



A LEADERSHIP SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Leadership Trust Audit

5 Warning Signs Your Communication Style Is Costing You Influence

*Titles reflect authority.
Leadership reflects respect.*

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Respect isn't handed out with a title or an org chart position — it's earned, conversation by conversation. Research on leadership trust consistently points to the same conclusion: teams don't just follow leaders because of authority; they respect leaders because of the trust and confidence created through how those leaders communicate.

The five warning signs below aren't about intent — most leaders who show these patterns are working hard and mean well. They're about habits that quietly erode trust, credibility, and influence over time, often without the leader ever realizing it. Read through each one honestly, use the self-check prompts to reflect on your own team, and notice which signs feel a little too familiar.

WARNING SIGN #1

You Command Instead of Coach

You find yourself telling people what to do rather than asking what they think needs to happen. Direction flows one way — down. Your team rarely pushes back, rarely asks “why,” and rarely offers an opinion you didn't ask for.

Why it matters: Leaders who communicate like coaches — encouraging input, framing goals in terms of “we” rather than “I,” and inviting the team to define what success requires — build far deeper trust than leaders who simply issue instructions. When direction only flows downward, it signals low benevolence trust: people stop believing you're genuinely interested in their thinking.

SELF-CHECK

Do you ask your team what they think is needed before telling them what to do?

How often does your team ask you “why” questions — never, rarely, sometimes, or often?

WARNING SIGN #2

Your Feedback Is Generic, Not Impact-Based

“Good job” and “nice work” are easy to say and easy to forget. If your feedback rarely connects a specific action to a specific result, your team has no real evidence that you're paying attention to their contributions.

Why it matters: Feedback that ties actual impact to action — “Because of your work on this, we saved \$40,000” — is remembered and repeated. Broader research on leader communication has found that positive, recognition-rich communication is directly associated with employees feeling more respected, more valued, and more engaged. Ambiguity and vague praise don't produce that effect; specific, impact-based feedback does.

SELF-CHECK

Can you recall the last time you tied feedback to a concrete, measurable outcome?

Would your team describe your feedback as specific, or as generic and interchangeable?

WARNING SIGN #3**Mistakes Trigger Blame, Not Learning**

When something goes wrong, the first instinct in the room is to find who's responsible rather than what can be learned. People start managing your reaction instead of managing the problem.

Why it matters: Teams that treat mistakes as learning opportunities — rather than events to be punished — build the kind of psychological safety that trust is built on. When mistakes are treated punitively instead, people begin hiding problems rather than surfacing them early, which erodes both trust and performance over time.

SELF-CHECK

When your team makes a mistake, do you discuss it as a learning opportunity — never, rarely, sometimes, or often?

Does your team bring you bad news quickly, or do they sit on it?

WARNING SIGN #4

Your Team Goes Quiet When It Matters Most

Meetings are calm. Too calm. Disagreement, when it exists, happens in hallway conversations and side channels — never in the room with you. Concerns about a decision surface after it's already been implemented, if they surface at all.

Why it matters: Silence is not the same as alignment. Research on trust in leadership shows that when communication is guarded rather than open, employees stop voicing dissent and concern directly to leadership — a strong signal of low trust, not high harmony. Leaders often mistake this quiet for buy-in, when it's actually withdrawal.

SELF-CHECK

Do team members express differences of opinion in front of you, or only privately?

Do people share concerns about your plans and decisions with you directly?

WARNING SIGN #5

You're the Bottleneck, Not the Multiplier

You're uneasy handing important work to people outside your direct line of sight. When you're away, critical duties default to whoever is physically closest to you rather than the person best suited for it. Every request — even a simple day off — gets a follow-up question.

Why it matters: Trust in leadership is built on three pillars: ability, benevolence, and integrity. A leader who can't delegate meaningfully, especially across distance, is often unconsciously signaling low trust in their team's ability — and that signal travels both ways. Teams sense when they're not trusted, and they respond by trusting back less. Consistency between a leader's stated values ("I trust my team") and their actions (who actually gets the important work) is what authentic leadership research identifies as the foundation of follower trust.

SELF-CHECK

Do you feel comfortable delegating important work to team members you don't see every day?

When you're away, do you assign key duties across your whole team, or only to those closest to you?

When someone requests time off, do you grant it without probing why it's needed?

Where Does This Leave You?

None of these five signs, on their own, mean you're a poor leader. But if two or more of them felt uncomfortably accurate, your communication style may already be quietly costing you influence — in the form of a team that complies rather than commits and tolerates you rather than trusts and respects you.

A quick gut-check:

- 0–1 signs felt true — your communication is largely working in your favor.
- 2–3 signs felt true — trust is likely uneven across your team; small shifts will compound quickly.
- 4–5 signs felt true — your team's trust and respect are being spent faster than they're being earned, and it's worth addressing directly.

MY REFLECTION NOTES

SELF-CHECK

Which warning signs felt most familiar, and what's one specific moment that comes to mind?

NEXT STEP

Recognizing these patterns is the easy part. Shifting them — while running a team, hitting numbers, and managing everything else on your plate — is where coaching makes the difference. If one or more of these signs hit close to home, let's talk about what a more respected, more trusted version of your leadership communication could look like.

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