

Trust — The Invisible Infrastructure of AI Transformation

Published March 20, 2026



Trust & AI: The Separation That No Longer Works

For decades, organizations have treated trust and technology as separate domains. Organizational leaders have owned culture, psychological safety, and engagement, while innovation teams have pushed tools, automation, and process redesign. Before AI, this separation was inefficient but survivable.

With generative AI, it's untenable.

AI is destabilizing the foundations of workplace trust at the exact moment organizations need unprecedented levels of trust to adopt it successfully. True transformation (experimentation, transparency about errors, rapid learning, and willingness to reinvent one's role) requires deep psychological safety. Yet AI simultaneously threatens people's professional identity, competence narratives, and job security.

This is the trust paradox of AI: **We're asking people to take their biggest professional risks at the moment they feel least safe.**

Leaders must recognize that AI transformation isn't a technical shift that can be insulated from the emotional and social dynamics of work. **AI initiatives succeed only when the transformation itself becomes a trust-building process.** Trust cannot be a parallel initiative; it's the infrastructure that enables every step of the AI journey.

Trust Under Strain: The 3 Dimensions of Trust in Flux

Trust in organizations is built through human interactions rather than policies or systems. Our approach is grounded in the Reina Trust Building® model, [where trust is defined](#) through 3 interrelated dimensions: **Trust of Capability®**, **Trust of Communication®**, and **Trust of Character®**. Together, these dimensions are reinforced through everyday social exchanges: keeping commitments, communicating openly and respectfully, demonstrating expertise, and showing care for others.

Trust is the currency of AI transformation because AI changes the conditions under which humans coordinate, learn, and take risks together. Each dimension of trust is now under strain:

- **Trust of Capability** is destabilized as AI disrupts expertise, redefines roles, and challenges the long-held stories people tell themselves about what they're good at.
- **Trust of Communication** is pressured by automation, speed, and a lack of clarity, which can erode transparency, voice, and mutual respect.
- **Trust of Character** is tested as AI systems introduce new ethical ambiguities, unclear accountability, and uncertainty about whether decisions are being made with fairness and integrity.

The old premise for building trust assumed a world where expertise was stable and roles were clear. That world no longer exists. What follows is our thinking on how AI is reshaping each dimension of trust, and how leaders must respond if AI transformation is to become a trust-building process rather than a trust-eroding one.

Trust of Capability Redefined

Before generative AI, Trust of Capability was built on demonstrated expertise within a stable domain. Leaders earned trust because they knew their field, could make sound judgments, and could reliably deliver results. Capability was equated with mastery, and credibility flowed from historic success.

But what does Trust of Capability mean when no one is truly an expert at AI transformation? The landscape is too new, too fluid, too uncharted, and too fast-changing for mastery to be a realistic foundation. For leaders accustomed to grounding their credibility on certainty and deep functional knowledge, AI surfaces a challenging question: *How do I lead when I genuinely don't know the answers?*

The temptation is to perform mastery. Leaders feel enormous pressure to project certainty, to over-specify an AI strategy, to imply knowledge of answers that are unknown, such as how roles will change. But pretending to have answers no one possesses doesn't build trust. It erodes it, often quickly, as reality exposes the gap between confidence and knowledge.

The opportunity lies in redefining trust of capability from mastery to learning leadership. Trust is strengthened when leaders demonstrate the ability to navigate uncertainty, not deny it. In practice, this sounds like:

- "I don't know yet, and here's how we'll figure it out together."

- “Here’s what’s unclear, and here’s how we can mitigate risks.”
- “Here’s what’s changing fastest. Let’s brainstorm about how we can adapt.”

Amid AI transformation, Trust of Capability rests on creating the conditions for collective learning: curating expert voices, authentically and honestly naming uncertainty, modeling curiosity, and experimentation. **The leader who can navigate without pretending to know how exactly to deal with the constantly changing AI landscape is the leader others will trust to lead AI transformation.**

Trust of Communication Reimagined

Trust of Communication reflects whether people experience leaders as respectful, open, and genuinely caring in how they communicate, not just what they say but how and why they say it. Historically, Trust of Communication was built through attention: genuine listening, taking diverse views seriously, honoring others’ expertise and perspectives, and demonstrating care for people as humans rather than just roles.

AI complicates these signals in ways both obvious and subtle. When leaders use AI to draft communications, do employees experience it as efficiency or as a diminishment of respect? When organizations explore automation while simultaneously telling people they are valued, the norms that once signaled respect and care become ambiguous. Are leaders [genuinely, actively listening](#) when speed and scale take precedence? Are people’s concerns treated as meaningful input or as resistance to be managed? When efficiency overrides presence, Trust of Communication erodes, even if intentions are positive.

At the same time, AI brings real emotional weight. People are tired and anxious. They’re navigating genuine existential fear about their professional futures: *What am I worth in a world where machines can do my work? What does growth look like for me now? Who am I in this future?* In this context, Trust of Communication can become a stabilizing force, or a breaking point if leaders prioritize transformation speed over people’s capacity to adapt.

Building Trust of Communication in the AI era requires leaders to make their intentions visible and their attention tangible. This includes:

- Being transparent about when and why AI is used, not as confession but as clarity
- Seeking input from those most affected by AI-driven change
- Treating fear and uncertainty as valid data, not resistance to overcome

AI also presents a practical opportunity. When used well, it can free leaders from routine work and return time to human connection:

- Prioritizing individual check-ins
- Acknowledging fear without minimizing it
- Creating spaces for processing what’s happening
- Accounting for patience with the learning curve
- Designing transformation with recovery time, not just execution milestones

Amid uncertainty, Trust of Communication is built less through polished messaging and more through sustained presence. **Leaders who invest in *how* they communicate, especially when answers are incomplete, create the conditions for trust to endure through AI transformation.**

Trust of Character Under Pressure

Trust of Character reflects whether people believe a leader's intentions are genuine and whether words and actions remain aligned when trade-offs emerge. It's built through consistency, transparency about expectations, and follow-through that allows people to predict how leaders will behave even when the stakes are high. AI strains this alignment.

Contradictions surface quickly:

- “We value our people,” while exploring automation that eliminates roles.
- “We’re committed to transparency,” while using AI in undisclosed ways.
- “We want your honest input,” while decisions feel predetermined.

The pace of AI adoption amplifies these tensions. Small misalignments between stated values and lived decisions become powerful signals, quickly eroding Trust of Character.

Building Trust of Character in the AI era requires leaders to name tensions explicitly rather than attempting to smooth them over. A leader might say: *“We’re exploring AI automation and we value our people. This is a tension, not a contradiction. Here’s how we’re thinking about it, and here’s what we’ve committed to.”*

When difficult decisions about AI arise (role changes, restructuring, reskilling, shifting responsibilities), Trust of Character is strengthened through [responsible AI use](#) and transparency about the trade-offs, not just the outcomes. **Trust isn’t built by pretending there’s a perfect path. It’s built by being honest that the path is difficult and walking it with people anyway.**

Leading at the Intersection of Trust & AI

AI transformation asks leaders to navigate a profound paradox: the work cannot succeed unless trust is strong, yet the process of adopting AI inevitably shakes the foundations of trust itself. The mistake is imagining these as separate challenges. **Trust building isn’t an adjacent task to AI transformation, it is the transformation.** Every moment of uncertainty, experimentation, role redefinition, and shared risk is also a moment in which trust is either strengthened or eroded.

[Psychological safety](#) isn’t something to *achieve* before the real work begins. It emerges from how people move through the work together: through shared vulnerability when no one has all the answers, through the courage to try something new, through transparent discussion of missteps and course corrections, and through the steady commitment to support one another as everything around them changes.

The behaviors AI transformation depends on (experimentation, learning, reskilling, open feedback, and [shared sensemaking](#)) become trust-building behaviors when leaders cultivate Trust of Capability through learning rather than certainty, Trust of Communication through honest involvement, and Trust of Character through visible intentions and transparent trade-offs. Leaders who recognize AI as a disruption that’s as much about people as technology create the conditions for people to take risks, speak candidly, and imagine new possibilities together; those who treat trust and transformation as separate will find that neither succeeds.

We’re not claiming to have this figured out. No one does. But figuring it out together is the work of leadership. We believe leaders who embrace this integration, who see trust and transformation as one intertwined challenge, will be the ones who guide their organizations forward with both their capabilities and cultures intact. **If leaders want to scale AI effectively, they must treat every experiment, every deployment decision, and every learning moment as an opportunity to strengthen the trust that makes transformation possible.**

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