In all my years of leadership, building trust is the foundation of everything, which is why I'm sharing this chapter from my book, "The Common Thread."

My hope is that this shifts your perspective on what it takes to build trust, how easy it is to erode it, and how to continually strengthen it in your organization to unleash your leadership.

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An excerpt from:

"The Common Thread – Lessons in Leadership and Awareness for Life and Business"

authored by Colonel Jim M. Donihee OMM, CD

TRUST

"The way to make people trust-worthy is to trust them." – Ernest Hemingway

Trust: What I Learned Leading from the Cockpit

My first Command in Canada's Air Force was 410 Operational Training Squadron—the Cougars—based in Cold Lake, Alberta. The Squadron was then and remains the unit responsible for the full spectrum of training CF-18 Fighter Pilots, from entry level to post-graduate level capabilities. The unit had been worked extremely hard because of the tremendous operational pace and essentially was a "stay-at-home" workhorse that never deployed as a unit, as a team. Promotions were few and the pride, fun, and fulfillment from being assigned to the *Cougars* was weak. When I first learned I was selected to assume Command of the Cougars, I was hugely disappointed as my preference had been to command an operational CF-18 squadron. In retrospect, commanding the Cougars was one of the best assignments I ever experienced.

Although not armed with the luxury of knowing the trust equation at the time, unwittingly working its components helped me engage the squadron personnel and completely turn the unit around. Within two years, 410 Squadron was transformed from the place few wanted to go, into the go-to place on the base. First and foremost, I committed myself to the success of our mission and, even more importantly, to the squadron personnel's success. From the outset, I worked hard to learn the names of every squadron member (some 350 of them) and, as best I could, their families. In that way, **every member of the squadron knew that they mattered.** I created a degree of intimacy amongst myself and the entire complement of personnel that was not previously present. We found a way to reinstitute unit deployments to create operational circumstances that called upon people to know and depend on one another more deeply. We revised our Squadron vision, mission, and values. We constantly

emphasized our vision— "To Train the Best Fighter Pilots in the World"—to re-instill pride and we stressed teamwork throughout all of our activities. **We worked to achieve our vision by focusing on people, leadership, innovation, and technology.** At every opportunity, I made a point of emphasizing that people and leadership were instrumental to the way in which we'd achieve our vision.

In a nutshell, the Squadron Chief Warrant Officer (the chief non-commissioned officer) and I learned the names, heard the concerns, trusted, empowered, and set high expectations. We worked extremely hard and played equally hard on occasion when the opportunity warranted, and we routinely spent time with the squadron members to know them and to be known by them. I worked the maintenance line by refueling aircraft, changing tires, and loading munitions, all the while training as a CF-18 instructor pilot and managing the other needs of the unit. **We forged a team that was welded to the vision, how we would achieve it, and the high expectations of each other that were required**. In the space of those two years, we completely revamped the training syllabus. We introduced a new and much needed electronic warfare certification, we ensured capable young technical leaders were trained and promoted, and we increased the production of CF-18 pilots while holding the line on costs and improving quality. These outcomes were not the result of orders as people so often attribute to the military environment. **These outcomes resulted from strengthening the bonds of trust, providing leadership, and by unleashing the power of an engaged, highly motivated workforce.**

One of the tasks I took on to demonstrate my sincere interest in the unit personnel was

that of personally penning each of them a birthday card on their birthday. When it was warranted, on the advice of the Squadron Chief and through personal observation, we gave the individual his or her birthday off as an extra day of vacation to enjoy with their family. It wasn't universal so as not to become an entitlement, but **that simple act paid many dividends through engagement and increased contributions.** Recently, some twenty years later, I met one of the technicians that I served with on 410 Squadron, and the first thing he remarked on was the longstanding appreciation for the penned notes and birthdays he could enjoy with his family. **Simple, consistent acts of intimacy and caring for your team will garner trust and deepen a shared commitment to achieving great things.**

In another instance the trust formula served me extremely well when serving as the Chief Operating Officer for the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association. Rather than examining the components of trust on an individual basis, we applied the formula through the lens of an industry as we sought to increase trust levels between the multi-billion-dollar pipeline industry and the citizens of Canada. We were able to use the formula to examine myriad stakeholders' viewpoints outside of the industry as it pertained to matters of operational safety, how landowners were treated, and the relationships that we were building with regional, provincial, and national regulatory agencies and governments. The trust formula proved itself to be scalable and extremely useful as we worked to increase trust levels for an industry that was under siege.

Trust: the cornerstone of every relationship.

Trust is the cornerstone of every relationship, every transaction, and is the glue that binds a social structure together. How you succeed as a leader, or not, in fostering trust throughout your organization will determine how deeply people become vested in achieving your vision. Simply stated, **your ability to create a high-trust environment will determine your success as a leader.**

You cannot demand that trust simply shows up across the organization. You can't order it up on Amazon—trust is built and sustained over time through your actions. Perhaps there may be a grace period, that benefit of the doubt period when you first assume the reigns or are hired into an organization. But that period is simply a courtesy, the length of which is very largely dependent on the temperature that's present when you step in. Very quickly thereafter, the scrutiny that will evolve into a collective assessment of your trustworthiness as a leader will set in. The scrutiny is nothing to fear; rather, it's something to welcome because armed with the proper mindset and approach to earning trust, your organization, and ultimately you, will flourish.

Trust has to evolve and flow in every direction. A leader needs to know his team is trustworthy, and the reciprocal is even more true. An individual or team needs confidence that its leader is trustworthy. So—who goes first? **Working hard, constantly, to create trust is key**. The nature of communications, the clarity of the vision and values, and especially the shared understanding of acceptable behaviours all

play into trust's evolution. Having identified a few of the considerations related to trust, always know that the consequences (+/-) of how the outcomes and relationships unfold will always be mapped back to the trust barometer in your organization. *As a leader, you don't get to choose when your people are observing you so you can tell them, "Look at me now—trust me now."* Your people will watch you every moment to form their assessment of your trustworthiness and, as a direct result, they will determine whether to put their backs to your wheel. If your people assess you as being trustworthy and they trust in both the vision and how you are striving to achieve results, it will pay tremendous dividends in engagement and success. It will also attract other capable people who want to join the journey because that's the ride they've been looking for too.

As a fundamental element of your culture within which trust is key, the tone, transparency, and way communications occur is vitally important. *As a leader, being present and human is extremely important to creating trust.* Check your ego at the door and listen, interact, and exchange openly and transparently. Being the leader rarely means that your voice needs to be louder or that you always need to have the answer. The odds are that you will have the answer, but when you don't, have the courage to say so. Be authentic and honest rather than stepping on or deflecting questions or dialogue. If there's a legitimate reason that you can't answer the question or contribute to the dialogue (confidentiality, security, insider issues, etc.) say so, but don't use that excuse as a crutch either. Open, frank communications will go a long way to deepening trust as you move forward. Remember that *trust will be strengthened whenever you can*

personally be present, open, honest, and transparent, and most certainly will not by deflecting, obfuscating, and avoiding.

Trust: Practically Speaking

As I've travelled my journey in many leadership positions, trust has, somehow, always played out. Perhaps because I naturally stand in the space of a servant-based leader: a space where I recognized that it's about the team, it's about the people. As the leader, my role was to create a compelling vision, create an environment wherein success could occur, and then recognize that people are the common thread that will execute on strategy. Especially as the organization becomes larger and more complex, as a leader, you will increasingly become removed from the coalface and more dependent on the engagement and execution by others to achieve your intended outcomes.

I can't say that I ever consciously set out to create trust. I can say that it certainly evolved because of my focus on **the common thread that drives everything— people**. In recent times, however, I came across a simple equation that truly clarified the attributes of trust and provided insights on how to create it more intentionally. This simple formula takes an abstract concept—trust—and expresses it in a manner that can serve you in every relationship: individual, organizational, at the industry level, and beyond. The Trust equation is expressed through four key attributes.

$$Trust = \frac{\underline{Credibility} + \underline{Reliability} + \underline{Intimacy}}{Self\text{-}Interest}$$

Credibility: drawn from your technical knowledge, expertise, and your ability (authority) to actually deliver on the essence of the interaction.

Reliability: measured by the dependability and consistency of your actions, and your ability and consistency for delivering the outcomes to which you commit. Do you keep your word—can I count on you?

Intimacy: measured by the quality of the relationship, the deep understanding of each other's needs and concerns, and the degree of safety required for powerful conversations. Do you really see me, do you care?

Self-Interest: are you simply in this for yourself. Big egos focused only on what they get from the exchange rapidly erode or destroy trust.

The Impact: Safe, sustainable excellence!

"When the trust account is high, communication is easy, instant, and effective." – Stephen R. Covey

One of the immediate benefits that we enjoy in a high trust environment is the ability to move safely and effectively to a much deeper / truer quality of interaction. ***In a fighter squadron or any operation where execution and safety of personnel is paramount, going quickly and safely—leaving rank at the door—to the root of learning and execution is the quickest and most effective path to sustainable excellence***. Trust helps you get below the water's surface to safely discuss the things that matter most.

To reach and sustain excellence you need to get below the surface—to reach beyond shallow conversations about the weather or weekend plans. We need to explore:

- Choices: which did we consider and why did we select the one we did?

- Knowledge & Skills: were they adequate – were there aspects missing or ignored?

- Programming: are there beliefs, values or attitudes that unduly influence (+/-) thinking?

- Identity: are there underlying elements of ego/identity that influence openness and approach?

- Spirituality: what is the degree of awareness of higher purpose and

alignment to true self?

When we truly succeed in creating a high trust environment, it's safe and expected to get below the surface to explore and clarify vision, the choices that are necessary to achieve it, and the values and capabilities that will be integral to excellence. Importantly, ***trust provides the permission to dissect operations—without any blame—to identify critical lessons that require action to improve in the next round of execution***.

SUMMARY POINTS

Trust is the cornerstone of every social structure, every relationship. Your success as a leader will be determined by your ability to build trust in your organization.

- Trust can't be ordered up—it will be earned, or not, because of your actions.

- Trust is amplified by establishing a clear vision, clear values, and the high expectations that apply to absolutely everyone contributing to sustainable excellence.

- High trust will lead to high engagement, high productivity, and the attraction of great talent.

- The trust equation defines the attributes and provides a benchmark for your leadership regarding trust.

- Trust is personal—look after the well-being of your people and they will excel.

- Trust creates the potential for the depth and quality of conversations that are necessary for sustainable excellence.

ACTION POINTS

- Examine the trust formula and reflect on how you transmit on each of its elements to your workforce and throughout your life.

- Reflect on the depth and quality of your communications: with your workforce, your executive team, and, even more importantly, with your family and friends.

- Engage your team members with this simple, yet extremely powerful instruction: "Tell me what we need to do to increase the level of trust on our team?"

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FINAL NOTES…

- The leaders I work with are dedicated to personal and professional growth.

- If you'd like to learn more about the whole 'Leadership Unleashed' model, click [here](#) to connect and explore next steps.

- If you know it's time to address some critical issues in the leadership of your company and want to talk 1:1, email me at jim@highflightexec.com

To purchase 'The Common Thread' [[Click Here]](#)