

# A Commander's First Challenge

## Building Trust

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Trust is “the vital bond that unifies leaders with their followers and commanders with their units.”<sup>1</sup> Not only is trust vital for an effective leader, it should also be established quickly based on the nature of the military. While trust is important for a successful leader, it may be even more important for a commander whose responsibilities include sending Airmen into harm’s way.<sup>2</sup>

Research has shown that trust is about relationships. Commanders need a relationship with their followers to have influence over them.<sup>3</sup> If commanders were better equipped to quickly build genuine trust with their followers, there would likely be a significant increase in effectiveness and efficiency. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify actions and tasks that USAF leaders, particularly squadron commanders, can use to quickly and effectively build trust within their units.

## Defining Trust

Trust can be a difficult concept to describe exactly; therefore, for many, it is easier to describe what trust is not. That is why trust is commonly referred to as “being broken” and rarely referred to as “being kept, built, or strengthened.”<sup>4</sup> Herein, *trust* is defined as a “psychological state comprising willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of a specific other or others.”<sup>5</sup> Although there are different definitions of trust, most of the definitions include a willingness to accept vulnerability along with the positive expectations of others.

Trust is vital to leadership because the level of trust that followers have in their leader directly impacts their willingness to accept that leader’s influence.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, a leader’s trust in followers makes the leader more open to their influence.<sup>7</sup> A leader–follower relationship built on trust facilitates open communication, mutual cooperation, mutual dependence, and empowerment, all of which greatly enhance both individual and group effectiveness.<sup>8</sup>

Traditionally, the most widely accepted understanding of trust has been that it is something that takes time to develop, build, and strengthen.<sup>9</sup> However, research into temporary groups and systems has identified that a large degree of trust is established early in relationships.<sup>10</sup> *Swift trust* is a unique form of trust that occurs between groups or individuals brought together in temporary groups or teams to accomplish specific tasks, often under certain time constraints.<sup>11</sup> Swift trust, as described by Debra Meyerson, Karl E. Weick, and Roderick M. Kramer, has become increasingly popular as a research topic in recent years.<sup>12</sup> Swift trust implies that trust can be presupposed in certain environments and organizations. That is, swift trust is formed quickly out of necessity to manage the issues of uncertainty, risk, and perceptions between groups or teams. The concept of swift trust takes trust out of the personal form and instead focuses trust based on actions and tasks. Thus, swift trust becomes a strategy for groups or individuals as a means to manage vulnerability based on their roles rather than focusing on interpersonal relationships that may not yet have had time to form.<sup>13</sup>

With the current environment in the USAF where squadron commanders typically serve for only two years or less, swift trust may provide an excellent starting point from which to build genuine trust. Deployed commanders must build trust within their units even more quickly than a commander in a traditional unit given the compressed timelines of downrange command tours. Typically, deployments are between 4–12 months with a mix of personnel from different units around the world. In a deployed environment, the unit is in a heightened readiness state and usually closer to a combat zone. In this type of environment, unit members typically show up prepared for combat on Day 1 and have little to no time to

acclimate to their new unit and members of their unit. There is very little time to get to know each other, and in addition to being in a deployed environment, the operational requirements and mission set usually carry greater ramifications.

By building upon swift trust, commanders may focus on actions and tasks that can develop relationships and build genuine trust more quickly.<sup>14</sup> Providing commanders with a clear pathway to building trust may create an avenue for increased operational performance as well as increased employee organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

## **Methodology**

We collected data from focus groups and individual one-on-one interviews. Focus groups are typically composed of 6–10 people with similar backgrounds who participate in the interview together for approximately 1–2 hours. These participants can make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other participants have to say. The advantages of focus groups include enriched data quality because of the participant interactions, enhanced cost-effectiveness because more people can participate in the same time period used for a one-on-one interview, and improved data analysis because the researcher can quickly identify consistent or shared views as well as the extreme and diverse opinions.<sup>15</sup>

Focus group participants are generally selected based on their relevance and relationship to the topic of study. Typically, focus group participants are not chosen in an attempt to statistically represent a meaningful population.<sup>16</sup> However, for this research, we felt it important to capture a representative sample of the various Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC) and the different squadron mission sets in the USAF. Focus group participants were randomly selected with consideration to ensure that multiple AFSCs were represented. It is hoped that the concepts derived from the focus groups and interviews will generalize to all types of units, regardless of their mission sets.

Three focus groups were conducted. The first focus group consisted of eight senior noncommissioned officers (SNCO). They offer a unique perspective as to what the enlisted force sees from their commander and have been in the USAF between 8–30 years. The second focus group consisted of eight company-grade officers (CGO). These CGOs provide the unique perspective of having been in the USAF typically between 1–10 years and are the backbone of the officer corps. The final focus group was conducted with field-grade officers (FGO). Six of the seven FGOs in the focus group were already squadron commanders, and the seventh was selected for command.

We conducted five individual interviews following the focus groups. These interviews helped us to better understand the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of the focus group members. The interviews also allowed us to gather anecdotal and historical data, which added more context to the data gathered during the focus group sessions.

## Analysis and Results

Data were collected from the focus groups, individual interviews, and a detailed literature review. More than seven hours of interviews with 28 individuals equaling 130 pages of transcripts and 2,100 pages of reviewed literature have gone into this research. The data collected from the focus groups and interviews were so dense and rich that the researchers decided to “winnow” it, which is a process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, this research focused on the most pertinent and relevant information directly applicable to the research questions. The most common themes and ideas that kept reappearing in the three different focus groups and interviews were the foundation of our analysis.

We aggregated the data collected from the focus groups into four main themes. These themes emerged from the data collected during the focus groups and interviews and were validated by the in-depth literature review. The data revealed four prevalent themes that a commander needs to work through to build trust: Engage, Connect, Serve, and Lead. These four themes provide a framework (see fig. 1) for the actions and tasks that a commander can do to build genuine trust with their Airmen.

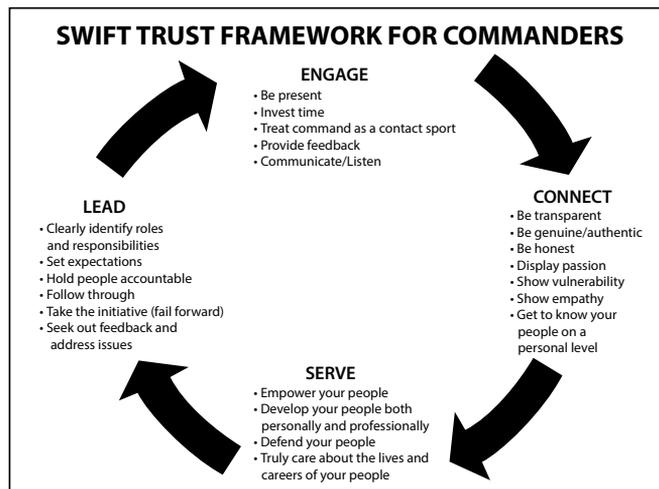


Figure. Trust-building framework

## **Engage**

To build trust, leaders should meet with their people and communicate regularly and consistently.<sup>18</sup> The same sentiments were shared by all three of the focus groups. A squadron commander in the FGO focus group stated that “leadership is a contact sport.” A commander cannot lead without getting out with their troops and doing the job with them. Time spent with an Airman on the job shows that the commander values the Airman individually and what that Airman is doing. In fact, members of the focus group stated that sometimes the most important thing that a commander can do is to “simply show up.” One FGO who recently returned from the Air Mobility Command (AMC) Commander’s Course said that the four-star general in charge of AMC was present for almost the entire week-long course. The FGO stated, “His presence alone, his just showing up, was enough. He did not have to say it was important, we knew it was important to him because he was there.” Here, the AMC commander’s actions helped to build trust because he showed that he valued the training the new squadron commanders were receiving and that it was important and significant for him to be there.

When commanders are present with their Airmen, it provides the opportunity for communication to take place and is an opportunity to provide feedback to an individual. Members of all three focus groups mentioned communication and feedback multiple times as being highly significant to a commander’s ability to build trust. In an interview, one squadron commander stated that being “consistent with your communication and then following through with the message that you communicated is a demonstration of your trust.” Additionally, this communication should happen sooner rather than later. A commander or leader cannot afford to waste a single opportunity to communicate with their people or delay getting to know their unit. Peder Hyllengren has shown that leaders who meet regularly and communicate consistently have a more positive impact on trust than those leaders who fail to do so.<sup>19</sup>

Members of all three focus groups mentioned that feedback was virtually nonexistent, specifically constructive feedback (i.e., identifying areas that need improvement). Feedback is important because it is intended to improve the individual receiving the feedback, and it shows that the commander cares about making them better. One first sergeant from the SNCO focus groups stated, “most Airmen don’t trust their supervisors, I guarantee it, I have seen it.” Supervisors “don’t tell their people when they are doing good or when they are doing bad,” thus, “their people think that they do not care,” and trust is diminished. The USAF struggles with providing real, constructive feedback and holding individuals accountable when they make a mistake. Not holding people accountable shows in-

consistency and also diminishes trust. Correcting a mistake can provide an incredible opportunity to hold someone accountable, which can build trust.

## **Connect**

The most commonly mentioned factor that a commander needs to build trust was transparency. Members of every focus group repeatedly mentioned the commander's need to be transparent. Transparency implies openness, communication, and accountability. This means that a commander cannot have hidden agendas, they need to be thorough in all that they do, and they need to explain their decision-making process whenever possible. Some people may argue that a commander does not need to explain their decision-making process or why and how they came to a certain decision. There are times when this may be true—when a decision requires immediate action, and there is no time for an explanation or when discipline is involved.

When commanders are not transparent, they need to know that Airmen will talk and reach their own conclusions as to why a certain decision was made. At the same time, the more trust that commanders have built with their Airmen, the more benefit of the doubt their Airmen will provide to the commander. A squadron commander stated that “. . . explaining why we didn't go where I thought we were going to go. For example, I know that I said X is going to happen, X is not going to happen, and this is why,” is one of the most important things that he has to do as a commander. He continued, saying that as a commander you need to be “. . . frank, open and honest. That is what engenders trust.”

The need to be vulnerable and show vulnerability was also mentioned by members in every single focus group, including every squadron commander in the FGO focus group. This is extremely telling and important to note. Virtually all the literature that discussed building trust, mentioned that a leader needs to be vulnerable to build trust.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, Zand stated that commanders and leaders must be vulnerable if they want to build trust with others.<sup>21</sup> A maintenance squadron commander stated, “Vulnerability must be shown as a commander. Showing your own vulnerability and imperfections is really important as is admitting when you make mistakes openly.”

There can be some resistance and hesitation to the idea of a commander being vulnerable. Some people relate being vulnerable to having a weakness, being susceptible to something, or having a flaw. What vulnerability means, in this case, is that the commander needs to build a relationship with their Airmen, and by so doing the commander potentially opens himself or herself up to criticism. However, this vulnerability shows that the commander is a real person who is not perfect. They are essentially humanizing themselves, which is both respected and

appreciated by subordinates. Vulnerability is necessary to build trust. It creates the authenticity and genuineness needed to inspire and lead.

If commanders open up and truly get to know their Airmen, trust can be built quickly and more effectively than when they do not. To do this, commanders need to take every opportunity to communicate with their people and build a rapport. As one squadron commander mentioned, "You cannot lead from your office." Commanders cannot afford to sit in their office and keep their distance; they cannot afford to waste one day not communicating with their Airmen. A key here is to get to know your Airmen on a personal level and not just a professional level. A commander should know about subordinates' families, where they are from, what motivates them, and so forth. As one squadron commander stated, "trust is earned, and it starts with sponsorship or your first interaction with an individual in your organization. Your people need to know who you are, what you stand for, and what you are about. Once this connection and relationships are established, your trust is being earned."

### **Serve**

The key for a commander to serve their Airmen is to empower them. Empowerment was an especially passionate theme among the SNCOs and the CGOs. This again is telling; they were essentially saying that their commanders are not empowering them or their subordinates enough. The ability to empower individuals can at times be difficult. To empower someone means that you are entrusting them to carry out a task and giving them the power to make the required decisions while accomplishing that task. Across all the focus groups, it was clear that commanders need to turn over more control to their Airmen and then back them up and defend them when they are going about accomplishing the task. As one CGO mentioned, "All Airmen have competencies, and you need to empower them to carry those out. This allows them to go to the next level and then you can turn up the intensity." Empowering an Airman improves performance, builds confidence, and perhaps most importantly, builds trust.<sup>22</sup>

To properly empower Airmen, commanders should have done their jobs to know and train them individually so that they can rely on them to effectively carry out the task. If the commander micromanages this process, the commander will lose the trust that they were trying to build. A commander can (and must) direct and follow-up with the individual they empowered, but they need to be careful to not take back the power or authority that they have delegated. If a commander takes back the authority that they delegated to the individual (and this take back of authority and power was unwarranted), then the Airman will feel betrayed, and

trust will be diminished. The entire squadron will see how the commander treated the Airman and will lose some degree of trust in the commander.

The commander is still in charge and responsible for the task. If the commander sees the situation taking a turn for the worse, then he or she needs to take action. If possible, this action should be taken privately, so as not to embarrass and humiliate the Airman they have empowered. Give that Airman an opportunity to correct and heed advice (if time and conditions permit). These situations are essential to building trust, and the more that a commander empowers an individual to accomplish a task, the quicker trust will be built. Empowerment and task accomplishment are key components and essential to establishing trust.

Another component to building trust is to develop your Airman both personally and professionally. Building trust shows that you care about your Airman as individuals, and you do not just care about them because they are essential to mission accomplishment. Airmen need advice on multiple aspects of life (e.g., marriage, finances, education, future job opportunities, and so forth). They need to know that their commander cares about them as an individual. If their goals do not necessarily fall in line with the goals of the Air Force or the unit, then the commander has an opportunity to influence Airmen or to help guide them to make the best decision for themselves, their family, the unit, and the USAF. An operational support squadron commander stated, “The only thing I really care about is. . . [for] the people in my squadron to become better people and to be doing great things wherever [that may be] and for them to say that I made myself a better person.”

## **Lead**

Naturally, a commander always needs to lead, and their leadership is always on display. The key to the trust-building framework is to take action. Commanders should act on everything that they say and emphasize to their Airmen. If a commander does not act on what they say, trust is diminished or lost completely. If a commander says that something is important, they need to show that it is important through their actions.

A key element to action is to clearly identify roles and responsibilities and to set expectations. Every Airman needs to understand what is expected of them. Therefore, it is crucial that commanders clearly communicate their expectations. A logistics readiness officer in the CGO focus group stated that Airmen “need to know what your expectations are, otherwise they cannot meet your expectations.” Once expectations are laid out, the commander should then hold people accountable and provide feedback.

The idea of failing forward was also a key concept from the focus groups. A squadron commander stated that “as a leader, if you instill a culture where failing forward is okay and allow people to learn from and make mistakes, then they will be more prone to trust leadership, understanding that it is okay to take risks.” Commanders should encourage their Airmen to take the initiative and to be creative and think outside the box. To do this, commanders should allow their Airmen to take risks. These risks must be smart and calculated with the permission of and in communication with the commander. If an Airman will be punished for a simple mistake or for taking a smart, calculated risk, they will not innovate. As was mentioned several times in the focus groups and the individual interviews, what is important here is that the commander needs to encourage critical thinking and some degree of risk-taking to become more effective.<sup>23</sup>

Another key to leading is to seek out feedback and address issues as they arise. The commander should be open to new ideas and needs to know the “pulse of the squadron.” Great ideas can come from a young Airman or a new lieutenant. Rank does not equate to an individual’s ability to think critically or have great and creative ideas.

## **Discussion**

The USAF values trust and acknowledges its importance. For example, Air Force Doctrine Document 1-1 specifically states, “Trust is the vital bond that unifies leaders with their followers and commanders with their units. Trust makes leaders effective.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the USAF has taken several steps to address this issue. In March 2015, Gen Mark Welsh, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF), directed the activation of the Profession of Arms Center of Excellence (PACE). “PACE is tasked as the USAF champion laser focused on infusing Air Force Core Values within the Profession of Arms.” PACE is “committed to developing Air Force personnel with a professionalism mindset, character, and core values required to succeed today and well into the future.” PACE teaches a course entitled “Professionalism: Enhancing Human Capital.” PACE staff travel throughout the USAF and teach about the importance of commitment, loyalty, and trust.<sup>25</sup>

In December 2015, the CSAF stated that almost every mission area faces critical manning shortages. The CSAF continued, “we have got to figure out different ways of using our people in a more efficient way or we will wear them out. And if we lose them, we lose everything.”<sup>26</sup> The USAF is, in fact, losing many qualified and exceptional individuals due to their lack of faith and trust in their leaders and, by extension, the USAF.<sup>27</sup> The CSAF also stated that for the USAF to operate in the future, we need “[A]irmen who are ready and responsive, and demonstrate

general qualities such as critical thinking, adaptive behaviors, innovation, creativity, collaboration, social networking skills, emotional and cognitive intelligence, initiative, and resilience.”<sup>28</sup> These are the exact qualities that Stephen Covey describes as being the products of trust.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, today’s Airmen need trust.

## Conclusion

This research identified how commanders can build genuine trust with their Airmen based on relevant literature and primary data obtained from focus groups and individual interviews. As a result, specific actions and tasks were presented to aid commanders in building trust. Four themes—Engage, Connect, Serve, and Lead—provide a framework for what commanders can do to build trust with their Airmen. Research has validated that trust is about relationships.<sup>30</sup> Our proposed framework facilitates building trust through relationships.

The participants in our study represent a cross-section of the USAF by AFSC, rank, and age that enhances the generalizability of our findings. While our relatively small sample is a limitation, the fact that every focus group and individual interviewed stated that the lack of trust in the USAF is a big problem that is inhibiting effectiveness provides credibility to our findings. ✪

## Notes

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