Generate trust to lead properly

Good teams have good managers and those managers "got good" by developing trust within the team

Act Consistently

Teams watch their manager's behavior very closely, and will take note of how you behave. If you behave consistently — if you react in similar ways to similar circumstances — your team can start to build a mental model of your behavior, and will be able to predict how you'll act in new situations. This helps lead to a feeling of comfort: knowing how you'll react — assuming that reaction will be positive, will make it easier for your team to be open and honest with you.

On the other hand, if your reactions seem random or capricious — if you react differently to similar stimuli — this builds an atmosphere of uncertainty and possibly fear, and your team will hide things from you.

Communicate clearly and transparently

Clarity and transparency about what's going on in the broader company builds trust. And nothing erodes it faster than lying or telling half-truths.

Transparency doesn't mean "telling your team everything"! Your job as a leader is to give your team context about the rest of the organization — and thus you need to distill and summarize. Pointing a firehose of information at your team isn't effective transparency. And there are also any number of situations where you can't ethically (or legally!) share information. You emphatically should not be "transparent" about other people's performance issues, gossip or rumors you don't know are true, large organizational changes you've been

told not to share, information shared by other team members in confidence, and so on.

How do I build trust: the essentials are:

1. Do summarize and distill important context for your team; don't just be a firehose.
2. Do answer questions and go into more detail if team members ask. Sometimes people won't want the fiddly details, but other times they might. Be prepared for either.
3. Critically, be clear about when and why you can't share more. When there are situations where you have limits on what you can say, say so, and explain why you can't be transparent in this situation.

Be reliable

Do what you say you're going to do. If you say "I'll do the thing by next Tuesday", then do the thing by next Tuesday — or, failing that, communicate very early that you're gonna miss and what the new ETA is (and try not to do that often).

Managers often have wider and more varied responsibilities than ICs, and are frequently pulled in many different directions. Their job is also in part reactive, making predicting their schedule and availability harder. This makes it much easier for managers — especially new managers — to overcommit.
If a team sees their manager frequently flaking on responsibilities, they'll begin to wonder where else they can't trust them, it implies dishonesty your team learns not to trust what you say, a disaster. So it's critical to understand your own capacity, avoid committing to work you can't complete, and meet your commitments.

Set and respect boundaries

If you spend any time at all reading Ask A Manager you'll know

the world is full of leaders who push boundaries. If you want your team to trust you, don't be That Guy: set and respect boundaries around work.

This includes:

1. Work/life balance: don't push people to work nights/weekends, encourage real disconnection during time off, don't ask people to work when sick, etc. And it's important to demonstrate those things — e.g. if you choose to work weekends, fine, but queue your email for Monday so your team doesn't read an expectation into your choice.
2. Professional behavior: model and require appropriate professional behavior at work: honesty, keeping commitments, professional demeanor, etc.
   And more. Even small behaviors, like establishing a culture of being on time to meetings, help sets a tone of respect for people's time and attention, which, again, helps build trust.

Use role power rarely — but when you do, don't be coy

As a manager, you have role power: the power to say "you need to do this because I'm your boss". A trustworthy manager uses role power infrequently — "because I said so" gets compliance, not alignment, and certainly doesn't build trust.

However, when you do need to use role power, be very clear about what you're doing. Don't couch orders in the form of a request. When you ask, "can you do …?", it should be a real question, which means you should allow for and prepare for a "no". If you're not in a situation where a "no" is acceptable, don't phrase the order as a request. If you do this — use role power infrequently and clearly — it'll make your team believe you more during the majority of the time when you really are asking.

Give feedback: quite a lot, mostly positive

Most people crave feedback about their work — they want to know how they're doing, what they're doing well, what to change, etc. Done right, feedback can lead to trust — when the feedback is clear, specific, actionable, and helpful, you'll be helping them do their jobs better, and your team will appreciate that. But it's also pretty easy to mess up: done poorly, feedback can feel more like criticism, and will make your team fear you.

See Three Feedback Models for an introduction to feedback; in the context of trust-building, the highlights are:

1. Give lots of feedback. It's nearly impossible for a manager to give too much feedback.
2. Mostly positive. There are studies suggesting a ratio of about 5:1 — that is, five pieces of positive feedback for each piece of negative feedback.
3. Make sure your feedback is specific and actionable — otherwise it's just criticism (or praise, which isn't as helpful).
4. Ask for permission before giving feedback.

Give credit; take blame

As a manager, you are responsible for the combined output of your team. This means that when your team scores a win, you do deserve some credit for it. It can be tempting to take accolades without acknowledging the folks on your team who did the work. Don't! Nobody likes a credit-stealing manager!

Instead, make sure to always credit the people on your team who contributed to a success. When the team wins, make sure the narrative is that it's all because of the work of the individual(s) on the team. Try to make your role in the success invisible.

On the other hand, when your team stumbles, make it your

fault. The narrative should be: the team did their best, but the surrounding structure was wrong. It was a management failure, not on any individual.

"Give away your toys"

Trust is reciprocal: when you demonstrate that you trust the folks on your team, they're likely to return that trust. One way to extend trust is delegation: giving people on your team the opportunity to take on some of the leadership aspects of your role. When you trust them to do work that's more important or visible, you'll help them trust you.

But don't delegate the boring, tedious, or uncomfortable parts of your job; instead, "give away your toys". The best work to delegate — both in this trust-building context and more generally — is the work that you yourself love.

Coach

Two related activities that most managers probably don't do enough of are sponsorship and coaching. Both are such huge topics that I'm struggling to give concise summaries, so instead let's try some links:

Lara Hogan: What does sponsorship look like?
HBR: The Leader as Coach

Respect confidentiality but be clear about the limits

Much of what you discuss with your directs one-on-one should be considered confidential. They'll bring you concerns they have about the work or their teammates, tell you about places they're struggling, sometimes reveal things about their health or personal life outside of work, etc.

Generally speaking, your team should be able to rely on an assumption of confidentiality for anything personal or performance-related. If you're spreading this stuff — or,

worse, gossiping — that's a massive breach of trust and you'll probably never recover.

However, there are some serious limits to confidentiality. You're not a lawyer or a doctor or a priest; there's no iron-clad manager-direct confidentiality requirements. Some of the many exceptions to confidentiality include:

You need to talk about the performance of your team with your manager — and they'll in turn talk about your team's performance with their manager, etc. If someone's struggling, you can't hide it from your management chain.
If your direct tells you that someone else on your team isn't doing their job well, you need to address that with that other person (assuming it's true). You can try to keep the specific way you found out confidential, but sometimes that's not possible.
If they reveal things that have legal, regulatory, or ethical ramifications, you may need to take steps.
And so on. It's critical to communicate clearly and be transparent about where you can and can't respect confidentiality. Don't promise to always keep things confidential! That's almost as big a mistake as gossip.

Instead, make sure your staff know what they can trust to keep between the two of you and what they can't. Give them the information and context they need, and trust them make their own decisions about how much to share with you.

Ask for permission to give feedback, suggestions, etc.

The best manager I've had was incredibly disciplined about asking for permission before doing "manager stuff". She'd say things like, "can I give you some feedback?" "Is now a good time for a conversation about the status of Project X?" "Are you stuck? Would you like a suggestion?" And so on.

This sort of asking-for-permission helps smooth out the power

gradient between manager and report. It helps establish that your role is to help your direct be successful — and that you won't give help if it isn't welcome. Importantly, these have to be actual questions — i.e., you need to respect a "no". If someone doesn't want a suggestion, keep it to yourself!

The corollary is that when something isn't optional, don't ask. If you must act — say, a project is going off the rails and you need to step in — don't pretend it's optional. When you must use your role power, own it. Orders phrased as questions erode trust.