

# Three Levels of Trust – What Level Are Your Relationships?

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When it comes to trust, not all relationships are at the same level. Based on the context of the given relationship – professional, personal, family, social – each one can experience a different level of trust.

There are three basic levels of trust. The first level is **deterrence-based trust**, or what I like to call “rules-based” trust. This is the most fundamental, base level of trust in all relationships. Deterrence-based trust means that there are rules in place that prevent one person from taking advantage of or harming another person. In society we have laws that govern our behaviour in personal and business settings. When we engage in business we have contracts that ensure one party can trust another to hold up their end of the bargain. In organisations we have policies and procedures that provide boundaries for how we interact and treat each other, and if we violate those rules, usually there are consequences involved.

The second level of trust is **knowledge-based trust**. This level of trust means that I’ve had enough experience with you and knowledge of your behaviour that I have a pretty good idea of how you will react and behave in relationship with me. We’ve had enough interactions over time where there has been a consistent display of trustworthy behaviour that I believe I can trust you with the everyday type issues we experience together. This is the level of trust that most of our day-to-day professional relationships experience.

The third and most intimate level of trust we experience in relationships is called **identity-based trust**. This level of trust means that you know my hopes, dreams, goals, ambitions, fears, and doubts. I trust you at this level because over the course of time I have increased my level of transparency and vulnerability with you and you haven’t taken advantage of me. You’ve proven yourself to be loyal, understanding, and accepting.

Identity-based trust isn’t appropriate for every relationship. This level of trust is usually reserved for the most important people in our lives such as our spouse, children, family, and close friends. Yet with the proper boundaries in place, this level of trust can unlock higher levels of productivity, creativity, and performance in organizations. Imagine an organizational culture where we operated freely without concerns of being stabbed in the back by power-hungry colleagues looking to move higher on the corporate ladder. Imagine less gossiping, backbiting, or dirty politics being played because we knew each other’s hopes and dreams and worked to encourage their development rather than always having a me-first attitude.

Take a moment to examine the level of trust in your most important relationships. What level are you at with each one and how can you develop deeper levels of trust?