



INPURSUIT OF INSIGHTS

Trust Math™

Small Moments Create Big Leadership Outcomes

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**RESEARCH
THAT MOVES
DECISIONS.**

Trust, it turns out, is not built or broken in the moments companies plan for.

THE SIGNAL

A department head cancels a scheduled one-on-one for the third week running. A promised follow-up email arrives four days late, if it arrives at all. A leader answers a question in a meeting with visible impatience, then moves on as though nothing happened. None of these moments would make it into an exit interview or as a line item in an engagement survey. And yet, taken together and repeated often enough, they predict whether an organization keeps its best people far more reliably than the factors most executives track closely. Trust, it turns out, is not built or broken in the moments companies plan for.

10x

How much a toxic culture outweighs compensation as a predictor of attrition

1.4M

Glassdoor employee reviews analyzed in this research

38

Industries in the attrition data set

Executives tend to imagine trust as something forged in dramatic gestures such as crises handled with composure or a perfectly word-smithed mission statement. These moments matter, but they are rare, and rarity limits their power. Trust is a running balance, accumulating through the sheer frequency of small interactions. That is the core concept behind Trust Math™, an equation in which countless small deposits and withdrawals, most of them unremarkable on their own, determine whether trust is built or broken.

The clearest evidence that small, repeated behaviors matter comes from retention data. In a widely cited 2022 study published in MIT Sloan Management Review, researchers Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig analyzed attrition data across thirty-eight industries alongside the text of more than 1.4 million employee reviews posted on Glassdoor. Their finding reframed how the business world talks about the Great Resignation.

Why People Quit...really.

A toxic corporate culture was more than ten times as powerful a predictor of employee attrition as compensation. Pay raises, long treated as the default lever for retention, were attempting to solve a problem that was rarely the actual cause of departure. What drove people out the door was accumulated disrespect, inconsistency, and a felt absence of trust, expressed through patterns of everyday behavior that employees subconsciously tallied.

The psychological mechanism behind that tally has a name in organizational research: the psychological contract. Organizational scholar Denise Rousseau introduced the concept in the late 1980s to describe the largely unspoken set of mutual obligations employees believe exist between themselves and their employer. The kind of obligations that go well beyond what any signed agreement specifies. Every unremarkable interaction either confirms that contract or violates it. Because each individual moment feels too small to escalate, employees rarely raise it directly, and leaders rarely notice they have done anything at all. The violations simply accumulate in a private ledger the organization is largely blind to.

Research on what organizational scientists call behavioral integrity, the perceived alignment between a leader's words and their actions, helps explain why small inconsistencies carry disproportionate weight. A leader who says the door is always open but is reliably unavailable is not judged on the sincerity of the original statement. They are judged on the gap between statement and behavior, a gap that compounds with each repetition providing fresh evidence for the same conclusion. This is precisely why an organization can survive one dramatic failure of leadership more easily than it survives a leader who is merely inconsistent on a daily basis. Small inconsistency gets rationalized by the employee who does not want to seem petty and by the leader who genuinely does not realize a pattern exists.

I Am Standing Right Here!

Being ignored, specifically, turns out to carry more organizational weight than intuition would suggest. A 2020 study published in the International Journal of Hospitality Management, led by researcher Mahfooz Ali and colleagues, examined workplace ostracism among hospitality employees and found that the simple experience of being overlooked, merely left out of the loop, had measurable downstream effects on how employees related to their organization. Being ignored is, almost by definition, a small event. It rarely rises to the level of a formal grievance. Yet humans are highly attuned instruments for detecting whether they belong.

The psychologist John Gottman spent decades researching couples, producing some of the most durable findings in the science of trust. He described the occurrence of sliding-door moments, small junctures in daily interaction where one person can turn toward or away from another's bid for attention. Gottman's research on romantic partnerships translates more directly to the workplace than most leaders expect, because the underlying mechanism, attentiveness, is not specific to marriage. Any relationship sustained through repeated contact shares the weight of attentiveness leading to trust or inattentiveness triggering the opposite.

It Is Not Always About the Benjamins

In my own work, I watched this play out in organizations convinced their retention problems were strictly compensation issues. Compensation is the easiest reason to name out loud, precise, defensible, and free of the discomfort of naming a manager's chronic unreliability. But when teams began tracking the smaller behaviors instead, a different picture emerged. The departments with the worst attrition were not the lowest paid. They were the ones led by managers whose word, examined closely and across enough small instances, could not quite be counted on. No single failure justified anyone's resignation. The pattern did.

“No single failure justified anyone’s resignation. The pattern did.”

— Dr. Melanie Sue Hicks

The business implication is a genuine shift in how culture gets measured and managed. Most organizations audit culture through annual surveys that ask employees to rate broad, aggregate impressions. Do you trust leadership? Do you feel valued? Would you recommend this company to a friend? These instruments are useful, but a more precise diagnostic asks about the small, recurring behaviors themselves. Are one-on-ones reliably held or reliably canceled? Are commitments made in meetings actually followed up on, and within what window of time? Do employees who raise a concern see any visible response, or does the concern simply disappear? These questions are unglamorous, which is exactly why so few organizations ask them, and exactly why the ones that do gain a real advantage in understanding where trust is quietly accumulating or draining.

Leaders who internalize Trust Math™ understand the need for specific, practical adjustment. Organizations must start treating consistency as a measurable discipline, tracked with the same seriousness applied to a sales pipeline or a budget.

READY TO OPERATIONALIZE THESE FINDINGS?

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**RESEARCH.
INSIGHTS.
IMPACT.**

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