

Trust in Conflict Communication

How trust is practiced under pressure

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Trust is often treated as something a relationship either has or lacks, as though it were fixed beneath communication. In conflict, though, trust is better understood as a practice: something formed through speech, response, action, and repair. That idea aligns with Stephen M. R. Covey's view of trust as something built through behavior over time rather than assumed as a static trait. His 13 trust-building behaviors offer a useful framework for understanding how trust is communicated when disagreement puts pressure on relationships. In conflict, trust is not only what people feel before a disagreement begins; it is also what they experience during the disagreement itself. It is less a feeling than a set of communicative practices that make repair possible.

Trust-Building Behaviors in Conflict Communication

Talk straight. In conflict communication, honesty requires more than saying whatever comes to mind. It calls for truthful speech shaped by integrity. To speak honestly is to name what is real without distorting it for advantage, exaggerating the other person's fault, or hiding behind vague language. Instead of saying, "You never care about this relationship," a person might say, "I felt dismissed when my concerns were not addressed." Trust grows when people can believe that what is said is clear enough to engage and responsible enough to receive.

Demonstrate respect. Respect does not require agreement, approval, or emotional ease. It requires preserving the other person's dignity while still addressing the conflict directly. Tone, timing, facial expression, and word choice all become part of the ethical work of communication. A respectful person can still say, "This is not acceptable," but does not need to humiliate the other person to make the point. A manager, for instance, can correct a mistake firmly without being shaming.

Create transparency. Transparency strengthens trust because it reduces the uncertainty that often fuels conflict. When people sense that information is being hidden, they often fill in the gaps with suspicion. Transparent communication does not mean revealing every private thought or feeling, but it does mean making relevant information available so others are not forced to guess. If a project deadline changes, explaining why it changed and what the new expectations are helps reduce confusion and frustration. Transparency moves conflict from confusion toward shared reality.

Right wrongs. Because conflict inevitably involves mistakes, trust also depends on the ability to repair harm. A relationship does not become trustworthy because no one ever causes damage; it becomes trustworthy when harm can be acknowledged and addressed. That requires apology, humility, and a willingness to make repair concrete. An apology that protects only the speaker's self-image does little to restore trust. Repair begins when a person can name what they did, recognize its impact, and participate in what must change. After forgetting an important commitment, a sincere repair might include an apology, an explanation without excuses, and a clear plan for preventing the same mistake again.

Show loyalty. Loyalty is a quiet but essential form of trust, revealed most clearly when the other person is not present. In conflict, people may need to seek support from others, but there is a difference between seeking wise counsel and building a case against someone. Loyalty means speaking fairly enough that, if the absent person were present, the speaker would not need to become someone else. This protects relationships from the secondary damage caused by gossip, exaggeration, and alliance-building. Instead of saying, "They are impossible to work with," a person might say, "We are having a difficult disagreement, and I want help thinking about it fairly."

Deliver results. Trust also has a practical dimension. People become trustworthy not only by speaking well, but by following through. Unkept responsibilities often become relational messages. A missed commitment may communicate carelessness, avoidance, or disregard, even when that was not the intention. In conflict communication, reliability gives language weight. When words and actions begin to match, trust has something concrete to rest on. If someone promises to revise a proposal by Friday and then delivers it on time, that follow-through helps restore confidence in future conversations.

Get better. A trustworthy person is also willing to learn. Conflict becomes especially difficult when feedback is treated as an attack that must be defeated. Growth requires the ability to listen for what may be true, even when the feedback is uncomfortable or imperfectly delivered. This does not mean accepting every criticism as accurate, but it does mean remaining teachable. A person who can learn from conflict helps keep the relationship from becoming trapped in repetition. If one person notices that the other becomes defensive during hard conversations, being able to hear that pattern without immediately dismissing it creates room for improvement.

Confront reality. Trust deepens when people are willing to face what is actually happening. Avoidance may feel peaceful in the moment, but it often preserves the very conditions that make conflict return. To confront reality is to address the real issue rather than maintaining the appearance that everything is fine. This kind of directness does not have to be aggressive. It can be calm, careful, and deliberate, but it must be honest enough to bring the issue into view. Instead of pretending that “things are okay” after repeated tension, a person might say, “We need to talk about the pattern that keeps happening between us.”

Clarify expectations. Many conflicts emerge from unclear expectations. People often assume that others understand what was needed, promised, implied, or valued, only to discover later that each person was operating from a different understanding. Clarifying expectations is therefore a trust-building act because it makes assumptions speakable. It invites people to define what they need, what they can offer, what they understand, and what still requires negotiation. Two coworkers, for example, may need to clarify whether “getting it done soon” means by the end of the day or by the end of the week.

Practice accountability. Accountability gives conflict a path forward. Without it, communication tends to collapse into blame, denial, or self-protection. To practice accountability is to take responsibility for one’s part in both the problem and the repair. This includes acknowledging outcomes, not only intentions. A person may not have intended to cause harm, create confusion, or break trust, but accountability asks them to consider what their actions produced and what responsibility now belongs to them. Saying, “I did not mean to interrupt you, but I understand that I did and that it shut the conversation down,” is more accountable than simply saying, “That was not my intention.”

Listen first. Listening is one of the most powerful ways trust is restored during conflict. To listen first is not merely to stay quiet while preparing a response. It is to make a genuine effort to understand what the other person is saying before correcting, defending, or redirecting the conversation. Listening changes the pace of conflict. It gives the other person evidence that their experience is not being dismissed before it is even understood. Repeating back what someone said before answering—“What I hear you saying is that you felt left out when the decision was made”—can lower defensiveness and build clarity.

Keep commitments. Keeping commitments is closely related to accountability, but it deserves separate attention because relationships are built on patterns of dependability. When people say what they will do and then do it, their words become more trustworthy over time. When commitments are repeatedly broken, even sincere explanations begin to lose force. In conflict, keeping commitments communicates that repair is not only emotional but behavioral. If one person promises to send the revised draft, call at a certain time, or follow up after the conversation, doing so shows that the relationship matters beyond the moment of disagreement.

Extend trust. Finally, trust must also be extended. This does not mean offering unlimited access, ignoring risk, or pretending that past harm does not matter. Rather, it means recognizing that

trust cannot grow if it is never given room to operate. Some relationships require boundaries, gradual rebuilding, or careful testing over time. Even then, moving toward trust involves some willingness to let the other person respond differently. After a breach of trust, someone may choose to rebuild confidence slowly by agreeing to small commitments before returning to deeper vulnerability. Trust often returns unevenly, and that slower pace is part of what makes repair realistic.

Together, these practices show that trust is not a single feeling or a general attitude. It is a pattern of communicative behavior that becomes visible over time. Trust is built when people talk straight, demonstrate respect, create transparency, right wrongs, show loyalty, deliver results, get better, confront reality, clarify expectations, practice accountability, listen first, keep commitments, and extend trust wisely. In conflict communication, these practices do not remove disagreement, but they make disagreement more human, more workable, and more capable of leading toward repair. Conflict reveals whether trust can be practiced under pressure.

Trust-Building Behaviors

At a Glance

Behavior	Core Practice	Conflict Communication Connection
Talk Straight	Speak truthfully and with integrity.	Clear truth reduces confusion and keeps conflict from going underground.
Demonstrate Respect	Preserve dignity and show genuine care.	Respect keeps disagreement from becoming personal attack or contempt.
Create Transparency	Share relevant information openly.	Transparency reduces suspicion and supports shared reality.
Right Wrongs	Apologize, repair, and act with humility.	Repair shows that harm can be acknowledged and addressed.
Show Loyalty	Speak fairly about others, especially when they are absent.	Loyalty prevents conflict from turning into gossip or alliance-building.
Deliver Results	Follow through on responsibilities.	Reliability gives words credibility during difficult conversations.
Get Better	Receive feedback and keep learning.	Growth keeps conflict from becoming a repeated pattern.
Confront Reality	Address difficult issues directly.	Naming the real issue allows it to be understood, negotiated, or repaired.
Clarify Expectations	Make assumptions and agreements explicit.	Clear expectations reduce misunderstandings and prevent avoidable conflict.
Practice Accountability	Own one's role and outcomes.	Accountability shifts the conversation from blame toward responsibility.

Behavior	Core Practice	Conflict Communication Connection
Listen First	Understand before responding.	Listening slows defensiveness and shows that the other person's experience matters.
Keep Commitments	Do what you say you will do.	Kept commitments become evidence that trust is deserved.
Extend Trust	Offer trust wisely, with appropriate boundaries.	Extending trust creates room for repair and a different next turn.

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