The vision of a high-trust workplace is something people already know. It is carried internally and waits to be expressed. It does not come from the views of experts or specialists and is not dictated by leadership. Rather, it comes from day-to-day experiences that people associate with trust. This chapter presents one possible vision of what a high-trust workplace is like and examines some of the key points that can help a trust-based vision flourish.

Over the years, we have asked hundreds of people in a variety of small-group settings to define their idea of a great working relationship. Since, for some, differences in organizational power seem to complicate this work, we often ask people to describe outstanding coworker relationships. This approach helps people to concentrate on the characteristics of the relationship rather than on differences in authority. The results are the raw data from which a vision begins to unfold.
People easily and spontaneously generate long lists of qualities they personally have experienced in satisfying work relationships. Within ten minutes, groups can list twenty or thirty characteristics. Here are some commonly cited qualities:

- Mutual helpfulness and understanding
- Serving as a reality check for one another
- Providing feedback for one another, on strengths as well as areas that need improvement
- Influencing each other's ideas and decisions; willingness to be influenced
- Humor; enjoyment of each other's company
- Creative, synergistic problem solving where the results are greater than the sum of the parts
- Respect for different backgrounds and talents; reliance on one another's expertise to ensure the best results
- Willingness and ability to work through conflicts and disagreements
- Common commitment to the same goal; commitment to one another's success
- A high level of rapport and honesty with one another
- Straightforward communication

These qualities suggest interpersonal relationships that genuinely support the performance and success of others. They are core behaviors because they describe partnership and teamwork at their best; individuals doing high-quality work directed toward common goals and achieving personal satisfaction at the same time. A trust-based workplace may be defined as one in which core behaviors are displayed frequently, whether or not power differences exist between individuals.

Employees who enjoy this type of relationship with a supervisor may say, "Of course my boss has greater decision-making authority than I do, and that's fine." A manager in this type of relationship may say, "Naturally, the front-line employees are more familiar with the daily pressures of getting our products out the door, and that's as it should be." Because people are tuned into their common goals and their commitment to open communication and one another's success, differences in power become a nonissue—except when they can be used to help others be more successful.

Day-to-Day Action

The exercise of asking people to describe core behaviors is simple and a good way to get started defining a vision of the future workplace. But to make the vision real and flesh it out requires another round of thoughtful reflection. For example, what do these core behaviors mean for day-to-day action, especially among people whose positions vary in power and scope? Here are some ways the core behaviors have been translated by people, regardless of their position.

They give credit for good work that is being done, instead of blaming each other. Managers and their employees publicly acknowledge each other's hard work, strengths, and original ideas. Employees are encouraged to express their ideas and be visible to top leadership. On the other hand, employees talk about how a manager's insight or technical skill helps them be successful. Both talk about how much they learn from working together and let one another know how much they—and their work—are appreciated.

They take responsibility rather than making excuses. Supervisors and employees alike admit when they make mistakes. They identify problems early so that others are warned of potential difficulties. They take the initiative in offering solutions, pulling people and other resources together to correct difficult situations. They believe that if people do not make mistakes, they never will improve. They support each other when mistakes are made and help each other to figure out how to do things differently in the future.

They openly share information. Information related to decisions, rumors, events, and technical developments is passed easily between employees and managers and back again. They all believe that accurate and timely information is essential to anyone doing quality work. They are committed to keeping each other informed. They know that not all information can or should be exchanged.
Both employees and managers trust each other to pass along information appropriately. If they do not get the information they need, they talk to each other and set plans in motion that will prevent problems in the future.

They collaborate on important issues. Managers and employees are sensitive to the way their decisions influence one another. They seek one another’s opinions and expertise. When possible they work with the spirit of partners to design, organize, and complete work that needs to be done. When it is practical, decisions are made by consensus. People speak up and fully participate in offering their views. If decision making must be top-down, managers explain why this is so, share the reasoning behind the decision, and explain how employee input was used. By the same token, employees seek their managers’ views and support on sensitive decisions that fall within their areas of responsibility.

They speak in terms of “we” rather than creating “us-and-them” distinctions. In spirit, people assume, “We’re all in this together.” They see success, failure, learning, and problem solving as issues of mutual concern. They think about how their own roles and behaviors affect others and the organization at large. Without regard for the power differences between them, bosses and subordinates believe that their job is to make sure all of them are successful.

They focus on the common purpose and do not get sidetracked by differences in the details. Employees and managers keep their collective mission in mind. They acknowledge their differences regarding details and figure out how to work with them. They recognize the real issue: “How do we move forward together to accomplish what we both believe is important?”

They respect organizational structures and roles and do not use them in undermining ways. Whatever the role, they mutually try to make sure that decisions are correct, information is exchanged, and conflicts are attended to constructively. People do not feel a need to talk about their “rights” or their turf. They decide together what is right in a particular situation.

They value each other’s background and experience and do not discredit each other’s competence. People seek each other’s opinions because they have learned that “one plus one equals more than two.” The synergetic effects of combining viewpoints and expertise lead to better-quality work. They ask each other questions like “What have I forgotten here?” or “How would you approach this problem?” Because people think and talk in terms of “we,” they do not say or do things that would deliberately discredit anyone. They value diversity and speak positively of one another’s contributions to others in the organization.

They openly voice concerns, criticisms, and conflicts. Neither employees nor managers act in ways that would undermine, manipulate, or sabotage each other’s efforts. Because of their commitments to common goals, most disagreements and conflicts relate to methods of accomplishing work. When these arise, they are discussed openly. People say what they think and trust that the other person will hear the criticisms in the spirit in which they were intended. They give each other essential feedback that will help to improve individual and collective performance. They do not worry about “getting paid back” for suggesting different approaches or a different line of reasoning. If that concern should ever come up, it would be discussed directly. In response to the feedback, people listen carefully and do their best to respond to each other’s concerns. They see their ability to disagree and manage their conflicts as a strength of their relationship.

They speak positively about their work, the organization, and the future. Cynicism does not get in the way. Dilemmas are identified and talked about in realistic ways that help people to move forward. Uncertainties and the impact of changes in industry, technology, and the environment are discussed openly and positively. People are encouraged to express their concerns, frustrations, discouragement, confusion, and anger. Acknowledgment of these feelings is considered an important step toward managing change. Positive feelings prevail because people target their actions to arenas that they can truly influence.

Together, the core behaviors and their translation into day-to-day action start to form a vision for the high-trust, high-performance organization. As this vision comes together, however, people sometimes become skeptical. They may accept the notion that it is possible
to achieve the vision among peers or coworkers, but they may become more doubting when it comes to those with different authority levels. Their questions can usually be boiled down to this one: how can a manager and employee have the type of relationship described by the core behaviors when it is obvious that the manager has more organizational power?

This is a point well worth examining.

The Problem Is the Power Difference

Managers' organizational power is typically based upon their greater level of decision-making responsibility. This responsibility typically includes the ability to evaluate performance, hire, fire, promote, demote, and change employee assignments and roles. Managers at all levels have a larger scope than their employees. They typically have more responsibility for larger numbers of resources and oversee a greater number of functions. With closer access to the top of the organization, they usually get information from higher levels before their employees and have a greater opportunity to influence the direction of the organization. Employees have a smaller and more focused area of decision making. Whether they are workers on the shop floor or vice presidents in executive suites, they still have a smaller scope of decision-making authority than do their managers. And, obviously, they do not personally have the formal authority to hire, fire, promote, or demote their superiors.

The slippery point here is that differences in decision-making authority do not inevitably require supervisors and employees to give up on the high-trust vision we describe. Mistrust emerges at the point where supervisors and employees connect their differences in organizational authority with their potential to negatively affect one another's lives. This negative, power-oriented focus often causes both managers and employees to feel threatened. Fernando Bartolomé and André Laurent (1986) documented this dynamic with a study of over 100 executives. Although their work concentrated on people in midlevel and senior management positions, we believe the pattern holds true throughout the organizational hierarchy. They observed:

Managers as superiors know how much they depend on their subordinates' performance and, therefore, how much real power, as opposed to formal power, their subordinates have over them. But when bosses are subordinates, they often forget this reality of organizational life. They forget that their boss's performance depends heavily on how committed the subordinates are to their jobs and on the quality of their work.... They don't always recognize that they possess real power that they can use with their bosses to negotiate and obtain satisfaction for their legitimate needs and demands [p. 80].

When managers and employees talk about this relative balance of power, they will most often cite negative examples to prove their point. Employees will talk about how a manager can disrupt their lives with a sarcastic comment, an unwanted assignment, a critical comment, or a poor performance appraisal. Managers will tell stories about uncaring staff, operational information that was negligently delayed, and the unwillingness of employees to take the initiative to solve problems on the spot. It is clear that if the goal is to make another person's life miserable, each has the ability to be quite successful. It is like two boxers in a ring. One may weigh twenty pounds more than the other, but that is no guarantee that both will not be bloodied by the time the match is over.

Change begins when people consciously and jointly commit to building a high-trust, high-performance workplace. When they mutually operate with this goal in mind, while fully acknowledging the differences in their organizational roles and decision-making authority, they search for ways to make these differences complementary rather than adversarial. They focus on building each other's professional and operational strengths, rather than competing or playing on another person's weaknesses. When a manager and employee are able to relate to each other in this way, they make it easier for coworkers to experience this same high-trust, high-performance relationship.

Although it may be difficult, at first, to achieve this goal, sharing it creates a kind of interpersonal and professional glue. Once that glue is in place, there are few barriers to solving problems. The curtain of mistrust that separates managers and employees comes down. People become proud of their ability to give feedback openly and to accept it from others. They become excited about their ability to learn from one another and work together to accomplish a greater purpose.
If it is allowed to grow, the vision defines both the quality of the interaction between a manager and an employee and the quality of the work they produce together. Once these relationships have been established, they both require and reinforce trust, creativity, risk taking, and commitment. They become their own positive self-perpetuating cycle—a cycle that has no room for fear and no time for mistrust.

The Key Is Changing Assumptions

It is sometimes difficult for people to believe in a high-trust vision because it runs counter to the cycle of mistrust that keeps fear deeply embedded in organizations. The vision of core behaviors and action described here is based on positive assumptions about people. Mistrust and fear are based on distinctly negative ones. When people begin with the premise that they can trust one another, their vision of work relationships is free to open up and take on new dimensions. They are able to envision trust in behavioral terms and in full bloom. Becoming committed to the high-trust, high-performance workplace can force people to look at how their own deep assumptions about others—particularly others who have a different level of authority—may need to change.

People want high-trust relationships, but the world is full of organizational systems, practices, structures, and habits that are based on negative assumptions. Many people are so attuned to these barriers that even thinking about the positive possibilities can feel patently unrealistic or painful. This is especially true for people who have a more pessimistic view of human nature.

However, individuals can challenge the negative assumptions about employees and managers they may have inherited from a culture of hierarchy. Suppose, for example, that managers assume that employees

- Want to take responsibility for their work and want to do a good job
- Care about their work above and beyond the money they get paid to perform it
- Consider a big-picture view essential to performing their work
- Are willing to take responsibility for their mistakes

...are capable of establishing their own structures in order to maintain focus
- Want to contribute freely
- Are fully capable of understanding budgetary and political realities
- Do not just focus on their entitlements and rights
- Are intrinsically honest and trustworthy

Next, consider what might happen if employees believe that managers

- Are sensitive to the personal issues and interests of employees
- Enjoy open, participative problem solving
- Want to use the power of their station to serve the organization well, and consider it unethical to use power to achieve private ends
- Want the workload to be fair and reasonable
- Work to find solutions that are both technically and politically sound
- Pride themselves on operating fairly and objectively
- Want employees’ input on decisions
- Are willing to put the success of the organization, the welfare of the employees, and service to customers before private interests
- Do not think they are better than their employees
- Are honest and would consider retaliation a sign of serious weakness

These lists of positive assumptions are also a part of the vision of trust and are much closer to reality than many managers and employees believe. The problem is that people do not think that the other side is trying to behave this way, too. All too often, individuals make positive assumptions about themselves but negative ones about the others, whoever they are. This “good guys and bad guys” perspective is read by the other side as an unspoken but real set of negative assumptions that must be defended against. Each group believes that the other wants radically different things. Yet time after time in conflict management and team-building work, the answer
Reasons for Building a High-Trust Workplace

Part of these agreements—and again, another aspect of the vision itself—is a shared view of why creating a high-trust work environment is so important. Two kinds of reasons together create leverage for change: business necessity and human desire. Both of these reasons are important, give power to the vision, and propel organizations toward the trust end of the trust-fear continuum. Energy to achieve the vision may suffer without some of each. Simply put, these reasons speak to what is both the smart thing and the right thing to do.

The Business Reasons

Trust is important as a practical business issue only if organizational success depends on people working together in collaborative and interdependent ways. When work demands something more than quick handoffs of individual efforts, the ability to follow explicit directions, and rudimentary communication, then trust becomes a vital and very smart business strategy.

Our reading of contemporary business is that very few work environments only require people to do what they are told. While there were glimmers of the information age in 1989 and 1990, when we were doing our field study about the fear of speaking up, it is now plain that this age is fully upon us. And with it comes the knowledge-based economy where, as Thomas Stewart reminds us, success “depends on new skills and new kinds of organizations and management” (1997, p. 17). Adding to this conversation is Aric de Geus. In his study of what he calls “living companies,” de Geus emphasizes the need for supporting “experiments and eccentricities” that stretch understanding. This enables organizations to successfully adapt to change, increasing their chance to go beyond the average current corporate “life expectancy,” which is well below twenty years. He suggests that “companies die because their managers focus exclusively on producing goods and services and forget that the organization is a community of human beings that is in business—any business—to stay alive.” Living companies are ones where “the essence of the underlying contract is trust. Individuals understand that in exchange for their effort and commitment, the company will help them develop their potential” (1997a, pp. 52–59).

The capacity to partner with others in order to innovate is rapidly becoming a critical success factor as formal hierarchies transform themselves into flatter organizations, self-organizing groups, and virtual teams in various parts of the world. In these new types of workplaces, people are expected to carry out their work in serving key customers, resolving differences with counterparts, and taking action to resolve problems on behalf of the organization without direction or inspection. More importantly, people are recognizing that they must be able to learn together and apply that knowledge creatively in order to maintain a competitive edge. All the recent efforts to pare down organizations and to empower people in this way depend on trusting and upon being trustworthy. People will not share information or their ideas if they do not feel safe to do so, regardless of how much the company needs their best work in order to survive.

It only makes sense from a business standpoint to help people shift toward high-trust environments as other business changes occur. And the key to this is being clear about what trust means, having an explicit vision of trusting relationships, and continuously working to achieve this goal.

The Human Reasons

People want work environments where they are valued as individuals, where they can learn and contribute, where they feel they can be most useful and will be treated as adults. They want to feel good about themselves and have the chance to be themselves by openly bringing their unique strengths, skills, and intelligence to their work. They want to be proud of what they do, where they work, and who they work for. Fear undermines all this, and in so doing, it leaves people feeling belittled, cynical, disenfranchised, and
understandably self-protective. Fear makes people smaller—and less capable—than they really are.

In a democracy, the right thing to do is to build organizations on the principles of fairness, choice, and the open exchange of information and opinions. It is at least misguided, if not wrong, to do otherwise. When leaders consciously try to reduce fear and build trust, they extend the legacy and live up the promise of those who struggled to overcome societal oppression of all sorts in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. And yet, in spite of the clear and hard-won philosophical underpinnings of democratic nations, intimidating hierarchies are found in every sector: from family firms to nonprofit community organizations, churches, labor unions, megacorporations, and government. When asked for his thoughts on the “challenges already taking shape for executives as they move into the next century,” Charles Handy (1997) observed that one “of the great paradoxes of our time is that it is totalitarian, centrally planned organizations, owned by outsiders, that are providing the material wherewithal of the great democracies. Free people do not relish being the instruments of others. The best of them will, increasingly, either refuse to join such institutions or demand a high price for the sacrifice of their rights” (pp. 27-28).

Trusting people so they can grow and genuinely participate in the life of their organization reflects the deepest values of a democratic society. This position is neither naive nor simpleminded. It is good business and it is good for all of us as people. It is both the right—and the smart—thing to do.

A vision of a high-trust workplace is a cornerstone for all efforts to drive out fear. We hope it is clear that this vision is not the same as a vision “statement” that does little more than hang on the wall and inspire more silence and cynicism. A genuine vision is about hope and finds a way to live in the real day-to-day interactions of people.

One way to think about where the vision must be strongest is to consider how each person participates in a variety of relationships that radiate outward—to an immediate superior, to immediate peers, perhaps to reports—and more distantly to others outside this inner circle of immediate contacts. This immediate circle is the place where trust is most directly felt. Each person is at the heart of a social network where trust is either a reality or not. This is the ground where a vision needs to take hold and have an impact.

At the core of this vision is an understanding that the human connections in a workplace are potentially much more powerful than organizational ones. In the long run, things get done well because of the quality of the relationships between people, not because job descriptions are well thought out and explicit. It is not that organizational roles and structures are unimportant or that organizations should forgo formal human resources systems. In some form, they are essential and can either increase or reduce fear. It is just that they can never be a substitute for energizing, trust-based relationships at the heart of an organization that is meeting the challenge of the new era.

The subject of the four chapters that make up Part Two will be the patterns of fear that interfere with an organization’s ability to move ahead. The results of our field study will be described in detail, revealing the triggers, symptoms, and costs of fear.

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New Lessons and Reflections

Thoughts on Organizational Culture

Vision is extremely important. But it is only powerful if it guides visible action on a consistent basis. To do that, it must be firmly established inside of people, as an internal set of concepts and principles. This is more likely to happen if you engage others in the development of collaboratively created statements of vision (what you are trying to make happen), mission (what you do and for whom you do it), and values (what fundamental beliefs underlie the delivery of your product or service). This work can be done, if desired, at every level: organization-wide to the smallest of work units.

The risk involved with creating these guiding philosophical documents comes after they have been published, framed, and posted. To mean anything, they must be used as a daily reference point for all sorts of decisions—from how money gets spent to who gets sent to a conference. The individual behavior of leaders and the organization’s policies, practices, systems, and structures are key leverage points in the organization’s cultural infrastructure. If these elements do not clearly reflect the organization’s vision, mission, and values, people will see the documents as a sham. Instead of serving as an important tool to increase trust, they will become the source of increased cynicism and suspicion.
Thoughts on Personal Leadership

Developing a vision of a trust-based workplace can take a long time. Leaders may need to directly help their teams verbalize their hopes for a workplace where people can talk openly and develop trust in an environment of mutual learning. People often need the leader to initiate conversations of this kind, helping them to articulate and feel secure in expressing the type of workplace they want to be part of. The result of these conversations can be thought of as a group understanding and agreement. At its best, this agreement is a deeply felt personal commitment to create a high-trust workplace that does not need to be made into a wall plaque.

When such an understanding is in place, people welcome opportunities for development and growth. They choose to take some risks in their relationships on behalf of the organization and in response to their own desire for growth. As this occurs, a natural sense of community emerges. What ties people together is their shared promise to one another.