

10 Phrases Leaders Use to

Build Trust With Team Members



A few words go a long way.

Building a culture of trust starts with a shared vocabulary of simple—yet powerful—phrases that leaders use to say thanks, show empathy, and provide support.

Relationships of trust are rooted in understanding. Leaders who engage team members with compassion and gratitude encourage them to mutually invest in the teams and the clients they collectively serve. When team members trust one another and rally around each other and their leader to achieve desired outcomes, amazing things can happen.

To start creating that shared vocabulary, share this guide with leaders throughout your organization.



1. “I’ve noticed a change.”



Specificity allows for team members to share their feelings candidly and with confidence.

Use it: When a typical behavior or pattern presents itself.

This phrase signals you’re present, perceptive, and paying attention. Team members appreciate such connectedness and caring. They feel seen as individuals and not just cogs in a machine. They know you’re the kind of leader who won’t let important things go unsaid.

Be specific about what you see, and invite team members to respond. You’ll discover whether your team members agree with your perception or think you’re off target.

For example:

Team, I’ve noticed a change. I’m not seeing as much friendly banter on Slack lately—most of the messages are focused on projects and deadlines. How are people feeling this week?

I’ve noticed a change. Typically during meetings, you stay fairly quiet. Recently, you’ve been speaking up more and offering excellent suggestions to help the group when it gets stuck. I’m interested to know what’s behind this shift.

2. “Thank you for letting me know.”



Responding with gratitude communicates a growth mindset—and a willingness to collaborate in meaningful ways.

 **Use it:** Whenever someone shares bad news or criticism with you.

Why would anyone want to share hard news with you if you react with volatility or blame? Accept feedback as an opportunity to grow and an opportunity to support your team members in their growth.

Consistently respond with thanks. Doing so builds trust. And it gives team members space to feel confident and comfortable in leveling with you about issues you need to hear and trust that you’ll be a partner in generating solutions.

Specificity and sincerity matter, and open-ended questions will facilitate problem solving.

For example:

Thank you for letting me know that you’re behind on the report. Knowing that will help me recalibrate expectations with department heads. Could you share more about the unexpected issues you’ve encountered?

Thank you for letting me know that I haven’t been giving the team enough feedback on their customer interactions. I know that wasn’t easy to share, but I needed to hear it to improve as a leader.



“One of the fastest ways to build trust is to make and keep commitments—even very small commitments—to yourself and others.”


— Stephen M. R. Covey

Bestselling author,
The Speed of Trust

3. “I want to check in.”



People appreciate offers of support, especially when invited to articulate what they need from you, their leader.

 **Use it:** To follow up on a previously discussed issue.

Few things erode trust more quickly than not doing what you say you’re going to do or hearing an issue is important to someone and then promptly forgetting about it. When you follow up, you’re not only communicating that you’re paying attention, but also that you care.

You care about others’ needs and are committed to helping them improve. You will provide the support needed to impact growth and improve future outcomes for the team—and you will do so generously and graciously. It means you will check in on things that matter to your team members, not just things that matter to you.

Check in with wisdom and tact. Repeatedly checking on projects you’re worried about can feel like nagging. Trust rapidly disappears when direct reports feel doubted or micromanaged, even if that’s not your intent.

So approach checking in with care and clarity, and give team members opportunities to respond.

For example:

I want to check in to see how you’ve been adjusting to the office after maternity leave. How is your family adjusting? Is there anything I can do to help?

I want to check in to see how your first call went. How did you feel about it? What worked for you?

4. “What do you think?”



Be sincere, not selective, when soliciting a team member’s point of view.

Use it: To invite someone to open up with their point of view—and when you want input.

You know the answer to “How are you?” You also know when you’re being asked as a matter of polite conversation and when a trusted colleague sincerely wants to know. So do your team members.

Seeking others’ viewpoints is a hallmark of trusted leaders. Trust isn’t accrued by simply asking. You show that you value your team members’ perspectives and desire them to share when you ask sincerely. You genuinely want their input and consider their feedback indispensable.

Few things torpedo trust faster than a manager asking team members to share their opinions—only to ignore their advice and do exactly as previously intended. Value team members’ viewpoints, ideas, and expertise. Thoughtfully invite others to share their point of view.

For example:

I noticed the agenda item you’ve prepared to discuss has been repeatedly pushed back to the next week’s meeting. What do you think is a good way to bring it to the top of the agenda?

I have to put together a presentation for leadership on the team’s progress this quarter, and I’d love your input. What do you think I should highlight?

Bring out the best in people by entrusting them with meaningful stewardships and creating an environment in which high-trust interactions inspire creativity and possibility.

5. “I’ve been there, too.”



Extending empathy increases compassion, and compassion builds trust.

Use it: To help a team member understand that you’ve faced a similar struggle or made a similar mistake in the past.

When you help someone understand they’re not alone in their challenges, they often become more open to sharing details about their troubles. They’ll see you as a resource for generating solutions and as someone who views challenges as opportunities.

As a leader, you can create these moments of connection by focusing on your team members’ experiences, not your own. The goal is to help team members understand—and feel—they are not alone. Avoid claiming, “I know exactly how you feel.” That’s unlikely. Instead, acknowledge similarities: “I’ve been there, too.”

Managers who are willing to share their own imperfections build trust.

For example:


There’s no need to beat yourself up over the error in this week’s newsletter—we all make mistakes. I’ve been there, too. I once sent out a newsletter with three spelling errors. I’d love to hear your ideas for reducing errors, and I can share the process I came up with as well.

You’ve said public speaking makes you anxious. I’ve been there, too. I used to dread it more than anything else and not sleep the night before a presentation. Tell me more about what you’ve tried so far to calm your nerves.

6. “Let me share what I know and don’t know at this point.”



Transparency and honesty work in tandem. One without the other leads to suspiciousness.

 **Use it:** When you’re conveying information relevant to your team’s work and well-being.

As a leader, you’re often the best—or only—conduit of information between your team and your company’s leadership. Hide or hoard information, and you’ll leave your team uncertain, in the dark, and hesitant to trust you.


Provide as much information as possible, and you’ll foster a reputation as a trustworthy, transparent leader. You’ll also raise your team’s collective intelligence, enabling them to do better work. Don’t hesitate to admit when you don’t know. Empower your team by sharing what you do know, and communicate that you’ll promptly share when you know more.

When transparency exists, team members are more likely to extend their trust.

For example:

The Impact Team met again. Let me share what I know and don’t know at this point. They’re planning three events next month. They haven’t clarified what role, if any, our team should play. They’re meeting again next Tuesday, and I’ll send an update then.

The acquisition is in process, but not yet finalized. Let me share what I know and don’t know. I know business processes will remain the same through the end of quarter four. It’s anticipated the acquisition will be completed in mid-October.



The reality is that everybody makes mistakes. The issue isn't whether you will make them—it's what you will do about them. It's whether you will choose the path of humility and courage or the path of ego and pride.

7. “How can I help you make progress?”



The trust we have in people and organizations comes, in part, from believing they care.

Use it: When you’re genuinely interested in helping a direct report succeed.

Great leaders care about what’s important to their direct reports because when individuals do well, so does the team and the organization. They also understand that few things are as motivating as feeling supported by a boss who celebrates progress.

Brainstorming is powerful, especially in a collaborative 1-on-1 setting. Ask specific questions to hone your direct reports’ focus. Offer suggestions if a team member can’t think of anything.

Asking how you can help means nothing if you don’t follow through and provide support. Genuine offers of support are not only heard, but they’re also more likely to be accepted.

For example:

Now that we’ve established your goals for the quarter, let’s discuss what I can be doing to help you make progress.

Could we spend a few minutes in our next 1-on-1 checking in on your professional development goals? I’m interested in hearing how progress is going and how I can help.

8. “I need your help.”



Team members are most often eager to help, especially when their efforts are acknowledged with a “Thank you.”

Use it: When you genuinely need support or feedback.

Even leaders need help sometimes—asking for it shows you’re human and that you trust your direct reports to deliver. Asking builds a culture of teamwork and openness, sending the signal to your direct reports that it’s good to ask for what you need to get the job done well.

Always be respectful when asking for help. Sounding the alarm too often—or asking for too much because you’ve failed to plan—erodes trust and morale. Where possible, shout for help sooner rather than later, and consider a pool of possible assistants, not just one team member.

Modeling asking for help respectfully and professionally creates opportunities for success.

For example:

I just learned I have to present to the finance team on Thursday, and I need your help filling in some information gaps. Do you have 30 minutes today to pull that data for me?


A client has just provided us another sales opportunity and requested a quote by the end of business tomorrow. Are you available to help?

**By behaving in ways
that build trust with
one, you build trust
with many.**

9. “This is a challenge for all of us.”



To build trust during times of change, you must be willing to work side by side with your team members.

 **Use it:** When your team faces a tough task or big change.

As a leader, you’re not one of the gang. But you can help rally a concerned or demotivated person or team by demonstrating that you’re going through a similar experience and that they can rely on you to lead the way—by rolling up your sleeves and pitching in, if necessary.

Lead with specificity: “This is hard, but we can do it by organizing individual tasks, and applying an assembly-line approach.”

Compliment team members in real time for their contributions.

For example:

I realize we’re 10% away from our goal with only two weeks to go. This is a challenge for all of us. Why don’t you send me some client numbers so I can start making calls? I’d also like to hear everyone’s ideas for how we might close the gap.

This new strategic direction is a challenge for all of us. I know there’s a lot we don’t know yet about how the prototype process will work. In the meantime, let’s use what we do know to flesh out some initial concepts.

10. “That’s my mistake.”



A humble person is more concerned about what is right than about being right.

 **Use it:** To admit an error or lapse in judgment.

You may feel like crawling under a rock when you make a mistake. But admitting it out loud shows courage, integrity, and that you recognize the impact of what you did and are willing to accept responsibility. It also models to your team that owning up to errors is okay—even desirable—which can help your team feel more open to trying new ways of doing things.

Inevitably, we all make mistakes. We’re human. Admitting it gives us the freedom to take risks and learn from our failures. And, it makes room for our direct reports to do the same.

Leaders who own their mistakes create an environment in which people are willing to experiment and can pivot quickly as needed.

For example:

I know I encouraged you to reach out to customers by both email and phone this week, but we’ve had some complaints. That’s my mistake. Let’s please go back to email outreach only. And I’ll connect with those clients who were frustrated.

I thought the streamlined agenda would work for our team meeting—that was my mistake. Next week, I’ll put more time into it so the group can stay on track.



**“Nothing is as fast
as the speed of trust.
It’s the one thing that
changes everything.”**

— Stephen M. R. Covey

Bestselling author,
The Speed of Trust

Team members who trust their leaders communicate with transparency and invest fully. They meet performance goals and enable strategic initiatives. They inspire confidence and extend trust to others.

With leaders who conscientiously build trust, your organization will collaborate more effectively and drive results.

That matters—because trust is the currency of speed. And navigating a world of shifting terrain, from digital superhighways to global markets, requires speed.

FranklinCovey provides leadership development solutions to help leaders at all levels build trust (and avoid breaking it). Our world-class learning solutions—delivered Live-Online, On Demand, or Live In-Person—are designed to build exceptional leadership skills throughout your organization.

To learn more, email us at info@franklincovey.com or visit franklincovey.com/solutions/trust

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