

Trust at Scale

Intentional communication for engineering
leaders



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Hello, today we're going to be talking about trust. My name is Mercedes Bernard and I've been a consultant for the last 10 years working with many different teams and clients. As a consultant, trust and relationships are my business much more than any 1 specific technology.



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In almost all of my client engagements, I've seen 1 problem over and over. Constantly shifting priorities. It's an evergreen problem we face as engineering leaders.



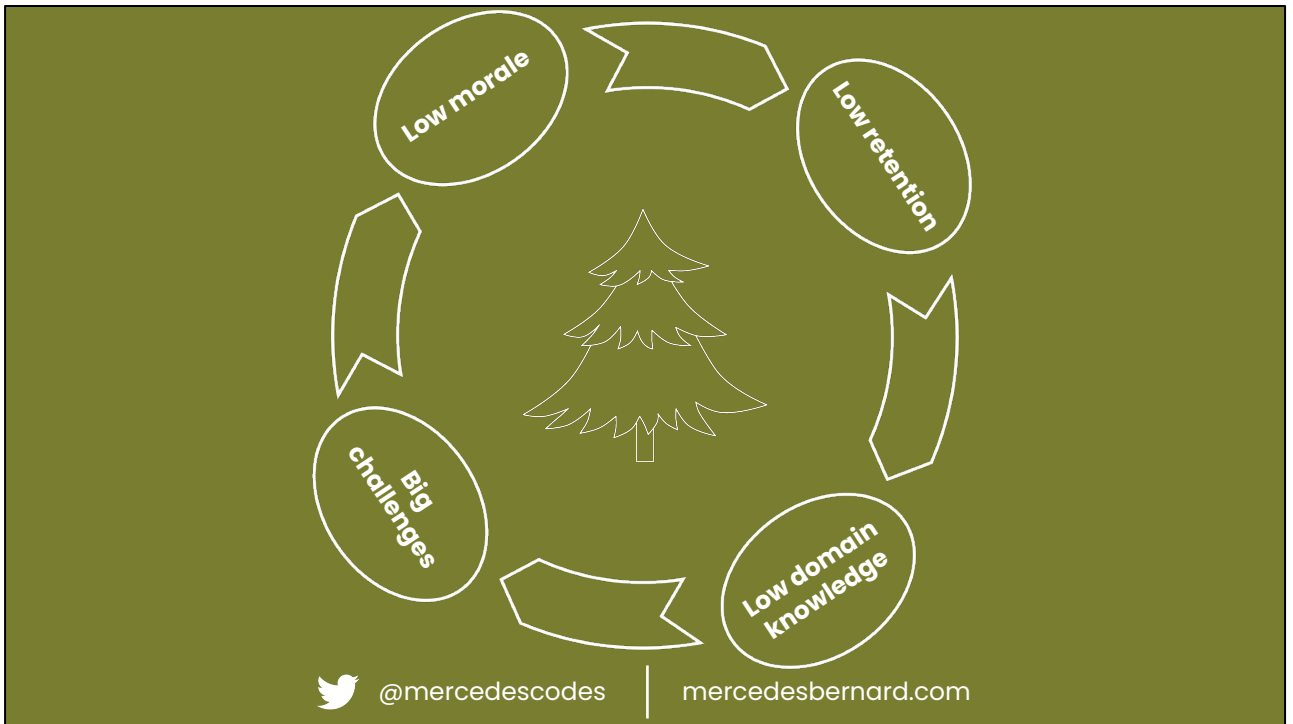
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On a recent engagement, my client's main business goal was to scale up the volume of product they could move through their system. There were and are many different ways that they could achieve this. And they had been trying a lot of them. So much so that many of their projects over the previous 12 months hadn't actually shipped. Their priorities were changing so fast and their projects were scoped so large that a team rarely had enough time to get something over the finish line before it was left on the cutting room floor in favor of the next big idea and big push to increase scale.

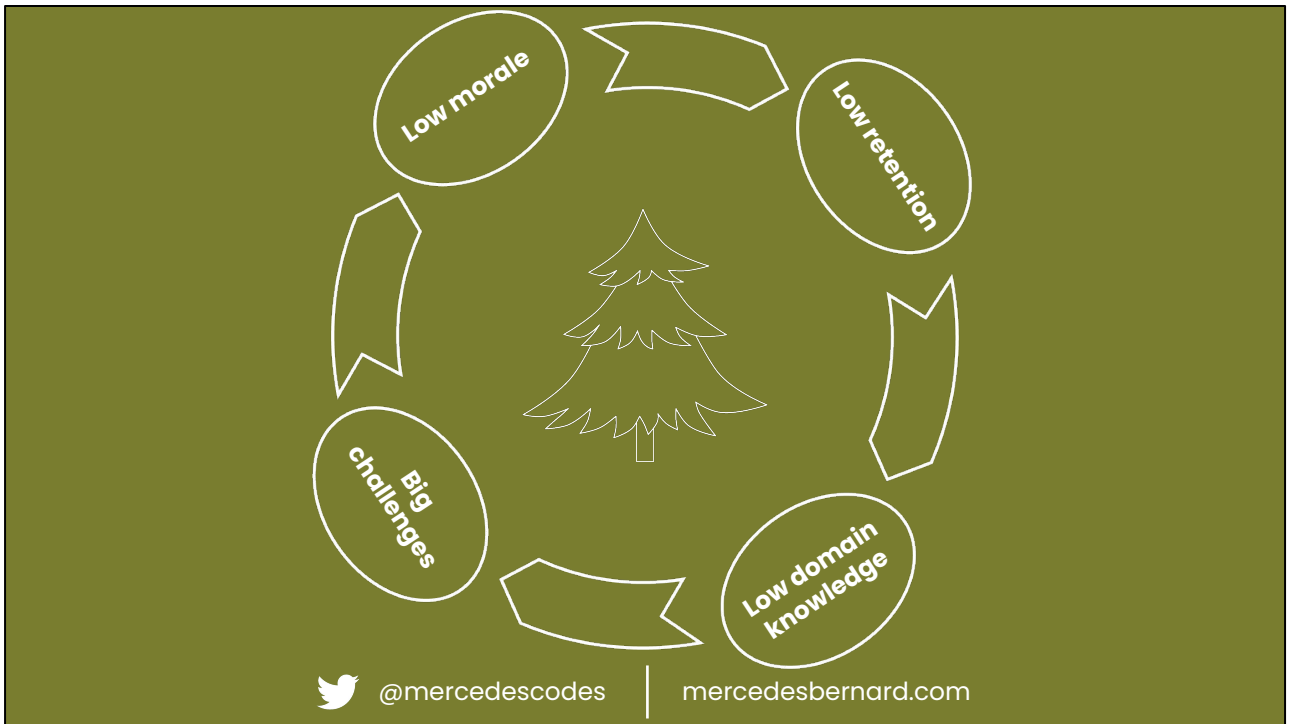


Many of the ICs at the company were exhausted. Understandably so. And they had little trust that their work was valued and that their time was well spent. As a consultant and not a full-timer, when a new project was announced I was privy to a lot of complaints that this would be yet another waste of time and they didn't expect to finish it before it was abandoned and the process started all over.



I'm sure you can see the problem here. Low morale leads to low retention. When you have high turnover, you lose a lot of domain knowledge. The less expert domain knowledge you have in your org, the bigger your challenges to achieving your goals are.

In this way ,the ever changing priorities are eroding team trust. Trust that leadership has a plan. Trust that the team will be given space to do good work. Trust that the work they *do* do will be appreciated.



Tech moves fast. Consumer attention moves even faster. We've all been in a situation where we need to "pivot" to stay relevant and keep up with business goals.

But building and investing in trust with our teams, customers, and company leadership can change our outcomes. It can change how those shifting priorities affect our teams and our business.

“Trust is built in very small moments ... There is the opportunity to build trust and there is the opportunity to betray.”

John Gottman



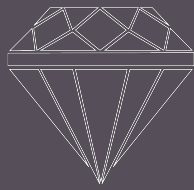
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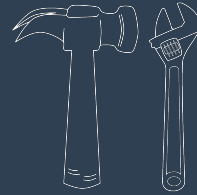
John Gottman is a renowned couples therapist. And he's done a lot of work with trust. Trust is the foundation for all healthy relationships: professional, platonic, romantic, and otherwise.

Trust is built in small moments. It can also be broken in small moments. If we accidentally step on someone in an elevator, a small, sincere “I’m sorry” builds trust with that stranger. If instead we tell them to get out of the way or give a big sigh, that’s going to be a really long elevator ride for them.

We often think that 'at scale' refers to large volumes and in software it usually does. But at scale actually means 'at the required size to solve the problem'. I'd argue that trust at scale means investing in our small interactions.



Explicit



Practical



Values-driven



Caring



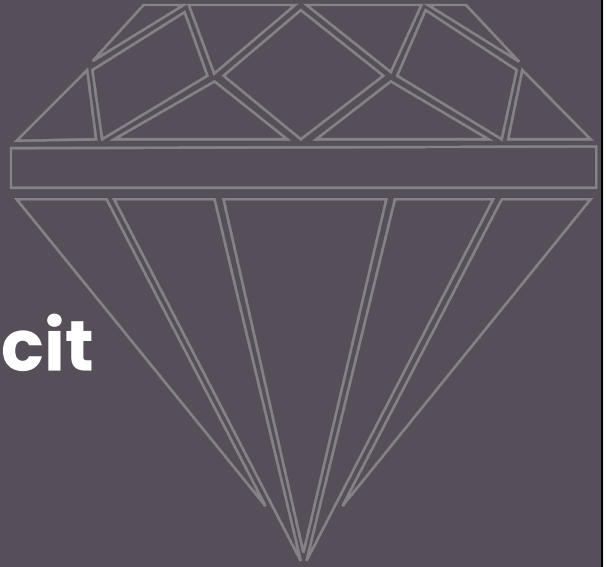
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There are 4 characteristics all of your communication should have in order to be trust-building instead of trust-breaking:

- Explicit
- Practical
- Values-driven
- Caring

Explicit



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As Brené Brown says, “Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.” Make your expectations and boundaries explicit. Share information without fear or judgment.

When I was VP at a previous company, I was responsible for making sure our clients projects were successful. This meant a lot of conversations to identify risks and make sure we were doing what we could to keep each project on track.

We had this one particular project that was plagued by risks. It had been underestimated and the staffing we had originally hoped for didn’t work out because the contract signing process took way longer than usual. The people we had staffed were learning a lot on the job. And one person in particular had been thrown in the deep end where every single tech being used was new to them.

Explicit



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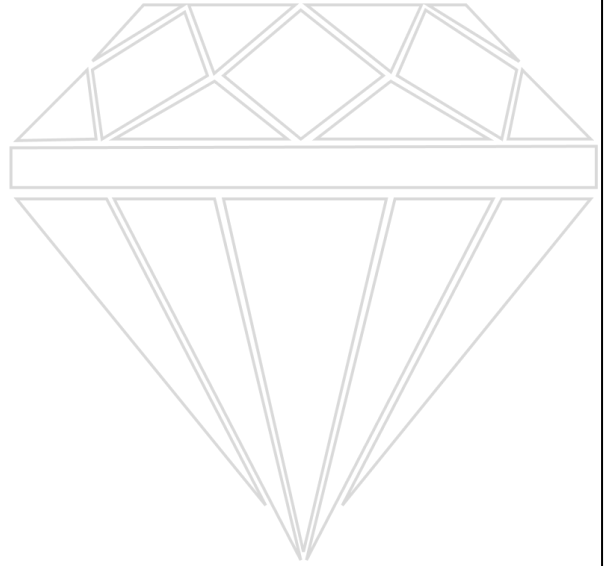
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It became clear after conversations with the client that we'd have to move some staffing around because they were concerned about delivery. I didn't want this person to feel like they had done anything wrong and I didn't want their coworkers to think they had messed up or were unqualified. So I tried to pull in another team member to help out on this project. But in my attempt to protect feelings, I was very unclear with the new team member's manager about team roles and timing. The new person ended up trying to juggle their current project and help out on this new one. They felt unsupported and like they were trying to compensate for the lack of skills in this other person without making it known how much work they were doing.

In my attempt to protect feelings, I damaged trust. Trust of their manager and the team members themselves.

Explicit - strategies

- Share timelines



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If I could go back in time and do this differently. I would have been much more explicit in how I communicated.

I would've shared clear timelines for each person's onboarding and offboarding of the project. Being able to say that we have 1 sprint where the new team member will split time on projects to wrap up what they had in flight and get to know their new client would've made it clear that there wasn't a long-term expectation to juggle or hide their work.

Explicit - strategies

- Share timelines
- Share plan for success and scaffold deliverables



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Related to timelines, I should've shared the plan with scaffolded deliverables with everyone involved.

For example, "The person leaving the project will complete ticket 256 by Feb 18. During that time our new team member will be onboarded. The first thing they'll be working on is ticket 241. We expect they'll be fully up to speed by Feb 23 and then the sprints will continue as planned."

Doesn't that sound much better than "we're swapping these 2 team members"? It inspires a lot more confidence. A step-by-step, with clear easy to follow instructions is much easier to trust than a magical black box.

Explicit - strategies

- Share timelines
- Share plan for success and scaffold deliverables
- Provide detailed explanations, especially with hard messages



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I also would've been much more open about why the staffing was changing. I would've had an open conversation with the person who needed to be rolled off and their manager about the concerns in their delivery. Instead of worrying about them fearing they did something wrong, I could be tell them they didn't do anything wrong and that learning new technologies was always a challenge on a new project. I could share that the project was underestimated and there was no wiggle room left so we needed to onboard someone who already had experience with this tech stack.

And for the person who had to be onboarded, I could explain exactly what was going on and why we needed their skills. Instead of feeling like they had to hide their work to compensate for their coworker, they could've left hyped up knowing that their skills and contributions were appreciated.

In both cases, the team members would've received the same message their managers did and everyone would be better set up to support each other and the project.

Practical



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Next up, trust-building communication is practical. It is realistic, relevant, useful, and actionable. It shows you know what it will take to achieve your goals and that you're committed to the work it takes to get there.

Practical



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I was recently working with an engineering org that had a team with a lot of people passionate about D&I. They self-organized a Diversity in Recruiting Q&A so they could ask questions to their company leadership to find ways to be a more inclusive company and build a more diverse team. During this meeting, when asked about the current demographics of the recruiting pipeline, the recruiting representative said that he hadn't grabbed that data before the meeting. When asked about what the org could do to improve retention of people from marginalized backgrounds, the response given was 'I should answer this since I'm in HR but I don't know enough about it so I'm not going to' and when asked by one of the women engineers about the lack of women in leadership, the response was that "We always look for and hire the best person for the job." The meeting wrapped up with leadership asking the engineers on the call to put in more referrals as a strategy to diversify the pipeline.

Practical



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The information provided in this meeting could be characterized as lacking and vague. The onus for change was put on a group of already marginalized people with less power in the company. It wasn't practical.

Remember every opportunity to build trust is also an opportunity to betray trust.

Practical - strategies

- Always prepare for meetings
 - Plan agendas
 - Know your meeting goal



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How could it have gone differently? Well first, we should always be prepared for our meetings. I know that can feel like a tall order when we have 5+ hours of meetings in a day but if we're delegating our work effectively (which is a whole other talk topic) then we should be able to prepare adequately for the role we play in each meeting.

For meetings in which we are being informed or consulted, reading the meeting description and following up on past meeting notes or async Slack conversations is enough.

For meetings where we are responsible for decisions made, we may have to do a bit more leg work.

And in meetings that we're leading, we should make sure to plan the agenda, have necessary information ready to share, and make sure that we go in with a goal in mind. Being prepared builds trust that we know what we're doing and that we value everyone's time and commitment.

Practical - strategies

- Always prepare for meetings
 - Plan agendas
 - Know your meeting goal
- Set the table



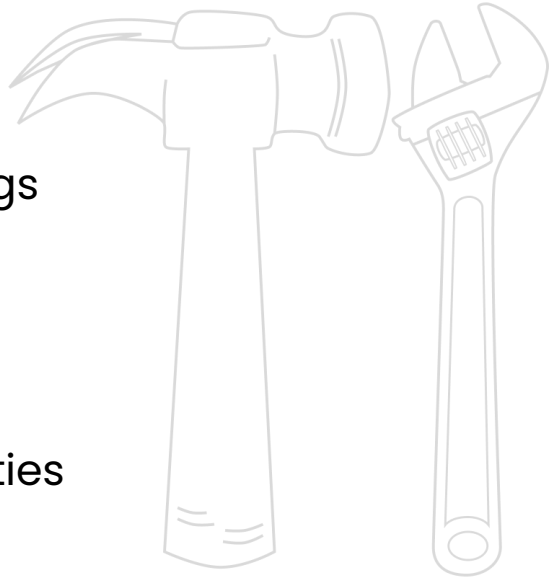
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We should also be prepared to provide context to anyone joining a conversation for the first time. Giving people as much information as possible helps everyone make better decisions.

Practical - strategies

- Always prepare for meetings
 - Plan agendas
 - Know your meeting goal
- Set the table
- Tie decisions back to priorities



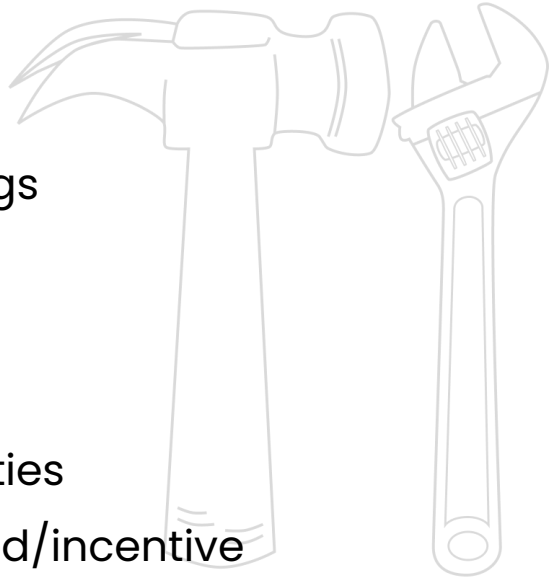
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When talking about decisions, make sure to tie any and all options back to the agreed on priorities. These could be team roadmap priorities, engineering quality priorities, business priorities, or whatever makes sense in the context of your discussion.

Practical - strategies

- Always prepare for meetings
 - Plan agendas
 - Know your meeting goal
- Set the table
- Tie decisions back to priorities
- Explain business value/need/incentive



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Related, make sure to pull back the curtain for your audience and explain the business value of a decision. Help them understand how things fit together. Take the opportunity to inform and educate your team. Helping them see the vision builds their trust in your competence and their contributions toward that vision.

Values-driven



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It's one thing to say we value integrity, honesty, accountability, etc. But if our actions and how we communicate don't align with those values, then clearly we don't value them. When we're communicating, no matter how big or small the message is, we need to walk the walk

Values-driven



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I worked with a team that had a high number of incidents. It was a microservice architecture that had grown a bit unwieldy and their systems were tightly coupled to some upstream services. This meant that when some seemingly innocuous changes upstream got shipped to production, our systems could be broken. The good news was that not all of our systems were mission-critical for our customers. Or so we thought.

Our policy was to update the status page of our API only if the incident was customer impacting and high severity. We had a thumbnailing service that took some assets a customer uploaded and created small, performant thumbnails for rendering in our UI. And one day we had an incident where all thumbnailing was broken. Annoying, but not show-stopping. So we didn't update the status page while we investigated. And this led to some very angry customers. We didn't realize that some of our enterprise customers used the thumbnails as an indication that we were done processing their assets. So when no thumbnails showed up, they assumed that our entire pipeline was broken.

Values-driven



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It was only after the customer support tickets started rolling in did we update the status page with a very brief message that thumbnailing was down. But at that point, the customers were upset about their SLAs and assumed we were trying to dodge accountability by blaming it on thumbnailing. We learned a lot that day about the value of status pages and how quickly we could damage trust with our customers.

Values-driven - strategies

- Acknowledge shortcomings



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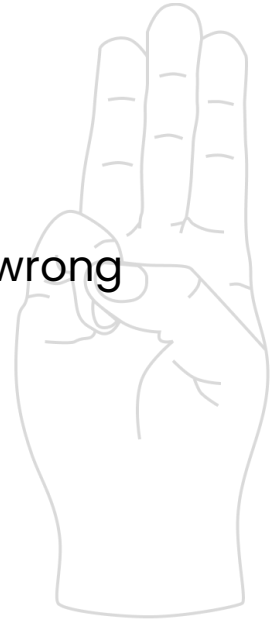
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How could we have used this incident and our status page to build trust with our customers instead?

First, we should have updated our status page right away. Admitting when something is wrong creates trust that we're not ignoring a problem or trying to dodge accountability. It's ok to not have all the answers right away because honesty is more important than being right when it comes to trust.

Values-driven - strategies

- Acknowledge shortcomings
- Honest explanations when things go wrong



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We also should've provided some more info for our customers about how thumbnailing fits into the process. We learned after the fact that thumbnailing was the indication for them that their assets were finished and so when it broke they thought the whole system was broken. If we could've provided them a bit more explanation, they would have more trust that we weren't making excuses to avoid SLA penalties.

Values-driven - strategies

- Acknowledge shortcomings
- Honest explanations when things go wrong
- Offer and seek suggestions to remedy



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During an incident, the communication flow is pretty one-sided but in other difficult situations, offering and seeking suggestions to repair harm shows a lot of integrity.

Values-driven - strategies

- Acknowledge shortcomings
- Honest explanations when things go wrong
- Offer and seek suggestions to remedy
- Start conversations from place of curiosity
 - Why do we have different understandings/assumptions?



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Starting hard conversations from a place of curiosity leads to better long-term outcomes. We learn more when we are committed to finding solutions that work for everyone rather than defending ourselves from blame.

Caring



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All of our communication should show care for others. Even when we have to deliver a hard message, we can build trust by showing that we care how the other person is feeling, that we are listening to their feedback, and that we're doing what's best for everyone even if there is a compromise.



Caring



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Making decisions about teams and organizational structure is never easy. I'm sure a lot of us have been through a dreaded re-org and remember how much it sucks. An engineering organization I was working with needed to realign their teams around the company goals. The goals had changed over the years and the boundaries between some teams were fuzzy and overlapped which caused confusion. None of the teams themselves were changing but how their work was organized and measured would be. And the team names were being updated to reflect this.

Overall, not the biggest deal but it was still a change. And after the pandemic of the last 2 years and the fast-paced changes in a growing startup, all changes feel like big changes. So when the VP dropped a doc in the managers channel one afternoon with the new names, goals, and performance metrics then asked the managers to announce it, they felt blind-sided.

Caring



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Sometimes a decision has been made and won't be changed. But how the decision is communicated is just as important as the decision itself. Showing care for the folks affected can build trust that you had their best interests at heart and advocated for them.

Caring - strategies

- Validate feelings



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Using more caring communication when delivering the news about the new team names and goals could've maintained trust with managers and helped them not feel betrayed. Acknowledging and validating feelings makes people feel supported and helps them to regulate their emotions. It creates a psychologically safe place to discuss thoughts and feelings about new information. Recognizing that the new team organization felt like a surprise and like a big change would've opened the door to a conversation about the change itself and what parts of day-to-day operations would actually be affected.

Caring - strategies

- Validate feelings
- Plan time for processing



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Instead of sharing the doc and asking managers to announce it, there should've been time planned for managers to digest the new information before sharing it with the team. As leaders, we should always plan time in our communication timelines for people to process and provide feedback to big news. Give space for the shock to wear off so that they can see the value in a decision and help you communicate that more broadly.

Caring - strategies

- Validate feelings
- Plan time for processing
- Humanize your team



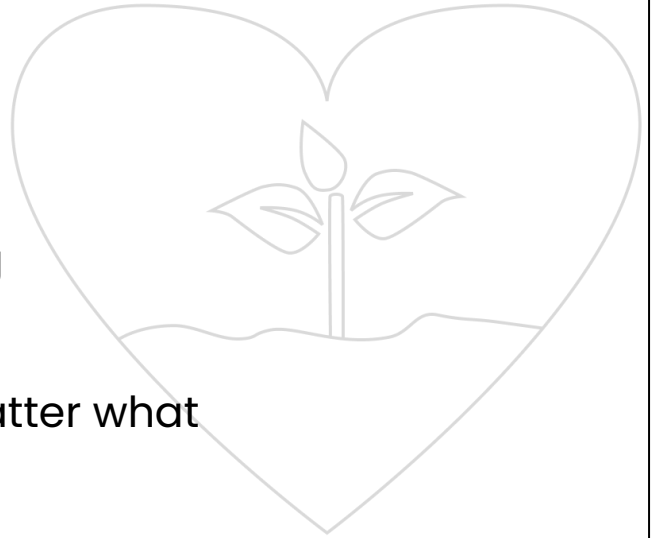
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And find opportunities to humanize your team. For yourself and for others. In this situation, you could propose more time for the rollout and advocate for your managers by talking about how swamped each of them are with hiring, performance reviews, and their team's current project workloads.

Caring - strategies

- Validate feelings
- Plan time for processing
- Humanize your team
- Timely responses no matter what



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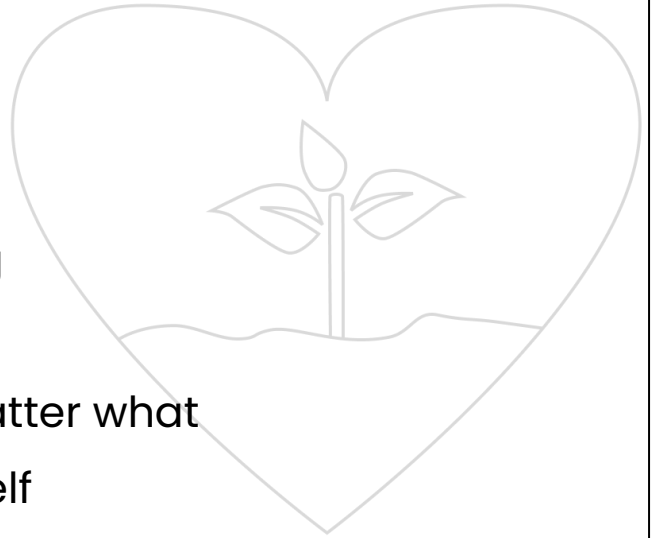
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Remember that trust is built in small moments. And there are smaller ways to show you care too. Consistent communication and respect for other people's time is caring.

Timely responses go a long way. I know we all have a lot going on, lots of meetings and other things competing for our attention. But just a quick "Ack" of some kind can go a long way so that your team feels heard. It can be an emoji response or a short, sweet note letting them know you're busy but you saw this. I like to respond with something like "I have meetings the rest of the afternoon but I set a Slack reminder to follow up on this in the morning" and then set the reminder.

Caring - strategies

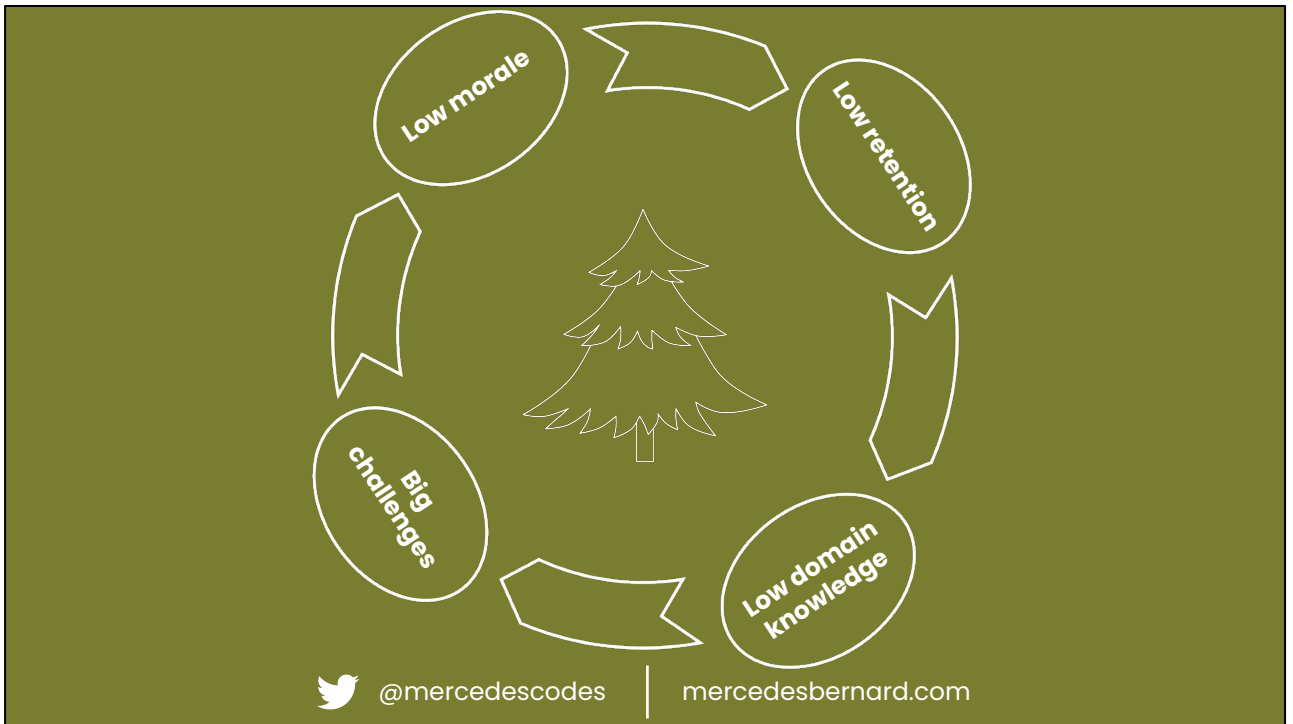
- Validate feelings
- Plan time for processing
- Humanize your team
- Timely responses no matter what
- Set reminders for yourself



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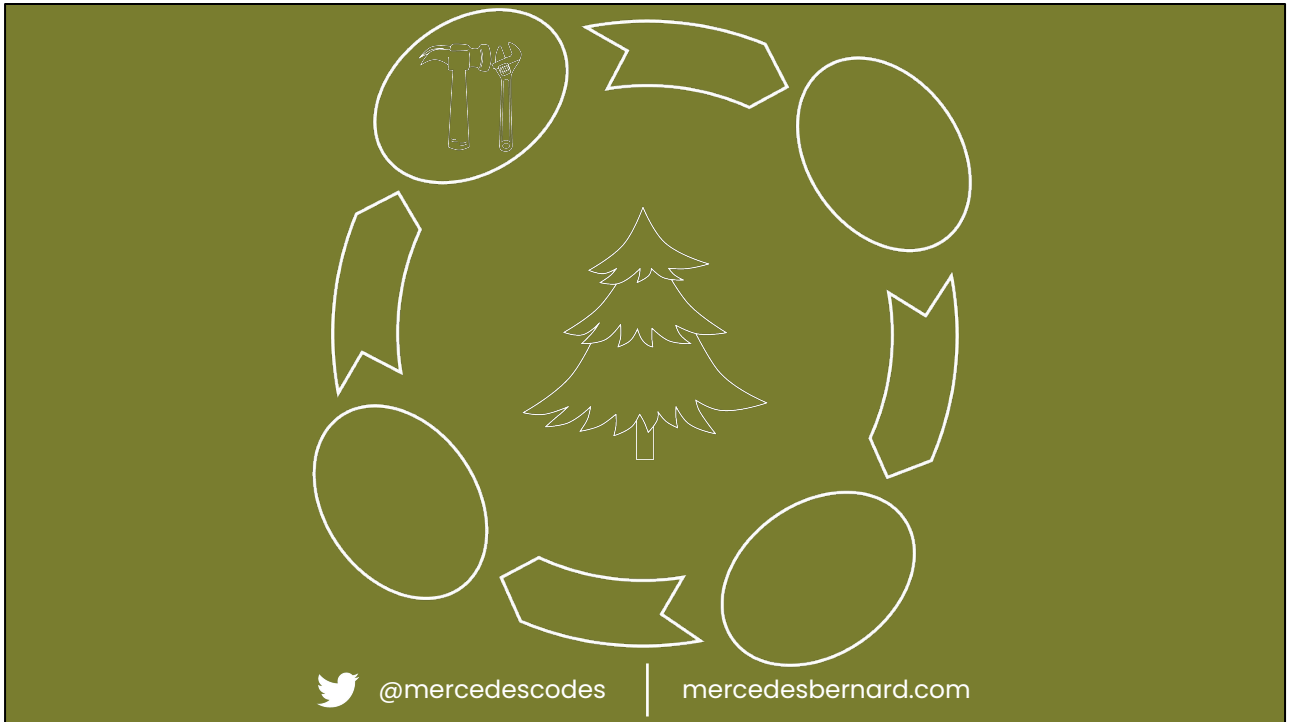
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Which leads me to the next point, create a reminder system that works for you so that communication doesn't slip through the cracks. Use Slack reminders. Snooze emails in Google. Put a big pink post-it on your screen before you take lunch. Find a system that works for you and use it to remind you to follow-up on all the things you've promised company leadership and your team. Don't let stuff slip through the cracks.



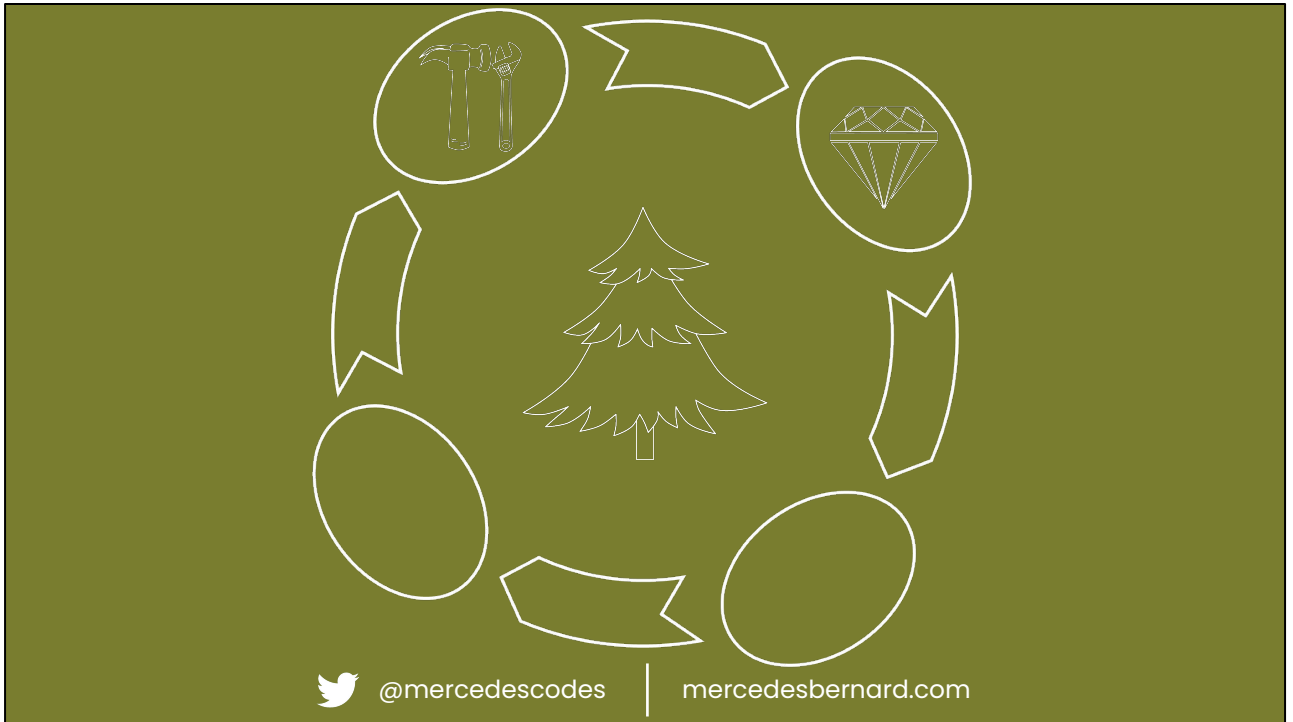
Remember how we started this session talking about how changing priorities can lead to this cycle? Using the strategies that we talked about, we can break this cycle.

When a priority changes, we should openly communicate that change with our affected team members as soon as possible.



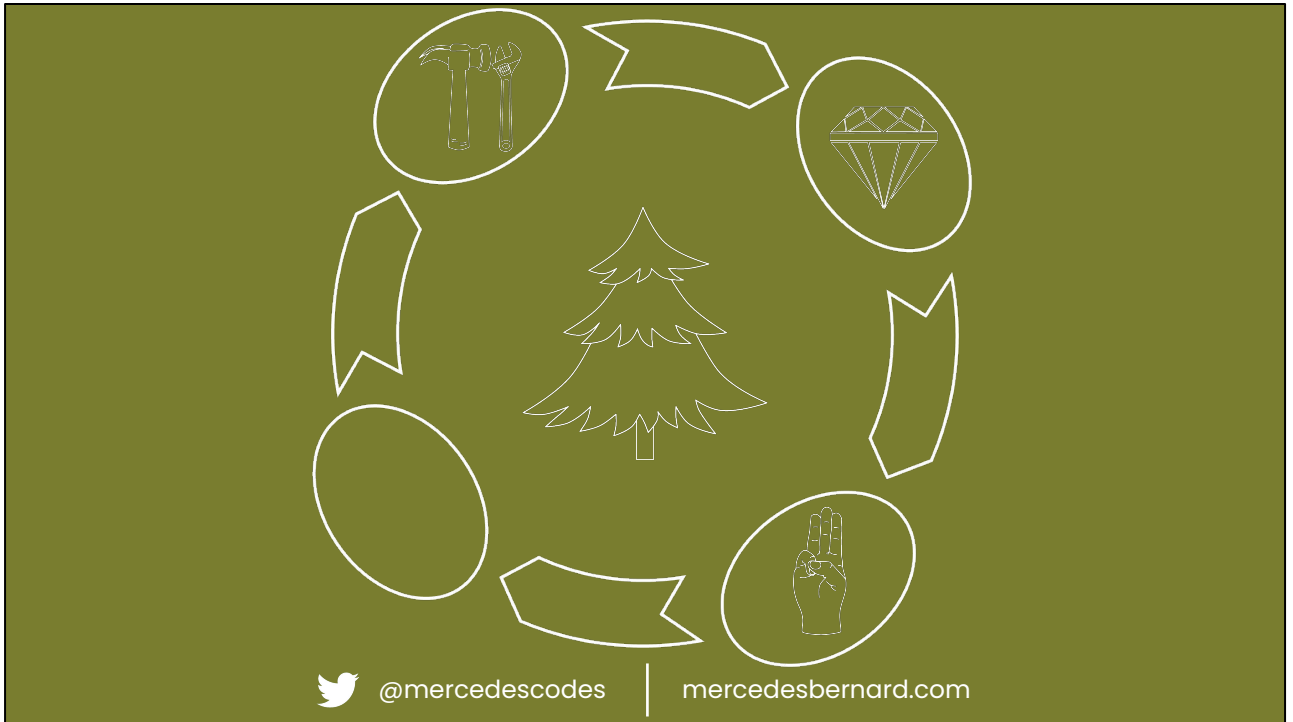
We should prepare for the conversation and have answers to their likely questions ready.

- Why is this change more important than what we are currently working on?
- How does it help us reach our business goal?

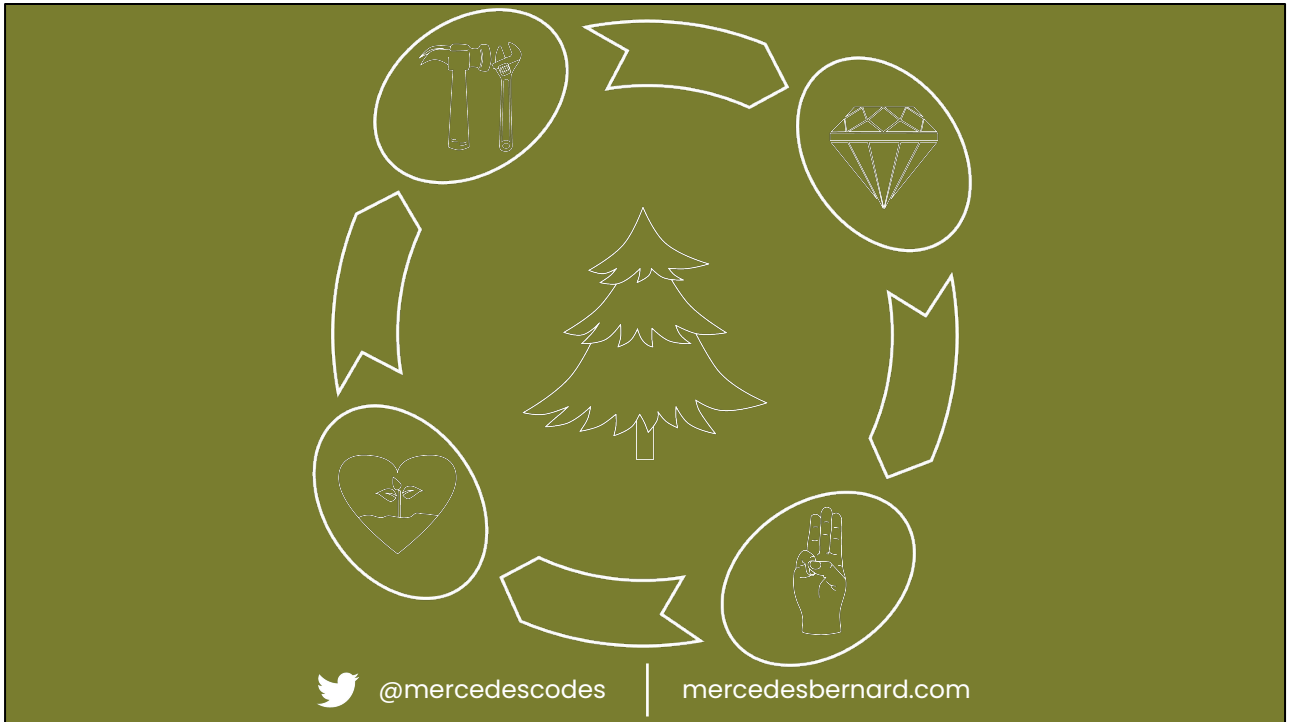


We should share as much information as we can.

- The timelines, the expected milestones
- How we'll ramp down work on the current project
- What we're going to do about the tech debt that we've just incurred



We shouldn't shy away from the fact that we know these changing priorities make it challenging to ship work. Ask for feedback and ideas on how we can organize our work so we can successfully plan for changing priorities. Because we know it's going to continue happening—that's the reality of a tech business.



And validate how frustrating it is to have to switch context. Make your team feel seen and heard. Give them time to react and process the news of the dropped project and the upcoming new one. Find ways to help them feel excited about their new work — skills they'll learn, new leadership opportunities, a tech they've been wanting to work with, etc.



These conversations are hard. And leading these conversations is even harder. But every conversation is a chance to build trust and create an open and collaborative culture where people thrive.

Acknowledgements

- John Gottman & The Gottman Institute
- David Horsager's 8 Pillars of Trust
- Brené Brown's BRAVING Inventory
- Charles Feltman's 4 Distinctions of Trust



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If you're interested in digging deeper into research on trust, these are some of the resources I used and there's a lot out there.

Thank you!

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