices into your weekly rhythm, start meetings by naming what is constant in a shifting environment, and Close conversations by summarizing commitments so fairness and clarity are visible. Pause to check your own state before delivering news; your calm regulates the team's calm.

#### Run Retrospectives Regularly

After projects or change initiatives, hold quick retrospectives.

*Ask: What went well? What could we do differently next time? Did everyone feel heard during the process?*

This normalizes feedback, reinforces psychological safety, and helps your team trust that their voice matters in shaping how you move forward.

#### Utilize Coaching to Develop your Trust Skill Set

Our research confirms what learning science shows: training fades fast without reinforcement. Coaching, however, turns insight into embodied leadership. Work with a coach, mentor, or trusted peer to help you reflect, notice patterns, and practice new approaches around trust, until they become second nature.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

You cannot improvise trust under pressure. Build the muscle in everyday moments so that when disruption hits, you default to presence, fairness, and clarity instead of scrambling.

### How to Apply This in the Moment

Practicing trust in low-stakes moments prepares you for the real test: the first 48 hours of a disruption. At these moments is when your team looks to you most. The guidance that follows is your quick-start kit for those moments.

## 5 | Disruption and the First 48 Hours

Our research shows **trust in direct leaders drops 4.1 points after disruption**, the steepest decline of any group. When handled well, disruption can build trust above baseline, that's the trust dividend.

To make sure you're a part of that group, here is your 48-hour disruption guide:



### BE VISIBLE, AVAILABLE FOR REAL-TIME CONVERSATIONS

Silence breeds rumors. Even if you do not have all the answers:

- Say what you know
- Say what you do not know
- Share when you will update again



### LEAD WITH CARE

People need to feel seen before they will hear strategy. Start conversations by first checking in on the human.

You can ask: "How are you doing with this news?"

And follow with a simple: "I know this change feels sudden. Here is what I do know, and here is what comes next."



### CREATE A TWO-WAY DIALOGUE

Ask:

- What is on your mind right now?
- What questions do you wish were answered?



### PARTNER WITH INFORMAL LEADERS

Every team has trusted voices. These are the informal leaders of your team and organizations.

These are trust multipliers who can help support during disruption. Loop them in early so they reinforce clarity instead of fueling side chatter or misinformation.



### ANCHOR ON WHAT STILL MATTERS

Reaffirm constants, your team's purpose, core priorities, and shared values. Stability creates calm.

## Why Coaching Matters Here

Once you've handled the immediate disruption, trust is sustained not just by information but by empowerment. Coaching skills enable you to transition from being the answer-giver to being the question-asker, demonstrating to your team that you believe in their capacity and voice.

## 6 | Tap Into Your Inner Coach

Asking questions changes the chemistry in our brains. Access your coaching power and move from having all the answers to asking questions.

### Coaching questions you can use during disruption

- What feels most uncertain for you right now?
- Where do you need more clarity?
- What would help you feel this decision was handled fairly?
- What part of your work feels most stable, and what feels most disrupted?
- What questions do you wish leadership would answer?
- What do you need from me this week so that you can keep moving?
- What is one small change that would make this easier for you or the team?

### What to Watch Out For

Many managers assume trust equals transparency. Our research shows that's only part of the story. The following section unpacks why clarity, fairness, and care matter even more than sharing every detail.



The iceberg of change reminds us that ninety percent of disruption's impact is below the surface: emotions, identity shifts, and uncertainty. Your role is to name and acknowledge what is below the surface, not gloss over it.

#### NOTES:

---

---

---

---

## 7 | Transparency Is Not Everything

Many leaders believe trust is built by sharing *everything*. However, our research indicates that transparency alone is not the most significant driver of trust. Employees recognize that not all information is available or fully known, especially during disruption.

### What matters most is how leaders act in the face of uncertainty:



#### Clarity

Even if you can't share all the details, you can share what is known and what it means for the team today.



#### Care

Acknowledge the human impact, even if outcomes can't be fully predicted.



#### Fairness

Explain the criteria guiding decisions so that employees feel changes are consistent, empathetic, and not arbitrary.



#### Listen

Create space for questions, concerns, and ideas so people feel heard, not sidelined.

### Let's Make it Practical

**The Clarity Fairness Care model is your checklist for tough conversations.** Think of it as the discipline that keeps you grounded when emotions run high and details are messy. Use it before you walk into any high-stakes conversation.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

You cannot improvise trust under pressure. Build the muscle in everyday moments so that when disruption hits, you default to presence, fairness, and clarity instead of scrambling.

## 8 | The CFC Check Model

The Clarity Fairness Care model is built directly from our research, which showed that the highest-rated interventions for building trust during disruption were clear communication, fair processes, and visible care for employees.

### Clarity

**Write one sentence that states the message in plain, straightforward language.**

*"Our team's budget will be reduced by ten percent this quarter."*

### Fairness

**Write one sentence that shows how the decision was made or how you'll apply it consistently.**

*"We applied the same criteria across all departments based on revenue impact."*

### Care

**Write one sentence that acknowledges the human side.**

*"I know this has a real impact, and I'm committed to supporting you as we move through it."*

## Bringing it Together

Every piece of this guide, from daily practices to disruption playbooks, comes back to one truth: trust is a leadership competency. It is built through small actions, tested in disruption, and measured by how your team shows up afterward.

The summary that follows distills these moves into the essentials you can carry with you every day.

### PRO TIP

Draft these three sentences on paper or in your notes before the conversation. Even if you don't read them word for word, the exercise disciplines your thinking, so you show up anchored in presence, fairness, and empathy.



## 9 | A Leader's Field Guide to Trust Summary

What matters most in building trust every day and in disruption:

- **Trust is strategic** — High-trust organizations are twice as likely to demonstrate clarity in strategy and confidence in financial performance.
- **Trust lives closest to home** — Employees trust direct managers most, but it is also the most fragile during disruption.
- **Daily practices matter** — Translate strategy, be fair and transparent, model openness, and invest in connection.
- **Muscle memory builds elasticity** — Practice in minor disruptions, run retros, rehearse tough conversations, and build consistency so trust holds under pressure.
- **The First 48 hours are critical** — Be visible, lead with care, invite dialogue, partner with informal leaders, and anchor on what still matters.
- **Clarity, Fairness, Care** — These are the highest-rated interventions for protecting trust in the face of disruption.
- **Leadership competency** — Trust is not extra; it is core. Leaders who consistently demonstrate clarity, fairness, and care outperform peers in resilience and results.

### Bringing it Together

Trust isn't extra work; it's how work gets done. Every conversation, decision, and ritual you lead either builds trust or erodes it.

This guide serves as a starting point, not a script. Use it to spark conversations with your team, test small practices, and lead with clarity, fairness, and care when disruption strikes. Start simple by trying one resource, one framework, or one ritual at a time.

As you develop these habits, you'll create more stability for your team, foster greater confidence in change, and establish stronger connections that endure even through disruption. And you don't have to do it alone, SparkEffect provides coaching and development support to help managers grow their impact and embed trust more deeply across the organization.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

You don't need to be perfect. You need to be consistent, fair, and caring, especially when the stakes are high.







## WHO IS SPARK EFFECT

SparkEffect is a human-first company built on one belief: trust is the most valuable capital an organization has.

We help organizations strengthen that capital through executive coaching, career transitions, organizational development, and board support. Our work equips leaders to handle disruption with clarity, fairness, and care — so people stay, strategies succeed, and organizations grow stronger.

Our research proves what many leaders have long intuited: trust isn't soft. It drives retention, reputation, and revenue. SparkEffect makes trust measurable, actionable, and sustainable; turning it into a true strategic advantage. Executive coaching and career transition make them the trusted partner for organizations preparing to meet future challenges.

## Our Services

### Executive Coaching



Our Readiness and Impact programs are designed to empower senior leaders. We provide tailored coaching that sharpens leadership behaviors, enhances strategic influence, and directly fosters trust throughout the organization and its systems.

### Career Transition & Outplacement



We offer human-first services that transform challenging moments like organizational restructuring or layoffs into opportunities for trust-building. Our compassionate approach supports individuals while upholding the organization's integrity and long-term reputation.

### Leadership & Organizational Development



Services include bespoke manager enablement programs, fostering internal alignment, and establishing robust fairness systems. Our goal is to ensure that trust permeates every level, extending to the very edge of your organizational structure.

### CEO & Board Advisory



We provide strategic counsel on trust dashboards, elasticity reviews, and governance models. Our unique approach ensures that trust is integrated alongside traditional metrics, such as revenue and pipeline. Positioning it as a core strategic asset.

Our key differentiator is our commitment to actionable results: we don't just discuss trust in theoretical terms. We provide the frameworks to measure it, the processes to operationalize it, and the governance models to help leaders protect it as a tangible, strategic asset for sustainable success.