

Trust in teams held back by individual factors

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Building trust in teams doesn't just depend on whether a manager or employees have earned each other's trust, it has to take into account each person's "headspace", according to a psychologist.

The conversations organisations have about building trust in teams tend to focus on interpersonal dynamics, but sometimes, barriers are more individual, says [Global Leadership Wellbeing Solutions](#) (GLWS) cofounder **Audrey McGibbon**.

Employees who lack self-belief and self-confidence, for example, or who are feeling burnt-out and insecure, might seek to protect themselves by withholding trust, even if their teams give them every reason to offer it.



Audrey McGibbon, GLWS

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— Audrey McGibbon

Part of building trust in teams, therefore, involves considering an individual's "headspace".

"I think there's a lot of fear that's just bubbling away in people today, and so trust between team members is really, really important," McGibbon tells HR Daily.

"What I've seen is that the more overworked people are, and the closer that they are to burnout, the harder it is for them to have trust and really feel that."

This isn't surprising, because one of the most obvious symptoms of burnout is a growing cynicism, McGibbon says.

If employees are suffering from mental ill-health, if they're feeling hard-done-by and resentful, or insecure about their employment, then no matter "how lovely the line manager might be, and how much goodwill is actually there" they might still withhold trust.

McGibbon says these factors, along with personality and temperament – some people are trusting by nature, for example, while for others trust must be earned – form a backdrop "we can't ignore".

"There are certain things you can do to earn a team's trust, but there will always be an interaction between what the manager or each team member does [and] the individual's own circumstances and own experiences, and that's the wild card," she says.

It's one of the reasons managers shouldn't necessarily treat everyone on their team the same way.

"A really talented manager will understand [if] you've maybe had a history of some unfair treatment in the organisation, so they will take extra steps to communicate well with you, to demonstrate an understanding that you might be particularly sensitive to something that's coming up," McGibbon says.

A less-skilled manager might, in pursuit of equality, treat everyone the same, rather than seek to give each person "what they need to feel and perform and think at their best, so that there is an equality of the opportunity for people to feel included and successful".

McGibbon notes that building trust and [getting to know people takes time](#). Shared bonds "are built by being in the trenches together", even developing "scar tissue" together through succeeding on a difficult task or delivering on a project that in some sense turned out to be "a bit of a nightmare".

If an employee and a manager know and trust each other, and an employee is blamed for something, the manager is more likely to ask questions and [less likely to jump to conclusions](#) – and vice versa – which can prevent potential problems.

Many organisations are more focused on psychological safety than on building trust, but "you cannot build psychological safety without trust", McGibbon says.

Further, trust becomes more important, and requires even more effort, [in a remote environment](#).

Employers can therefore prioritise processes that "reinforce the predictors of trust"; these range from the reliability and consistency of [team meetings, check-ins, and the like](#), to considering an individual's predispositions when recruiting.

A candidate who says they will "get s**t done and really deliver on tasks" might be a "seductive" option for an overworked manager who's chasing a deadline, McGibbon says, but they won't necessarily be the best one.

It's also important to consider what behaviours the organisation encourages through its systems, she says, because rewarding competitive behaviour and achievements over collaborative ones can also undermine trust.

Making time for trust

If managers rush through tasks without circling back to tell employees when something has changed, this can also lead to broken trust, but it's common in today's workplaces, McGibbon says, with many managers [working "silly" hours and "trying to do too much"](#).

A manager might not mean to shut team members out or conceal information from them, but failing to keep them in the loop could suggest otherwise.

Role-modelling tolerance and forbearance – giving people the benefit of the doubt – might take precious time, but it needn't take *much* time, McGibbon says.

Simply pausing to ask, "Is there an alternative possible explanation?" in response to a complaint, will be time well spent. Whatever the explanation, it resists the tendency to "instantly to try and blame a person" and recognises the likelihood of a misunderstanding versus intentional transgression.

Again, the risk of distrust is higher when an individual's wellbeing is low.

"When we're feeling tired and insecure we see daggers coming at us where none really were probably intended," McGibbon says.

When an issue arises "the more common reaction is to sit on it, and stew", she says.

But an HR leader, who senses this is the real issue a manager is facing, can encourage them to question a negative assumption.

They might say, "I know it takes time, and I know you don't really feel you've got that time... but it's going to take a lot less time than having to deal with a complaint or someone leaving, and you've got to replace them", McGibbon says.

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