



The Heart of Leadership: Building Trust and Empowering Teams Through Proven Practices

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Introduction

Frontline leaders are the most influential change agents in a healthcare organization. They play a critical role in shaping the strategies and daily practices that directly impact team dynamics and patient care experiences.

These leaders shoulder a wide range of responsibilities. Many organizations focus on developing operational skills, while the human side of leadership, seen in skills like fostering trust, often receives less attention. Organizations face unique challenges in leadership development, including outdated training models, limited in-person learning opportunities, and a lack of protected time for growth. Yet strong leadership is essential for both employee engagement and patient experience.

Despite the challenges associated with leadership development, leaders can rely on a few simple, heartfelt behaviors to foster high-functioning teams. These behaviors, though not necessarily new

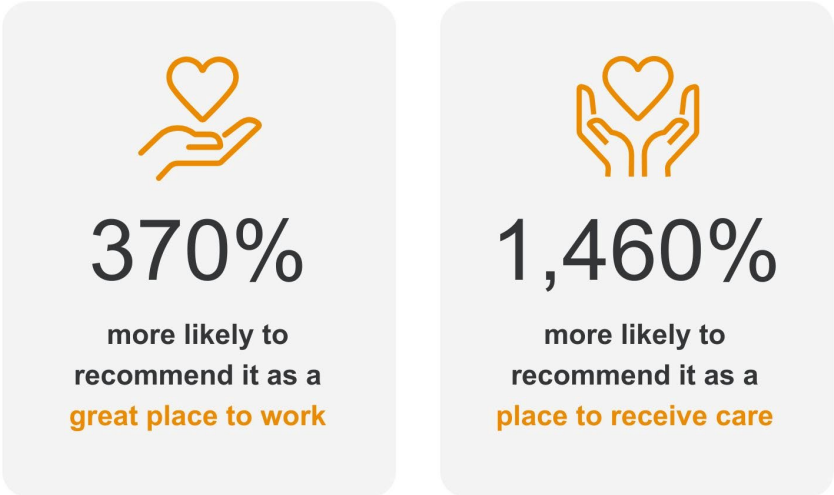
or innovative, are valued by employees and significantly contribute to empowering teams and building trust.

Data

NRC Health’s 2025 Experience Perspective underscores the critical role of trust in healthcare. Trust is a foundational element that spans the entire care continuum. In a study of over 700 healthcare employees, 91% reported that they trust their organization. Among the 9% who did not, the most common concerns centered on leadership, competence, and culture.

The impact of trust is significant: employees who trust their organization are 370% more likely to recommend it as a great place to work, and an astonishing 1,460% more likely to recommend it as a place to receive care.

Employees who trust their organization are



What drives trust?

- ✔ **Leadership:** Trust thrives when leaders are visible, active, and engaged
- ✔ **Competence:** Employees need confidence that their organization provides safe, high-quality, empathic care
- ✔ **Culture:** Employees want a workplace that values them as much as patients and families

Actions That Build a Culture of Trust (and Actions That Don't)

Leaders are the heartbeat of a trust-driven culture—and when employees feel genuinely valued, supported, and heard, trust follows. To cultivate that environment, lean into the foundational practices outlined below. They may seem familiar, but make no mistake—these are non-negotiables when it comes to building lasting trust.

- Spend purposeful time with the frontlines (Leadership): Employees trust leaders who are visible and accessible. Round often with a supportive mindset, not in order to catch mistakes. Use rounding as an opportunity to have transparent conversations with employees regarding anything that's on their minds. Spend purposeful time with your teams rather than just passing through.
- Say what you mean, and mean what you say (Competence): Clearly communicate expectations for quality, safety, and experience. Ensure employees have the necessary training and tools to meet these expectations. Provide honest, timely, and respectful feedback when expectations are not met. Debrief after mistakes to facilitate learning and prevent those mistakes from recurring.
- Show that you care (Culture): Bring humanity to the forefront by connecting personally with your employees. Be curious about them as individuals. Be generous with recognition, praise and gratitude. Human Understanding—seeing each person as a unique individual—is vital to building a strong team.

Lack of commitment to the above practices, as well as to some of the below practices, may unintentionally erode trust.

Drop the Superhero Complex—Instead, Empower Your Team

While removing obstacles is a key leadership responsibility, stepping in too quickly can undermine employee ownership. Empower your team by asking questions that promote accountability and independent thinking, such as:

- What ideas do you have to improve this situation?
 - Who do you think is best positioned to address this?
 - Have you already spoken with the person involved?
 - What steps have you taken so far?
1. How can I help you move this forward?

Statistics published by our strategic partner Medallia reveal promising insights: 73% of healthcare employees feel encouraged to find better ways of doing things, and 63% responded favorably to the statement, “If I try something new and it doesn’t work, I am not worried about being judged poorly.” This data confirms that employees appreciate the opportunity to participate in decision-making about their own jobs and embrace the concept of “failing forward.” Likewise, sharing ideas to improve and innovate for patients is highly valued. Remember, trust isn’t built when you have all the answers; it’s built when you guide others to discover their own answers, foster collaboration, and co-create solutions as a team.

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Judging Someone’s “Why”—Every Motivation Matters

Asking employees about their “why”—why they chose healthcare, or what drives them to show up each day—can uncover meaningful insights into their motivations. But it’s also important to remember that not everyone has a deeply emotional or mission-driven reason for doing what they do. Some may be motivated by practical factors like job stability, flexible hours, or a passion for science. All of these reasons are valid.

Leaders risk eroding trust when they imply that certain motivations are more worthy than others. Honor each individual's "why." Understanding what drives your team members fosters a culture of respect and trust.

Standardizing Authenticity—Ditch the Script

Some organizations use scripting to improve patient communication—but few things erode trust more quickly than forcing people to speak in a way that doesn't feel natural to them. Instead of prescribing exact words, offer communication frameworks that guide tone, intent, and clarity. Encourage true authenticity by allowing employees to speak in their own voice. When miscommunication happens, treat it as a coaching opportunity. Trust your team to use good judgment, and support them in refining their approach.

Building a culture of trust doesn't happen by accident—it's a purposeful, continuous effort. Frontline leaders are in a powerful position to shape this transformation. By reinforcing trust-building behaviors and challenging practices that may unintentionally break down trust, leaders can foster a workplace where team members feel truly seen, supported, and respected. The ripple effect? Stronger patient experiences and more well-connected, high-performing teams.

