THE 4Cs OF
TRUST

Communication

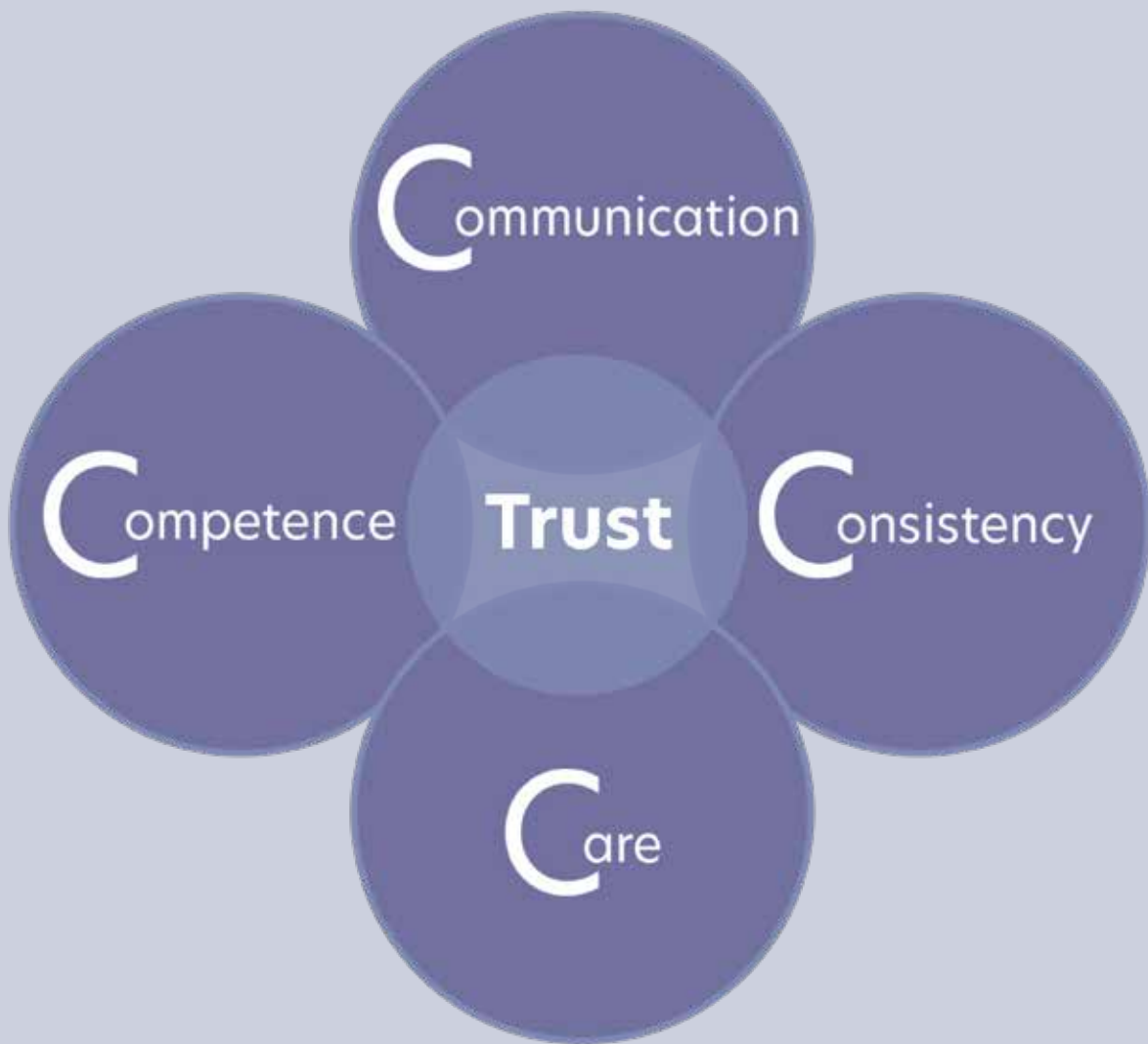**Competence**   **Trust**   **Consistency**

**Care**

Jamie Flinchbaugh

JFlinch

There are many valuable books and knowledgeable speakers who offer informed opinions about what is needed to make a lean journey successful. Trust, or a culture of trust, will often make that list. But how much does trust matter? Why does it matter at all, and what should you do about it?

In this article we will discuss the research and explore the conclusions about how trust impacts your lean journey.

Does trust matter?

We conducted a survey with a broad audience on trust. We first asked people to rate how influential trust was on continuous improvement or lean efforts. Does trust matter, or can you do without it? While this appears to be a bit of a leading question, as we certainly expected a connection, I was perhaps most interested in how tightly connected the two might be. Irrelevant is the lowest rating, and received only a couple responses. Somewhat Influential would imply it has some bearing, but that didn't receive many more votes.
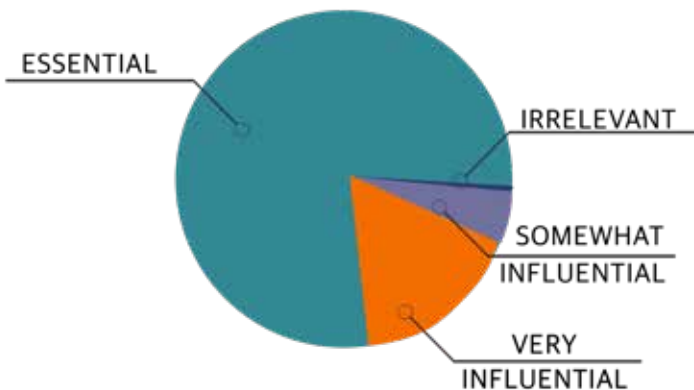
The word *Essential* was chosen for the survey because of its implied extremity. The word goes beyond saying, "very influential," and implies that without trust, you will in fact fail in your lean journey. As I examined the responses, I was astonished to see that more than 75 percent of respondents indicated that trust was essential for continuous improvement or lean journeys. They are indicating that lean cannot live without trust.

I often say that two ingredients are essential for sustainable success with lean: leadership engage

ment (in contrast to only leadership support) and culture (as in the right shared behaviors). Perhaps, as a result of these survey responses, I should add trust to this list. An alternative view is that trust is an outcome, and leadership engagement and culture are the inputs that create that trust. I don't intend to resolve that choice here, but we can certainly conclude that trust plays a significant role if you want lean to be successful.

Why do trust and lean go together?

Why are we talking about trust in the context of a lean journey? Isn't trust simply a good thing in and of itself? Trust takes on greater importance in a lean journey because there is greater ownership distribution of work and decisions, as well as broad empowerment to help improve the process. As your organization takes the waste and slack out of its work systems, problems may occur. Teams must trust that other teams won't engage in finger-pointing when things go wrong. After all, that's how many of the wasteful buffers and extra layers were created in the first place, to protect one manager from another, or one team from another.

As one of our survey respondents articulated, "Continuous improvement efforts are often placed within a cross-functional team, [from being] customers to your process up to bigger scope improvement or standardization efforts." That increased cross-organizational work to more closely couple the work and collaborate when problems occur requires trust across boundaries.

Lean journeys often require some counterintuitive changes to how we work. This requires that people let go of old assumptions or behaviors. Someone might have been very successful working in the old environment, but success in the new lean environment is not guaranteed. Will someone trust the leadership to give them time to adjust? If they do not trust leadership, it is in their best interest to resist change.

Do you need trust to begin?

I did not ask this question, regrettably. I believe that responses would be mixed regarding whether trust is needed in an organization in order to begin the lean journey. I do not believe that trust is required to begin. For starters, I have seen many journeys start without a strong basis of trust within an organization, that have turned out to be successful. These journeys would often begin with strong challenges from day-one. Most often these challenges stemmed from employees questioning the motivation behind their leaders' choice to pursue a lean journey. The mistrust was sewn deeply into the staff's perception of management's most basic motivations.

Certainly, this makes it harder to begin the lean journey, but does not limit the opportunity for success. Ultimately, as I'll demonstrate later in the article, you need action to build trust. You can't just claim trust. Therefore any break from the status quo provides an opportunity to build trust. The pursuit of a lean journey provides a platform to make the kinds of decisions and actions that can build trust. Of course, you can also destroy trust if you take the wrong actions or make poor decisions, but because lean is so inclusive, it becomes an effective amplifier for other cultural changes in the organization, such as trust.

The 4Cs of Trust

When I began this research on trust, I attempted to codify some of the important ingredients to either assess why your organization lacks trust, or to drive deliberate actions to build trust. The 4Cs, which I'll elaborate on in following sections, are: the demonstration of **Care, Communication** of context, **Competence** to effectively deliver on the promise, and the **Consistency** of those first three elements. I also produced a video describing these 4Cs in greater detail, which was shared as part of the research. In my research, I asked respondents to rank these four elements as to their impact on the establishment and maintenance of a trusting environment. We also asked respondents share the
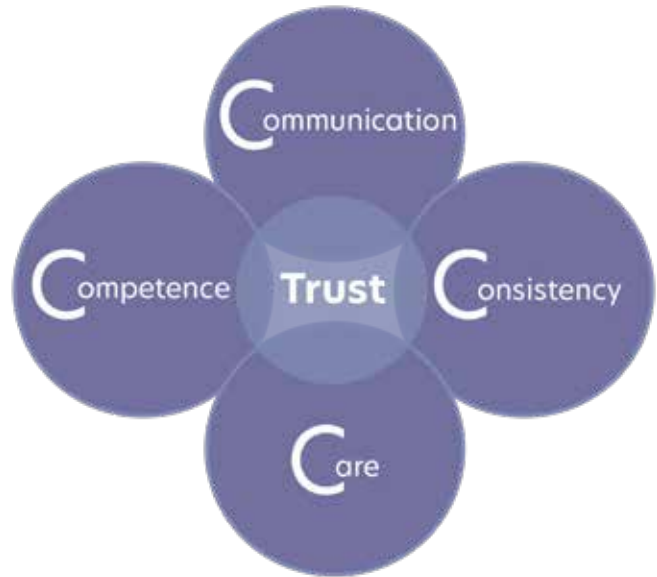
rationale behind why they selected their top choice, as well as any strategies they have observed or utilized in support of that element.
In some regards, the results were curiously inconclusive, with all categories receiving a substantial number of #1 and #2 votes. However, the demonstration of care clearly received the most #1 votes, and was a clear favorite as the most important contributing factor for establishing trust.

The Demonstration of Care

The demonstration of care was the first of the 4Cs. I will concede that by listing it first on my video, it is possible that I biased the responses on the survey, but the results were clear. One of the reasons for this is that the demonstration of care does seem to enable the other three to some degree. As one respondent put it, "Care is the basis that the other three points are built on."

More practically speaking, the point about care is not about intentions or even the morality of caring for others. It is about the *demonstration* of care. One response states: "A lack of demonstration of care may imply a lack of care, and it will be interpreted as such." To expand on this point, even if you do care, if you are unable to demonstrate that care, the team or organization will likely interpret your lack of demonstration as a lack of care. It is

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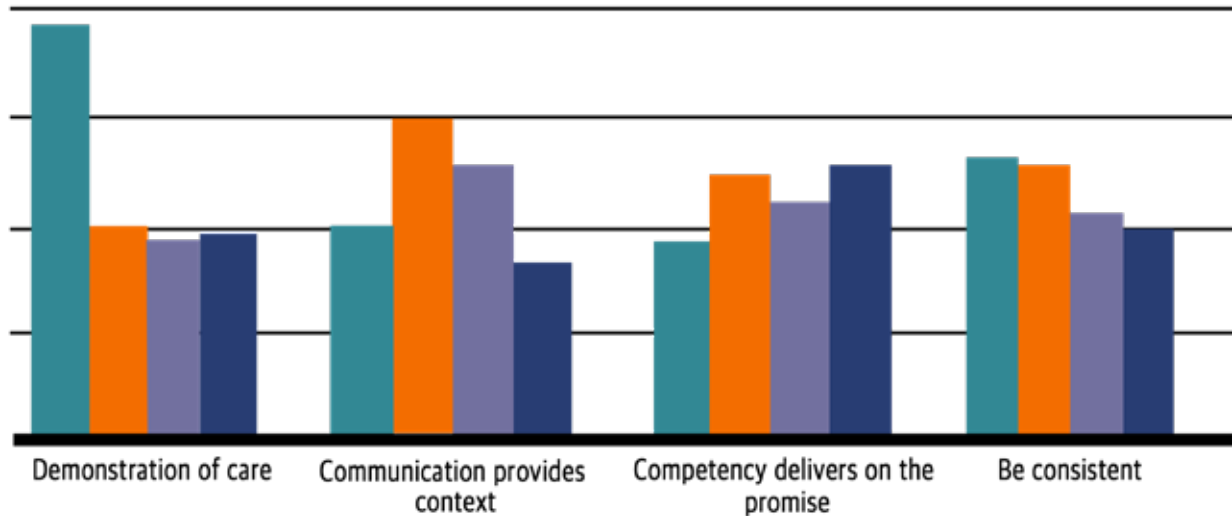
the easiest assumption to make. Demonstration of care, I argue, does not require that it come from a moral center or moral compass.

If you care about people's ability to perform at their best, in a productive and healthy environment, with commitment, then you have what I describe as a *functional perspective* of care. For example: a leader might demonstrate care to one teammate by involving himself in conversations about his family. For another teammate discussing his love for his job may be a significant demonstration of care. With either approach, the leader demonstrates that he/she cares. But that care must be followed through with demonstration, through sacrifice, interest, and engagement in order to endure.

That demonstration of care produces results in how people feel about their work with you. One response states, "Because when people believe you care about them they will do anything to continue being treated the same way." This is because that demonstration of care changes that relationship, as noted here: "Being genuine is important, but time and effort are needed to prove intentions are true, so they have to believe we care by being present for them."

As I've already said, good intentions don't count for much. That's why this suggestion carries weight: "We developed Leader Standard Work that details out several methods to show care... from simple

compliments on great work, to one-on-one discussions focused on helping the employee continue to grow and achieve their career goals... whether that is with our company or not."

The biggest themes in the recommended strategies for demonstrating care are listening, which is to be expected, but also, acting on feedback and suggestions. Particularly poignant is this strategy: "Acting on the feedback as possible, then checking back to see how I am doing." That checking back helps ensure that the demonstration aspect of caring is actually received as it was intended.

Communication of Context

Communication can be found in almost every leadership model, no matter what your purpose. But for trust to take place, the important aspect is often communicating context, or the *why*. Did you reject someone's proposal? Communicate why. Did you make a decision inconsistent with the intended strategy? Communicate why. Understanding the why of decisions and actions will limit the opportunity to conclude false motivations.

This category was not the second most common #1 vote, but had the most respondents marking it as #2, so it was clearly considered important. Perhaps the reason so many voted it second, and why some voted it first, is reflected in this comment: "Effective communication has care and competency

embedded within." It's important because the information--the why--provides empowerment: "People need to understand what they are driving to, why it matters to the organization, and what the guardrails are for their work."

As far as respondents' recommendations, most of them take the form standard work that provides the ability to communicate. For example: "Regular Stand up meetings, Q&A forums, wandering around" was one such recommendation. This reminds me of a best practice for a board of directors regarding the executive session. Instead of waking up one day and deciding you want to talk in private with other board members, you provide a standing portion of the agenda which you can talk about. Then, if you have nothing to communicate, the result is a short, efficient meeting. So having these standard, structured opportunities to communicate will open up the doors to communication regardless of whether you had a plan for communication or not.

Competence to Deliver on the Promise

When someone promises something to you, you judge the value of that promise based on whether or not the person actually has the competence to deliver on it. There are exceptions to this, such as JFK's promise to put a man on the moon. In a case like that, people both really wanted to believe it and weren't in a good position to evaluate the competency. But inside your organization, those competencies are better understood.

This category received the least number of #1 votes and most #4 votes, which might indicate it is least important. But at the same time, it received a substantial number of #2 votes, and its broad support would indicate that many still consider it part of the formula for trust. Some respondents commented that all of the elements were equally important, and found it difficult to follow the forced ranking that I requested.

This element differentiates what people experience from the intentions of the other party. If your intentions are solid, but ability to fulfill those intentions lack competence, the experience of the other party is still one of failure. To demonstrate the point, plenty of parents might know another person cares about their young kids, but will only leave their kids with them if they trust in the competence to care for them.

As one person stated, this goes hand in hand with intentions' "People won't trust someone who doesn't seem to know what they are doing. Covey states trust = character + competence." Another respondent adds, "Demonstration of your skill set in helping them solve the problems in their organization." This returns us to a point made earlier, that lean provides a platform on which to build trust. New tasks and skills and challenges are embarked on, and you can demonstrate your competence as a practitioner or leader by what you accomplish in support of that journey. This allows you to build trust, where it may have been lacking, through the pursuit of lean.

Consistency of Action

Consistency means that we operate in all domains (demonstration of care, communication, the competence to deliver) on a reliable and steady basis. As one respondent astutely noted, "Inconsistency creates mistrust and doubt."

Consistency actually received the second most votes for #1, although interestingly very few for #2. Looking at all the results, it seems the most common opinion is that, either care will help influence the other elements, or that, without consistency of these other elements, it just doesn't matter. One respondent summed up the latter view as follows: "Actions speak louder than words, and consistent action speaks even louder than that. Aligning your words and actions are the key to creating a culture of trust."

It is noted that consistency is difficult, and perhaps this is why it matters so much. Even small slips are noticeable, as one person stated: "Many leaders are not aware of the little things they say during passing or in a meeting that seem to conflict with what

they say they want or are trying to accomplish." This is why practicing continuous improvement on both leadership and management tasks is so valuable. Not only do you demonstrate your competence through engagement, but you can improve the consistency of your work, as one respondent noted, "I structured my work with cycles/repetition of activities (like PDCA)", while others suggest Leader Standard Work or audits to ensure standardization.

A common theme brought up often around consistency is transparency. You might think that transparency belongs under communication, but when transparency is connected to action, then it allows issues to be resolved rapidly, and that allows the organization to maintain their overall consistency. As one respondent noted: "Open communication in huddles and other meetings to build trust." Another respondent added: "establish short "cadence of accountability" check-ins on important initiatives." The deeper explanation is that the routine of daily huddles allows alignment and accountability to remain high, leaving few gaps for inconsistency to form and grow. It's very hard to wonder what other people are hiding when you have transparency through daily huddles.

A final point around consistency is that this element is perhaps most susceptible to good intentions producing bad outcomes. As one viewer noted on my YouTube video on the 4Cs: "I am guilty of taking on too many activities; that's the downside of being in a world of 'anything is possible.' I need to partner with someone that can hold me accountable to a system in delivering results." This is a great example, where someone wants to help and say yes, but overcommitting will ultimately lead to promises being unfulfilled, which will diminish trust that someone won't necessarily do what they say they will do. As one respondent put it succinctly: "Deliver on promises…that's the core of trust."

Conclusion

This research produces three primary conclusions. First, trust is not just a touchy-feely nice-to-have organizational trait. Trust has a material impact on your organization's effectiveness. This is particularly true during a period of transition or transformation. Lean transformation, with its focus on collaboration and empowerment, is particularly sensitive to the foundation of trust within the organization.

Second, trust is not likely just to be granted, or given. You don't just decide to trust, you must generate trust through action. Lean's opportunity to build a common lens and language and common system of work provides many tangible opportunities to create trust (or to deplete it if the opportunity is not leveraged properly). By driving improvements, problem solving, and decision making closer to the point of activity, but with the guidance of methods and culture, there are daily opportunity to demonstrate trust through focusing on the process that people are a part of instead of focusing on blaming individuals.

Third, there is no single element that will help you achieve trust. While there could be more, the four elements articulated here of Care, Communication, Competence, and Consistency all have a material impact on the foundation of trust. Use these 4 elements to evaluate your situation to determine where you have risk of failure or use it to shape the environment to help build trust.

The point is not to be passive or hopeful about trust. Take ownership of establishing trust. Trust matters, and if you act deliberately, trust can be built.

Jamie Flinchbaugh is the founder of JFlinch, an advisory firm that focuses on helping build cultures, capabilities, leadership, and operating systems that consistently perform and scale. Leveraging his extensive experience of helping transform over 300 companies, Jamie is an valuable asset for any company seeking expert guidance with process improvements, lean strategies, and leadership coaching. His areas of expertise include continuous improvement, innovation and entrepreneurship, coaching and training, process transformation, business strategy, and organizational design.

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