

10 phrases to help you build trust with direct reports

Everyone knows that without trust, you're sunk as a manager. But people often mistake trust for a mysterious, intangible thing — you either have it or you don't. Absolutely untrue.

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"I'll team build you!"

So, how do you actually build it? You do it day by day, conversation by conversation, and action by action — to back up your words. These phrases can get you started.

1. "I've noticed a change."

Use it: When a typical behavior or pattern suddenly or slowly has become different.

This phrase sends a signal that you're the opposite of the out-of-touch manager who has no idea what their direct reports really do all day. It shows you're engaged and paying attention — and you're the kind of proactive manager who won't let important things go unsaid.

Be sure to add specifics of what you see, then invite a response about how the other person sees the situation. You'll demonstrate respect for others' views and learn a lot about whether they agree with you or think you're off target.

Examples:

- *“Team, I’ve noticed a change. Everyone has been working through lunch instead of taking breaks. How are people feeling about their workloads this week?”*
- *“I’ve noticed a change. During meetings, you typically sit in the back of the room and stay fairly quiet. Recently, you’ve been sitting closer and offering excellent suggestions to help the group when it gets stuck. It’s been wonderful to see your increased contribution. What do you think is behind the shift?”*

2. “Thank you for letting me know.”

Use it: Whenever someone shares bad news or a criticism with you.

Why would anyone want to share the hard truth with you if you typically react with anger or defensiveness? Instead, respond with gratitude. It's as if you're saying, “We're adults and we can handle this — thanks to the fact that you had the courage to speak up.” Do this consistently and you'll establish a safe environment where your direct reports feel free to level with you about stuff you really need to hear and trust that you'll partner with them in generating solutions.

Caution: It can be easy to use this phrase dismissively (“OK, OK, thanks for letting me know”), so be sure to follow it with either why you're thankful or a sincere desire to better understand the situation.

Examples:

- *“Thank you for letting me know that your report will be late. Knowing that will help me recalibrate expectations with the department heads. Tell me more about the unexpected issues you’ve encountered.”*
- *“Thank you for letting me know that I haven’t been giving the team enough feedback on their customer interactions. I know that probably wasn’t easy to share, but it’s important for me to hear and will help me do better as a manager. I’m interested in talking through some ideas for how I could improve.”*

For more, see [Getting honest feedback from direct reports](#).

3. “I want to check in.”

Use it: To follow up on a previously discussed issue.

Few things erode trust more quickly than hearing that an issue is important to someone and then forgetting about it. When you follow up, you demonstrate that you care about the person’s individual needs and are making sure they get the support they need.

Caution: Be sure that you’re checking in on things that really matter to your direct report — not just to you. For example, if you’re repeatedly checking on a project you’re worried about, you could come across as a nag or a micromanager.

Examples:

- *“I want to check in to see how you’ve been adjusting to being back at work after parental leave. You said last week how sleep-deprived you are. What are you finding particularly burdensome? Would it help for me to adjust when I schedule meetings?”*
- *“I want to check in to see how your first call went. What worked for you? What did you find challenging?”*

4. “What do you think?”

Use it: To invite someone to open up with their point of view — and when you really want input.

Seeking others’ views shows that you value your team’s expertise, are ready to listen, and want them to feel empowered to share. It’s also a hallmark of deliberate managers who want to avoid the common, trust-killing trap of assuming they know more than their team members.

Caution: Ask this question only if you're truly interested in the person's answer and are willing to act on it (or explain why you aren't going to act on it). Otherwise, you'll torpedo the person's motivation and trust in you.

Examples:

- *“The client not returning your calls sounds like a challenging situation. What do you think would be a good way to reengage them?”*
- *“I have to put together a presentation for leadership on the team's progress this quarter, and I'd love your input. What do you think I should be sure to highlight?”*

5. “Let me share what I know and don't know at this point.”

Use it: To be transparent in sharing information relevant to your team's work and well-being.

As a manager, you're often the best — and only — conduit of information between your team and your company's leadership. Hoard information and you'll leave your team uncertain and in the dark. Provide as much as you can — that doesn't require confidentiality — and you'll foster a reputation as a trustworthy, open leader. You'll also raise your team's collective intelligence, enabling them to do better work.

Don't know something? Share that, too. Explaining what you *don't* know and communicating that you'll share when you know more still provides a level of clarity to your direct reports and gives them confidence that they have the latest, best information.

Examples:

- *“The Impact team met again. Let me share what I know and don’t know at this point. They’re planning three events next month. They haven’t clarified what role, if any, our team should play. They’re meeting again next Tuesday, and I’ll send an update then.”*
- *“Let me share what I know and don’t know after today’s layoff announcement. We’ll still be responsible for our territory, and our service model won’t change. I’m not sure yet how we’ll be covering for the Columbus office. I’ll be attending a budget meeting next week. Let me hear from you about your concerns and resources you think we’ll need so I don’t underestimate the costs.”*

For more, see [Are you undersharing with your team?](#)

6. “This is a challenge — but I’m confident in our ability to overcome it.”

Use it: When your team faces a tough task or company change.

As a leader, if you downplay or ignore hard truths, you’ll seem out of touch or unwilling to face “undiscussables.” You need to be real, but not so real that you’re gloomy, which kills team confidence. It’s important to strike a balance: Tell it like it is, and express that you trust in your and your team’s ability to prevail.

Caution: If you don’t follow a phrase like this with specifics about how you intend to lead the way (e.g., *“It’s hard, but we can do it by focusing on X, Y, and Z”*), you run the risk of your encouragement coming across as dismissive (“This is a challenge we can overcome ... so stop complaining”).

Examples:

- *“I realize we’re still 20 percent away from our goal with only two weeks to go. This is a challenge — but I’m confident in our ability to overcome it. I can start pitching in. I have some other ideas for how we might close the gap — and I’d like to hear all of your ideas, too.”*
- *“*
This new strategic direction is a challenge for all of us. I know there’s still a lot we don’t know about how the prototype process will work — but I’m confident in our ability to adjust. As we wait for more information, let’s use what we do know to flesh out some initial concepts.”

For more, see [How to communicate change to your team](#).

7. “I need your help.”

Use it: When you genuinely need support or feedback.

Even leaders need help — and asking for it shows that you’re human and that you trust your direct reports to deliver. You’ll also be building a culture of teamwork and openness, sending the signal to your direct reports that, it’s important to ask for what you need in order to get the job done well.

Caution: Sound this alarm too often or ask for too much because you didn’t plan well and your direct reports may come to view you as an unreliable manager who overpromises and expects them to bail you out last minute — again.

Examples:

- *“I just learned I have to present to the finance team on Thursday, and I need your help filling in some information gaps. Do you have 30 minutes today to pull some data for me?”*
- *“I’ve been working on improving how I facilitate meetings and I need your help. Would you be willing to share your perspective with me about how I come across and a few things you think I could improve on?”*

8. “How can I help you make progress?”

Use it: When you're sincerely interested in helping a direct report succeed.

Great managers care about what's important to their direct reports — and understand that when individuals do well, the team and the organization do well, too. They also understand that few things build trust as well as feeling supported by a boss who sees them as a whole person, not a cog whose sole purpose is creating value for the company.

Caution: Be sure you ask about something specific — for example, a project or development goal — to spark ideas from your direct reports. And help them with suggestions if they can't think of anything. Also remember: This phrase means nothing if you don't follow through and actually provide support.

Examples:

- *“Now that we've established your goals for the quarter, let's discuss what I can do to help you make progress on them.”*
- *“Could we spend a few minutes in our next 1-on-1 checking in on your professional development goals? I'm interested to hear what skills you're interested in building and want to identify some ways I can help.”*

9. “I feel strongly about this” or “I don't feel strongly about this.”

Use it: To help team members understand your point of view and how they should calibrate their response.

Your team can hear your words, but they can't read your mind. When you include how strongly you feel about what you share, you give them confidence that they know where you're coming from — no second-guessing or surprises. Clarifying phrases like these let them know when they should respond with care and urgency and when you're sharing a thought they can disregard if there's a better way.

Caution: Be sure you label your level of concern accurately. For example, if you say you don't feel strongly about an idea but later reverse a direct report's decision in favor of your idea, they'll be blindsided and left thinking, *What just happened? I took the initiative and made a decision, but now I don't know why I bothered.*

Examples:

- *"We need to be sure that we're responding to customers quickly. I feel strongly about this, so reducing customer response time should be everyone's top priority this week."*
- *"I don't feel strongly about this, but as a starting point for discussion: What if we started looking at our tracking data weekly instead of monthly? Would that help, or are there better ways to learn what we need to?"*

10. "That's my mistake."

Use it: To admit a screw up or error in judgment.

You may feel like crawling under a rock when you make a mistake. But admitting it out loud shows courage, integrity, and that you recognize the impact of what you did and are accountable for it. It also models to your team that admitting errors is OK and desirable — to help them be more open to trying new ways of doing things without fear of failure.

Examples:

- *"I know I encouraged you to reach out to customers by both email and phone this week, but we've had some complaints. That's my mistake. Let's please go back to email outreach only. And I'll connect with those clients who were frustrated."*
- *"I thought the streamlined agenda would work for our team meeting — that was my mistake. Next week, I'll put more time into it so the group can stay focused. I know how busy everyone is, and we can't afford disorganized meetings."*

For more, see [The next time you make a mistake, embrace it as a chance to gain respect.](#)

