

# Employee Engagement - Competence Trust and Confidence Trust - Why Leaders Need Both

By [Elizabeth Black](#)

Pick up any business publication today and it is likely you will see at least one article on the subject of employee engagement. Employee engagement is the degree to which employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. Gallup International recently reported that businesses in the top 24% of employee engagement had less turnover and a higher percentage of customer loyalty, profitability and revenue.

The research into employee engagement goes on to say that trust in the workplace is the foundation of employee engagement. If that is true, it would be useful if we could get a better idea of what really constitutes trust between employees and managers or organizations.

In organization's today, trust is a two-way street. Employees want to work for a manager and for an organization they can have trust in, and managers want to be able to trust their employees. The problem is that trust is a nebulous concept--not unlike honesty, energy and commitment. We value these attributes in our employees and colleagues, but we don't all agree on what constitutes them. Many of us say, "We'll know it when we see it," or "I trust everyone until they prove me wrong."

One useful way to define "trust" is to segment it into two types of trust: confidence trust and competence trust. "Confidence trust," it is said, is the belief that you can count on the other person to do the right thing or act in positive, ethical ways. "Competence trust," on the other hand, is belief in the person's capability to do the job or to complete the task. Competence trust may be synonymous with one's "capabilities." Confidence trust is synonymous with one's "willingness to do the right thing."

Let's take a look at a few examples.

Phil has been a project manager at a financial institution for 10 years. He has been a strong performer and has a reputation for hard work, excellent communication skills and a highly professional manner. When a recently-hired VP was looking to add project managers to her team, she interviewed multiple candidates and chose Phil. Phil's reputation preceded him, and the VP believed that Phil would continue to be a top performer. Phil didn't disappoint, and at his annual performance review, the VP indicated that Phil exceeded the standards for this position. She rewarded Phil both financially and with a nomination for a Leadership Team award--a prestigious honor granted annually to employees who exemplify the company's core values. Phil enjoyed both confidence trust in that the new VP was willing to believe in him, "sight unseen," and competence trust in that he continued to demonstrate his capabilities throughout the year.

Likewise, the VP enjoyed Phil's trust--both in her competence as a manager to set expectations, hold employees accountable for results, measure those results and reward performance both financially and with significant recognition, and in her confidence that he could and would perform "as advertised."

In this example, the trust that each person placed in the other was appropriate and the end result was a win-win for both employee and manager.

Often, however, this is not the case. Consider what happened when Emily, a very experienced researcher in the pharmaceutical industry took a new role with a company in her field. While Emily continued to perform to her own high standards, her manager spent far more time with her teammates who were underperforming. He reasoned that he needed to help these employees improve their performance, and he tried to provide indepth coaching for each of them. When Emily had asked her manager to provide peer review feedback on several papers she was writing, he agreed, but he was always busy or involved with her teammates when Emily asked him to review her work. Additionally, her manager was either chronically late for team meetings he called or missed them altogether when something else came up. Although Emily had accepted her position, in part, because of the professional reputation of her manager, she was beginning to question whether he was truly up-to-date on the latest scientific research studies. When it came time for Emily's annual performance review, Emily received very positive feedback on her work and a very good salary increase. Her manager definitely had competence trust that Emily was demonstrating strong capabilities, and he behaved as though he had confidence that she would continue to do so, with little to no supervision. What he didn't realize, though, was that Emily's trust in him--both to perform his managerial role and to care about Emily and her work--had eroded.

The employer/employee compact that is so dependent upon trust will probably continue to be sound in the case of Phil. In Emily's case, however, she may begin to question why she joined this company if she has little to no trust in her manager to provide what it is that she needs to continue to be successful in her job.

What can we learn from the situations involving Phil and Emily, and how can managers ensure that both types of trust are being demonstrated by themselves and their employees?

Communication is truly the key to building trust. As a manager, if you set specific, measurable expectations, provide both positive and corrective feedback, understand your employees' goals and motivations and recognize and reward top performers, you are well on your way to gaining or sustaining the employee's trust in you as a competent manager. It is especially important to remember to provide feedback to excellent performers as it is to those who are challenged. And, if you promise something to an employee--"do what you say you will do." That will garner more respect than almost anything else you can do.

Employees will be much more inclined to be positive and energetic about their jobs if they have trust in their managers. However, on that two-way street, employees must also

ensure that they are demonstrating their capabilities, seeking feedback, asking how they can help the company be even more successful, and helping their managers understand what they need to be successful.

So, as you think more about that elusive concept of "trust," ask yourself, "How are you demonstrating both confidence trust and competence trust with your employees?" Now, think about how your employees would answer these questions about themselves and you. Better yet, go ask them!

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