THE TRUST EQUATION / A WORKING GUIDE

Build Trust, One Commitment at a Time

When trust feels shaky, “try harder” does not help much. Look at one moment, make room for another account, and choose something you can follow through on.

$$\text{Trust} = \frac{\text{Credibility + Reliability + Authenticity}}{\text{Perceived self-interest}}$$

A lens for a conversation, not a score

Use the version in the Lauren Adelle Coaching handout to explore a specific relationship. There is no useful arithmetic to do here. A feeling is a starting point; a conclusion about someone needs more care.

Credibility

What is the advice based on? Make relevant knowledge and its limits visible.

Reliability

What was promised? Agree something possible to keep and flag changes early.

Authenticity

What reasoning or concern needs to be clearer? Personal disclosure is optional.

Perceived self-interest

Whose needs and costs are visible? Ask about the impact instead of assuming a motive.

Use it in three moves

1. Choose one relationship and a specific moment. Start with your own actions; use only the lenses that help.
2. Explore the four lenses below. Treat your explanation as a possibility, then invite the other person’s account.
3. Agree one practical commitment, the support it needs, and a date to check what changed.

Trust is not owed. Respect boundaries. If there is retaliation, coercion, or a serious breach, prioritize support and appropriate workplace processes. Keep only notes that are useful and safe to record.

Notice before you decide

Use roles or initials. Leave a lens blank if you do not yet know. You can return to it after listening.

Start with one moment

What happened, when, and what did it affect? Separate what you observed from the meaning you gave it. Use roles or initials if that is enough.

Credibility · What do we know?

Where is the relevant knowledge visible? What is still uncertain? Name a way to check expertise without mistaking confidence, status, or similarity for evidence.

Reliability · What can we count on?

What was actually agreed? What happened? Check workload, dependencies, and changed expectations before deciding someone simply does not care.

Authenticity · What needs to be clearer?

What reasoning, limits, or concerns would help us understand each other? Nobody owes you personal disclosure. Ask about the work, not whether someone is being their true self.

Perceived self-interest · Whose needs are visible?

Who benefits, who carries the cost, and whose voice is missing? Perception is not proof of motive. What could you ask rather than assume?

Make the next step real

A proposed agreement becomes shared only when the other person has a chance to change it.

My part · What have I made easier or harder?

Look at incentives, access, deadlines, decision rights, and your response to bad news. Choose one condition you can change. Healthy boundaries still matter.

Open a conversation they can answer

Try: I noticed __. The effect was __. I may be missing something. How did you see it? Offer a suitable time or another way to respond.

Make one commitment small enough to keep

Who will do what, by when? What support or boundary is needed? Agree how to flag a change before the promise is missed. Mark an unconfirmed proposal as a proposal.

Come back to what actually happened

Choose a check-in date and an observable sign of progress. Ask what became easier, what still costs too much, and whether the agreement needs to change.

What will I do if their account challenges the story I brought?

A promise made too soon

FICTIONAL WORKED EXAMPLE / A MOMENT AND FOUR LENSES

A team lead announces a fixed release date while a dependency remains unresolved. Two days later the date moves. The lead begins with their own part.

Start with one moment

I lead a team of six. On Tuesday I told them the release date was fixed, although a dependency was still unresolved. On Thursday we moved it. A colleague said, “We only hear about the uncertainty after we have committed.”

Credibility · What do we know?

The delivery lead had flagged the dependency. I treated my confidence as stronger evidence than their assessment. I will ask them to walk me through the remaining unknowns before I announce a date.

Reliability · What can we count on?

I promised a fixed date without confirming capacity or the dependency. The team delivered what was in its control. My promise and the conditions behind it need attention.

Authenticity · What needs to be clearer?

I knew the date was uncertain and left that out of my update. I can explain what I knew and what I did not know, without asking anyone to reassure me about my intentions.

Perceived self-interest · Whose needs are visible?

My update made the plan look settled to senior leaders while the team carried the uncertainty. I do not know how everyone experienced that. I can ask what consequences the announcement created for them.

Notice the difference: the team did not fail to keep a promise. The leader made a promise the conditions could not yet support.

Follow-through people can see

THE EXAMPLE / CONTINUED

My part · What have I made easier or harder?

I reward a confident answer in planning meetings and rush past caveats. I will add an unresolved-dependencies section to the release update and keep it visible when I brief others.

Open a conversation they can answer

On Tuesday I called the date fixed when we still had an unresolved dependency. That gave you a promise to work around. I should have kept the uncertainty visible. Would you be willing to tell me what that made harder? You can also send me a note later.

Make one commitment small enough to keep

My commitment: by Monday, add the dependency and its owner to the release update. Before the next date announcement, confirm the evidence with the delivery lead. If the dependency changes, I will flag it in the shared channel that day.

Come back to what actually happened

At our November 24 check-in, review whether the next update showed the uncertainty before people committed. Invite a correction privately or in the meeting. Do not ask whether everyone trusts me now.

Change a condition as well as a promise

Holistic Shaping asks us to look at the conditions people keep encountering. An invitation to speak carries little weight if the last person who raised a concern was brushed aside. Alongside a personal commitment, change something about the work: what is visible, who gets heard, what is rewarded, or how a promise gets made. Nic's essay offers another way into this: become curious about what someone is noticing before judging what their response means.

Where this comes from

This activity follows the credibility, reliability, authenticity, and perceived self-interest version in the Lauren Adelle Coaching handout (2019), which credits First Round Review's 2018 interview with Anne Raimondi. That article cites Steven Drozdeck and Lyn Fisher's The Trust Equation. A separate, widely used formulation from The Trusted Advisor (2000) uses credibility, reliability, intimacy, and self-orientation to discuss trustworthiness. The linked sources explain both formulations. The practice, example, and worksheet here are independently written by Leader Rebellion.

First Round Review · Anne Raimondi on trust

Trusted Advisor: the intimacy / self-orientation formulation

Stop Chasing Psychological Safety — Nic Payne