



How to Build Trust and Unleash the Potential of Your Direct Reports

FranklinCovey



Most of today's leaders are still using an outdated leadership style.

This “Command & Control” leadership style focuses on efficiency and getting things done but often ignores modern workplace expectations. These leaders view employees as fragmented people (just a worker) versus whole people (body, heart, mind, and spirit). It boils down to competitive self-interest, rather than the responsibility to care for and serve others. It's about motivating rather than inspiring—and controlling instead of unleashing potential.

But in the new world of work, this leadership style has become antiquated. The game has changed. It's no longer enough to merely motivate. We must adapt to something timelier and more relevant: a “Trust & Inspire” leadership model.

A “Trust & Inspire” leader's entire job is to inspire their team to do their very best work. They understand that everyone has greatness inside of them, and it's that leader's job to unleash it. **But the question remains—how do we unleash potential?**

Fortunately, this is a learnable skill. For your direct reports to thrive, you must build an environment of trust. High-trust relationships are built over time, but a great way to start is by becoming an advocate for your direct reports—among both their peers and higher-ups.

Advocating for a direct report is a delicate balancing act of collaborating to help them gain access to the right opportunities, elevating their reputation in the company, and accelerating them toward the next step in their career. When leaders do it well, they can score a triple win: The employee feels valued and engaged, your company benefits from their growth, and they can cement your reputation as a leader who recognizes talent and unleashes potential.

As a leader, you can build the high-trust environment necessary for your people to thrive. This guide will give you the tools to unleash the potential of your people.



1. Identify what the person wants next in their career—and how you can help.

Communication is key.

Imagine you broadcast to executives that your direct report is true management material when, in reality, they'd rather hone their technical expertise to become a senior developer. Whoops. If you're not aligned with your direct report on what you should be championing, you run the risk of disappointing the person and damaging your reputation.

Instead, take time in your 1-on-1s for career conversations. Keep in mind that not everyone has clear career goals, and you may see potential they don't. As one direct report told us, *"When I began my job, I never really thought I could excel or move up in my career. But the manager I have now encouraged me constantly to strive to be better and take myself to a higher level within my field. I'm proud to say I've been promoted twice because of their push."* For some, you may need to offer ideas of what's possible. Your effort to provide opportunities and open doors for your direct report not only benefits them but also improves your relationship and shows them you care about them as a whole person—not just about results.

After your direct report identifies career goals you can help with, map out the next steps with them to enable progress. For example:

- **Goal:** Be promoted to a management role.
- **Next steps toward the goal:** Learn about market positioning, work on running meetings, and get visibility with department heads.
- **What you (direct report) will do:** Attend a market positioning webinar, lead part of our team meetings, and volunteer for cross-team projects.
- **What I (manager) will do:** Introduce you to Coni in marketing, have you lead our weekly 15-minute team updates, and recommend you for relevant cross-team projects and an upcoming conference.
- **When to assess progress:** Monthly, during 1-on-1s.

While you want to be encouraging, be careful not to give false hope about raises, promotions, or role changes that you may not be able to deliver. To make it clear that you can't work magic or change the company hierarchy overnight, you might say:

"We've outlined some good steps to work toward your goal of becoming a manager. I need to be clear about timelines: This could take a long time, and it depends on what promotion opportunities open up. I can't give you a specific date. But I can advocate for you and give you opportunities to develop your skills so that when a management role does open up, you'll be well-positioned to apply."

ACTIVITY:

Let's practice. Write down the names of one or two employees and their next career goals.

Employee's Name	Their Goals

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True leaders unleash greatness by seeing it, communicating it, and developing it.

—Stephen M. R. Covey,
bestselling author of *Trust & Inspire* and *The Speed of Trust*



2. Help your direct report identify how they can shape their own reputation within the company.

You now have a sense of how your team member wants to be seen by others. But does this match how others see them?

If you don't already know based on what you've heard, ask a trusted peer for their general impressions (e.g., *"Ciara, I'm hoping to get an outside perspective on Jamal's potential here. What would you say are his biggest strengths and weaknesses?"*). Depending on what you hear, you can make suggestions for how the person can leverage their strengths or close the gap on weaknesses.

Don't forget to factor in your company's culture: If your organization places a premium on traits like personal polish, collaboration, or innovative thinking, reinforce those things in the feedback you give your direct report.

For example:

Poor:

"One team leader told me you share too much detail and never get to the point."

Better:

"I've noticed during department update meetings that you tend to share the technical details rather than emphasize the impact your project could have in the market. But our company places an emphasis on the business value of projects. Before the next meeting, would you be willing to talk through some ways to tailor your message, so more people take notice?"

Giving constructive feedback can be uncomfortable for both the leader and the direct report receiving it. But an employee can't reach their maximum potential if they don't understand what to improve. It's the leader's job to not only communicate this, but also clear the path for that employee to execute and implement those changes.

ACTIVITY:

From the employees you listed on page 3, what are three traits each person has that you know your company values? What are three they could improve?

3. Use feedback and coaching to support your direct report in achieving their goal.

Making consistent connections between their daily work and their goal isn't only motivating. It also helps both of you stay focused on your direct report's objective and inspires their next steps.

To do this, you could:

- **Frame feedback in relation to the person's goal:**

"I noticed in the team meeting that you connected Maura's idea at the end to what Tobias had said earlier. Pointing that out helped clarify next steps for everyone. Nice work—the ability to help people make sense of complicated information is a real next-level leadership skill."

- **Coach them toward greater autonomy:**

For example, let's say a business development rep on your team wants to become a sales account manager. To help them improve their phone skills, you could use the following progression, debriefing after each step to compare notes and share feedback on what they can do to advance to the next step:

- Have them sit in on sales calls with you.
- Dedicate an hour per week to role-playing sales calls where you act as the client.
- Have them lead a call with a low-stakes client where you sit in as a silent observer.

When your direct report has a meaningful win—like landing their first account—be sure to communicate it within your department or company. This not only creates transparency within the team but also builds trust with each direct report that their successes will be recognized and celebrated.

ACTIVITY:

Write a coaching statement with feedback for each employee that connects with their career goal and provides an opportunity for growth.



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Don't treat people according to their behavior; treat them according to their potential.

—Stephen M. R. Covey

4. Give the person assignments to grow their skills and visibility.

Ideally, all your direct reports will have at least one skill-building task that's related to their goal. Investing in your employees' upskilling demonstrates trust—and sends a message that you see and believe in their potential.

As you think about how to organize work for your direct report, consider ways to:

- **Give them an assignment where they can “fail safely.”** If they struggle at first, they'll at least learn something valuable from the experience.
- **Recommend them for high-profile projects.** Once you and your direct report feel confident in their skills, place your stamp of approval on their work with a full recommendation—either by having them lead an important project for your team or suggesting they play a part in a cross-team initiative toward an important company goal. For example, you might say to an executive, *“Jasmine could really bring the voice of the customer to your project, given her customer research expertise—and I can help free up her workload, so she has time.”*
- **Involve them in a high-profile project.** If your team member isn't quite ready to lead a high-stakes project, you can still involve them in a way that's relatively safe but still raises their visibility. For example, if you need to devise a launch plan for an important product, ask them to interview stakeholders across departments so you can factor those perspectives into your plan.

ACTIVITY:

Can you think of one or two tasks you can assign to each employee that will stretch them toward their career goal?

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What sets Trust & Inspire leaders apart is the way that they view people as fountains of greatness, brimming with potential.

—Stephen M. R. Covey



5. Check in with your direct report regularly on progress and course-correct as needed.

Set aside regular time in your 1-on-1s, perhaps once a month, to assess your direct report's progress toward their larger goal.

Consider asking questions like:

- What actions has each of us taken since last time—and to what effect?
- How have your efforts to build your reputation been working? How has my advocacy been working?
- What could we be doing more of going forward, whether it's taking new actions or better coordinating our actions, to help you reach your goal?
- Who else could be involved in this effort—and how?
- What have we each been doing that runs counter to your goal? How can we do less of those things going forward?
- Is your goal still what you want to accomplish? If not, how should it change?

Asking thoughtful, open-ended questions (and offering solutions when necessary) is a great way to improve advocacy for your direct report. This builds trust and leads them to advancement opportunities.

Even with effective advocacy, advancement can take time—and sometimes, your company's changing needs and budgets may work against your plans, leaving your direct report deserving of a promotion when there isn't one available. As you discuss this with your direct report, look for ways to boost morale by highlighting progress and focusing on their continual growth.

ACTIVITY:

How often will you meet with your direct reports about their progress and what questions will you ask?

Trust & Inspire leaders recognize that everyone has greatness inside of them—and that their job is to unleash the potential of their team.

When you advocate for your employees, you'll build an environment of trust and unlock potential to create lasting results for both your team members and your organization.

When you become a "Trust & Inspire" leader, you'll activate growth in your people and achieve phenomenal outcomes to future-proof your organization in an era of rapid change, uncertainty, and disruption.

As societal trust reaches new lows, today's organizations can avoid paying costly "trust taxes" by proactively creating high-trust cultures that inspire teams to unleash performance.

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