Building Stronger Teams Through SEL: Fostering Trust and Collaboration

Trust. It's a word we use often, a concept we intuitively understand, yet its profound impact on our lives and organizations is often underestimated. Think about it: when trust is present, individuals feel safe to engage, relationships flourish, and teams excel. But when it's absent or broken, the consequences can be devastating. So, let's dive in and explore this essential element of human connection and why it's so important to the success of high-performing teams.

What Exactly Is Trust?

We define trust as the invisible bridge of connection that allows individuals and organizations to work together in a safe space for exploration, vulnerability, and meaningful change (Brente, Hoskin, & Layton, 2025). In the context of coaching and education, trust is the bedrock upon which deep and lasting growth is built. It moves beyond mere comfort, creating an environment where individuals feel emotionally, mentally, and relationally secure enough to:

- **Express vulnerability without fear of judgment.**
- **Share doubts, anxieties, and inner conflicts openly.**
- **Explore limiting beliefs and long-held narratives without castigation.**

Charles Feltman (2009), in his insightful book "The Thin Book of Trust," offers a powerful definition: trust is choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions. This highlights the inherent risk involved in trust and underscores its profound significance in our interactions.

Why is Trust So Important for Strong Teams?

From an operational standpoint, trust drives organizational health. A study by the Harvard Business Review (2017) explains the importance of trust to the success of an organization, stating that "people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, and 40% less burnout than people at low-trust companies." The significance of trust cannot be overstated.

Research in education highlights the crucial role of trust in driving meaningful change. Consider high-performing teams in schools. Trust is the bedrock of their success. Trust fosters honesty, encourages open feedback, promotes transparency, and ultimately makes the work environment more rewarding. Collaboration and shared commitment are essential for student success. A study by Budge & Parrett (2022) emphasizes that improving teaching and learning in high-poverty schools requires building the capacity of leaders and educators. Interventions alone are insufficient; a foundation of trust is necessary to unlock the true potential of educators

How Do We Build Trust?

Building trust is an ongoing process that requires intentional effort. Feltman's (2009) research identifies four key areas that act as pillars supporting trust in professional relationships: sincerity, reliability, competence, and care.

- **Sincerity:** This is about genuine presence and authenticity. It's about being fully engaged with another person, listening actively without interruption, minimizing distractions, and making appropriate eye contact. Sincerity involves responding authentically and empathetically, demonstrating that you truly hear and understand their experiences.

- **Reliability:** Consistency is key here. Reliability means honoring commitments, maintaining clear boundaries, and providing a dependable structure. In practice, this could involve punctuality, consistent communication (like timely session summaries), and following through on agreed-upon actions. Being a predictable and trustworthy partner is paramount.

- **Competence:** This pillar encompasses the skills, knowledge, and techniques necessary to effectively guide and support others. It's not just about qualifications; it's about continuous learning, staying updated with best practices, and having the wisdom to recognize your limitations and refer others when necessary.

- **Care:** Demonstrating genuine interest in the well-being and success of others is what care is all about. This can be shown through simple gestures like remembering details about their lives, checking in after challenging moments, and offering encouragement and support. It's about showing that you value them as individuals and are invested in their journey.

Conversely, leaders must be mindful of issues that can hinder the formation of strong bonds. Freeburg (2023) identifies the four key challenges that inhibit trust development and erode the success of teams. These challenges include:

- **Special behavior:** When team members require unique management, it can detract from overall productivity and create resentment.

- **Going rogue:** This involves team members who outwardly agree but secretly pursue their own agendas, eroding relational accountability.

- **Splinter cells:** These are fractured subgroups within a team that resist the agreed-upon plan and create instability

- **Team tension:** Unresolved underlying tension creates a toxic environment that hinders open communication and collaboration.
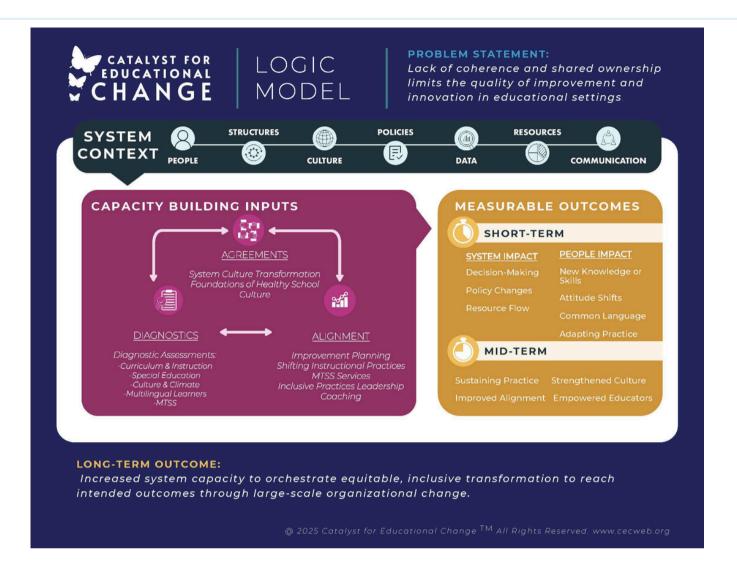
By understanding these potential pitfalls and actively cultivating sincerity, reliability, competence, and care, we can build stronger, more effective teams and organizations where individuals feel safe, valued, and empowered to thrive.

NOW WHAT?

Building Teams that Trust

Building teams anchored in unwavering trust isn't a peripheral initiative—it's the foundational strength upon which all meaningful progress is constructed. We've illuminated the path, distinguishing between the fertile ground of healthy, earned trust and the corrosive impact of unhealthy distrust. The charge now rests with organizational leaders to ignite this transformation. By embodying trust through transparent communication, resolute follow-through, and unwavering integrity, by carving out the time for consistent team connection, and by co-creating and championing team norms, leaders become the architects of a trust-rich culture. Trust isn't a desirable add-on; it's the indispensable operational compass that guides high-performing teams toward their true potential. Without it, organizations are adrift, hoping for success rather than engineering it. The moment to chart your organization's course toward enduring excellence, powered by the engine of trust, is not in the future—it is now.

LOGIC MODEL

PROBLEM STATEMENT: Lack of coherence and shared ownership limits the quality of improvement and innovation in educational settings.

SYSTEM CONTEXT: PEOPLE · STRUCTURES · CULTURE · POLICIES · DATA · RESOURCES · COMMUNICATION

CAPACITY BUILDING INPUTS

AGREEMENTS — System Culture Transformation Foundations of Healthy School Culture

DIAGNOSTICS — Diagnostic Assessments:
-Curriculum & Instruction
-Special Education
-Culture & Climate
-Multilingual Learners
-MTSS

ALIGNMENT — Improvement Planning Shifting Instructional Practices MTSS Services Inclusive Practices Leadership Coaching

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

SHORT-TERM

SYSTEM IMPACT
Decision-Making
Policy Changes
Resource Flow

PEOPLE IMPACT
New Knowledge or Skills
Attitude Shifts
Common Language
Adapting Practice

MID-TERM
Sustaining Practice   Strengthened Culture
Improved Alignment   Empowered Educators

LONG-TERM OUTCOME:
Increased system capacity to orchestrate equitable, inclusive transformation to reach intended outcomes through large-scale organizational change.

When stakeholders work together around shared agreements...the unthinkable is possible. CEC's focus on the **System Agreements** in school reform efforts aim to realign the adult culture and dynamics. We know when systems cultivate healthy, values-based relationships within each school and classroom measurable outcomes are more likely. People matter. And people working together really matters in schools. Developing a strong adult culture as[1] a foundation of a change agenda is what makes CEC stand apart.

CEC uses **System Alignment** to create collective efficacy on the agreed upon improvement aims of a school or district. Our tools and processes are designed to empower those closest to the issues to own the work. Our change management approach intentionally paces improvement through attainable short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. It is the "secret sauce" of school improvement.

We invite you to explore the role our **Logic Model** might play in your system's large-scale improvement. Our website includes FREE resources that might be helpful in opening up dialogue with key stakeholders. Let's work together to turn ideas into action, so we can all see what's possible for our schools.