

This Neuroscientist Says Work Culture Can't Thrive Without Trust

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Over craft beers in one of those bars so hip it lacks street-level signage, a friend revealed that lately she'd been thinking she might want out of her current job. That the politics were getting her down. And that, frankly, she was near breaking point. She posed London, maybe. Hell, anywhere but Sydney. I told her that office politics couldn't be escaped. "That's everywhere, friend," I replied, confident of my response and yet never having considered what the fix might be.

I spoke to a man last month, who in 2012 travelled to a rainforest in Papua New Guinea to take blood samples of the indigenous Malke tribe, examine their neurochemistry, and garner clues as to how to build high-trust organisations. Yes, that premise is strange and Paul J. Zak – the neuroscientist and academic in question – wouldn't fault you for saying so. His journey across the pond (California to PNG) was an attempt to learn how oxytocin impacts a functioning society.

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My first question to Paul, whose expedition resulted in the book [Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies](#), was an obvious one: Why the rainforest? Why go to a place where there is no electricity, no running water, no bathrooms, and where you don't speak the local dialect? "It's as far away as you can get from the Western world as there is," says Paul. "When I put my scientist hat on, I always want to think about whether what I'm finding really generalises."

To add further context, Paul was determined to find whether the relationship between oxytocin and trust is universal, and apply his findings to the modern workplace. So being as far away from any corporate notions of “talent development” or “human capital” (Paul’s least favourite term) was a giant plus. “None of that exists in the rainforest. These are subsistence farmers, they’re doing what they do, they live collectively. So the question is, if you strip that all away, do you still get to that deep human ability to cooperate with other people?”

Oxytocin is by now widely known as the “love hormone”, the one whose production gives us a very positive and rewarding feeling. It also encourages bonding. Dr Graham Phillips of ABC’s *Catalyst* says, “[Oxytocin] lets us tune in to the social information around us, allowing us to perceive in much higher resolution.”

What is lesser known, then, is how does oxytocin work in the workplace? Can we fashion more effective teams with it? Can we serve cans of it to employees and watch their cooperative powers soar? “We don’t really know for sure. Oxytocin seems to be, from what we’ve discovered in the last 15 years, this key signalling molecule that makes me care about someone else’s welfare,” Paul explains. Think of it thus: a positive social interaction you might have with a colleague fosters oxytocin. And when our oxytocin levels are higher, our propensity to trust and be trustworthy (i.e. our “trust factor”) balloons in response.

After-thought culture

Culture in the modern workplace is typically ad hoc. Maybe awards are handed out for exceptional achievement; perhaps there’s a catered ten-pin bowling soirée once a year. Meanwhile, little thought is given to how employees might have “high-engagement” (Paul defines this as a strong connection with one’s work and colleagues, feeling like a real contributor, and enjoying ample chances to learn). The Gallup organisation reports that companies with engaged employees are 22 per cent more profitable than those in which employees are merely eyeing the clock. And so the question, still stumping even Fortune 500 businesses, is how do you craft a deliberate culture of satisfaction, joy and commitment? Paul says it all boils down to trust.

What the data shows

In his 15 years of research, Paul has studied several thousand companies, including The Container Store, Zappos, and Herman Miller. The data shows that employees who feel trusted perform better at work, stay with employers longer, and are significantly more innovative. His solution for businesses is a science-based framework to help foster this “culture of trust” he speaks of. This is essentially comprised of a survey which measures how much employees currently trust each other, and offers exercises that might improve this factor.

“Company-wide, what I’m advocating,” he says, “is systemically measure and manage the culture for high-trust. If you do that, you’re going to get all these big leverage effects. It can start anywhere. Many of these interventions are not expensive. It’s really creating a human-centred culture and empowering the people who are doing the most to be most effective and to reach their highest performance levels.”

These days, there are typically two kinds of organisations that come knocking on Paul’s door for a culture reboot: either they’re rapidly growing startups with a strong existing culture that they fear will dilute as they scale; or companies plagued by a rapidly changing industry and dissatisfied employees. In less-technical terms, they’re desperate.

If your own working life could do with a culture overhaul, Paul is optimistic things can be turned around: “The short answer is baby steps – start small, measure, and then intervene to see if you can improve this culture, and do it continuously. Anyone can identify some impediment that’s causing higher turnover or more sick days, or less productivity, or less innovation – and then try something.”

How to tell if your workplace has a culture of trust

High-performance organisations have cultures with high interpersonal trust and the employees in these

organisations objectively perform better. Here are some questions Paul poses in his book, *Trust Factor*, to help you gauge what your company's present measure of trust is.

1. How does your organisation treat people as resources rather than humans? Identify one thing you can do to change this.
2. Investigate if the personalities of your organisation's founders are reflected in its present culture. What aspects of this are good and not so good?
3. The villagers of Malke see each other as members of a unique tribe (there are 800 distinct languages in Papua New Guinea). What makes your organisation unique?
4. Are departments and divisions siloed at your organisation? Construct a way to measure if all colleagues know the organisation's key objectives.
5. On a scale from 1 to 7, how trustworthy is your supervisor? Your direct reports? Consider this definition of trustworthiness: A person is trustworthy if he or she completes what is promised and if this cannot be done, notifies you so you can make other arrangements.

These questions are extracted from *Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies*.