Effective relationships are those that rely on trust. Trust has been described as the glue that sticks relationships together, or the oil that keeps them running smoothly. However, some relationships are more significant for trust than others, such as those with a senior or line manager.

VULNERABILITY IS TAXING

Trust involves two distinct facets: confidence in the other party, and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable. While a great deal of prior attention has focused on understanding the components of confidence, far less attention has been paid to the vulnerability involved in trusting the other party where there might be little means to control or monitor their behaviour. Feeling vulnerable diverts cognitive resources toward mitigating the perceived threat the other party poses. At its most extreme, where perceived risks outweigh the benefits, it can lead to the relationship being curtailed. Efforts to mitigate vulnerability raise the need for controls, which carry time and financial costs, but also divert effort from task performance – only realising after making a mistake.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LEADERS

Our CREST-funded study of trust in a high-security context showed that leaders play a critical role in trust, in part by shaping felt vulnerability. Leaders act as powerful role models who anchor others’ behaviour. In this way, they influence how much confidence a person has in others’ competence, their adherence to moral principles, and their care and respect for others’ needs (i.e., the confidence facet of trust). The behaviours they promote also shape how much vulnerability a person experiences. We found that leaders who were immoral promoted vulnerability, reduced trust and increased security risks, whereas leaders who were moral mitigated these effects.

RULE-BREAKING AND MISCONDUCT

Our work showed that rule-breaking by leaders was associated with wide-ranging counterproductive work behaviours. Rule-breaking removed a leader’s moral authority, allowing subordinates to perceive that they could do similar, creating the start of collective moral disengagement about rules and to whom they apply. This process undermined coherence within the team, significantly reducing their capacity to contain wrongdoing through social sanction. In cases where team members were more pervasive and wide-ranging in their misconducts, vulnerability within the team increased and new stresses were created. For those not engaging in misconduct, they could either stay silent, exit the organisation or join in. Collectively these deleterious processes reduce the performance of the team, replacing organisational interests with more self-serving goals. More critically, they re-shape local and organisational norms, creating a form of ‘frog-boiling’ as collective moral disengagement becomes normalised.

This effectively diminishes the means of social sanction and emboldens those engaged in misconduct and the leader in further self-serving antics. As feelings of vulnerability escalate...the organisation can start to rot from within, with the means of self-correction diminishing rapidly. It is here that security risks are greatest.

The efforts of an ethical leader diminish feelings of vulnerability as subordinates can understand the basis for their leader’s decisions and actions, freeing them to concentrate on the task at hand, rather than being diverted to self-protection. They provide adherence to and development of ethical standards. Ethical leaders encourage subordinates to model their behaviour in novel situations to determine for themselves what is right.

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...the organisation can start to rot from within, with the means of self-correction diminishing rapidly. It is here that security risks are greatest.

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