BREAKING THE TRUST BARRIER

How Leaders Close the Gaps for High Performance

J V Venable

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More Praise for *Breaking the Trust Barrier*

"As a leader in situations that are literally life-or-death, JV brings street cred to the challenge of leading high-performance teams. His examples come from the physics of close-formation aerial maneuvers and the incredibly small tolerances that make the difference between good and extraordinary. With quiet humor and humility, he uses those stories to offer insight and actionable advice leader to leader."

—Mark E. White, Principal, Global Consulting Chief Technology Officer, Deloitte Consulting, LLP

"JV does an amazing job of sharing powerful real-life examples that we can implement in our organizations. A fascinating read that delivers a message so powerful yet practical. This book should be required reading for all leaders looking to take their teams to new heights!"

—Bob Korzeniewski, Executive Vice President for Strategic Development, Verisign Inc., 2000-2007

"Even though this was written by the 'competition,' I found *Breaking the Trust Barrier* to be a great read. JV delivers a powerful message in a way that will stay with you and your team for years to come. Drafting is not just a process for building and leading high-performance teams; it's a pathway to success."

—Rob "Ice" Ffield, Blue Angels Flight Leader/Commanding Officer, 2001–2002, and President and CEO, CATSHOT Group, LLC

"*Breaking the Trust Barrier* is a leader's must-read! JV masterfully combines his Air Force experiences with thoughtful insights from commanding the world-famous Thunderbirds to create a road map for building real trust. He talks so honestly about commitment, loyalty, and trust that his message easily translates to any business or leadership environment. I honestly can't wait to apply much of what I have read with my own team."

—Dennis M. Satyshur, Director of Golf Operations, Caves Valley Golf Club

"JV clearly articulates the key to his success leading multiple organizations and gives readers a glimpse of the challenge, excitement, and emotion of leading a high-performance jet demonstration team. I followed JV in command of the Thunderbirds and was able to build on the principles he established. Leaders at all levels will find this book inspiring, practical, and helpful in accelerating their leadership skills."

—Richard "Spad" McSpadden, Commander/Leader, USAF Thunderbirds, 2002–2004, and Senior Director, Hewlett Packard Enterprise

"Multiple commands and his stint as the lead pilot of the USAF Thunderbirds have given Colonel JV Venable powerful insights that he has captured in *Breaking the Trust Barrier*. His imagery will sear the themes of this book in your memory. His conception of trust is striking, memorable, and entirely new to the literature of leadership."

—Dr. Charles Ping, President Emeritus, Ohio University

"Captivating stories within *Breaking the Trust Barrier* make the process you'll find inside absolutely indelible. This is an inspiring book and, if you're like me, you'll start putting JV's techniques to work the moment you set it down. Whether you're a senior executive or just getting your footing as a leader, this is a must-read!"

—Linda Chambliss, Vice President, Global Account Operations, STARTEK

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JV Venable

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Breaking the Trust Barrier

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This book is dedicated to the men and women
of the US Air Force Thunderbirds of 2000 and 2001.

You served as an inspiration to millions
of Americans during our time on the team,
and you still do that for me today.

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Foreword: Can Born Leaders Teach Others to Lead?

Robert L. Jolles

Bestselling author of
Customer Centered Selling

JV Venable is a born leader. You'd sense it if you ever stood near him. You'd know it if you ever heard him speak. You'd feel it if you ever shook his hand. His backstory is inspiring, and his accomplishments are amazing, but can a born leader like JV teach *you* to lead others?

Many leaders have been dogged by this same question. After all, if these skills are so innate, can they be consciously laid out in a process for others to learn and apply? Typically, those who are blessed with natural skills struggle to teach others the skills they so effortlessly command. This is because the skills that come so naturally are ones they have never really had to stop and assess.

If someone put a golf club in your hand and you could easily hit the ball 300 yards down the middle of the fairway, would you stop and study that swing? You might simply enjoy the gift you were born with. Now imagine that this same person decided to try to teach others how to duplicate that swing. It's no coincidence that those who are born with certain gifts—academic or physical—typically make poor teachers.

Ironically, it's far more common to find that the most effective teachers and coaches are not born with the skills they teach. Those skills did not come naturally to them. As a matter of fact, they learned those skills the hard way—by trial and error, bit by bit. Being consciously aware of every move you make allows you to naturally verbalize those lessons to others.

Every now and then, however, someone comes along who is the exception to this rule, and in this case that person is JV Venable. He was born to lead, and he was given the opportunity to study his gift from his time as the commander and demonstration leader of the US Air Force Thunderbirds. He led a 1,100-member combat group on flying missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he was an Air Force officer and fighter pilot with 26 years on the point. It is the combination of the instinctive skills and the conscious understanding of exactly what those skills are that can make someone an exceptional teacher.

What makes this book a treasure is not based on JV's accomplishments but rather on the way JV can help *you* accomplish great things. In *Breaking the Trust Barrier,* JV has successfully and clearly articulated the leadership skills necessary for you to be successful with *your* teams. How does he do this? He inspires, entertains, and motivates you through his ability to not just tell a story but to provide a clear moral to that story and tie that moral to a defined leadership action.

JV doesn't just want to tell you how to be a more effective leader; he sincerely wants you to succeed at it. He starts by getting you to look at your team and identify gaps that can cause a lack of competence. Then he walks you

through the commitment you extend to those you lead, the often small acts of loyalty that further the interests of those behind you. There is a big surge of energy when, due to the trust you have created, you can lead others to take the drag from your draft.

This book offers far more than just inspirational stories that generate an idea or two. In fact, what's presented here are repeatable, step-by-step processes that are measurable and therefore implementable. In turn you learn a systematic approach to leadership that can be adapted instantly to fit virtually any situation or scenario. Seek more in the pages that follow, and you will be handsomely rewarded.

There is one learning demon that you'll need to beware of—especially if you are already a good leader. This is the voice in your head that whispers: *I'm already an effective leader. Isn't that good enough?* Being too good to learn more or to think you can't improve on your leadership skills just doesn't make sense.

When I was a 21-year-old insurance agent for New York Life, I learned an invaluable lesson that I'd like to share. It was decided that we would try filming the insurance agents and give them an opportunity to evaluate their performances. In addition, I would provide feedback. I was pretty green, but I was coached on what to look for, and I was ready to go.

A form was placed in everyone's mailbox. It spoke about this new and rare opportunity to view one's approach to selling and get some feedback. It was a mandatory exercise for all 21 of the recently hired apprentice field underwriters (AFUs) but optional for the other 57 agents. Of these 57 agents, 52 were tenured agents and five were

Chairman's Council agents—the most successful agents in the country representing the top 2.5 percent of the sales force. At the bottom of the form, to help with scheduling, it was requested that all agents respond either yes or no. What followed was something I will never forget.

Of the 78 forms that were returned, as expected all 21 AFUs requested various filming dates and times. Not one of the 52 tenured agents chose to take advantage of this learning experience, and, ironically, the only agents who wanted to participate were all five Chairman's Council agents. In other words, the top agents in the country were the only ones who wanted to learn how to be even better agents. But wait, there's more.

Many of the AFUs were a little put off by the experience, going through the motions and casually nodding at the feedback they received. When the Chairman's Council agents came through, each one had a pad of paper and never stopped asking questions and taking notes. Each of the Chairman's Council agents—five of our best in the country—came to the filming obsessed with getting better.

What those five agents taught me was that there are many common traits that successful people share. One trait that seemed of paramount importance was a desire to improve, no matter what one's current level of success might be.

Now let's apply this lesson to this book. You've accomplished the hard part; you've picked this book up. You may already be a good leader—but reading this book will help you be an even *better* leader. You'll need to think about it and digest the messages. You'll want to try to implement the lessons you will learn, and if you do that, you'll see your

leadership skills improve. You'll want to thank JV Venable for writing this book because he will make you a better leader. You've come this far, now go even further and let a born leader and exceptional teacher take you further than you could ever imagine.

Preface

The most demanding and gratifying leadership role of my life was my time as the commander and demonstration leader of the United States Air Force (USAF) Thunderbirds. My selection for that position was the culmination of a lifelong dream. The passion for flying began when I was four years old, standing on the roof of our home in Fairfield, Alabama. Three Kingfisher biplanes came screaming overhead so low that I could see the pilots waving at me. I got so excited I almost fell off the roof. By the age of nine, that passion had shifted from flying, to flying fighters, to leading the Thunderbirds.

For the first dozen or so years after college, I lived a dream that few rock-and-roll stars can compete with and flew the F-16 all over the world. About the time I could apply for the commander/leader position on the Thunderbirds, I ran into a wall like few others: I was diagnosed with cancer. My family history is rife with the disease, and after a second operation I was told to prepare for the battle of my lifetime—and that I would never fly again. Putting that childhood dream back up on the horizon helped me recover from one of my biggest setbacks, and capturing the

dream came through a series of miracles that I will never be able to explain. What I found when I got there exceeded every expectation I had framed through the whims of adolescence.

The annual turnover within the Thunderbirds was significant. We lost a third of our enlisted force: half the officers and, with them, half the pilots who flew the demonstration every year. That programmed attrition forced us to train a new team from the most basic level forward at the end of every demonstration season.

In just three and a half months of training, we took men and women who had never worked together and methodically developed the kind of trust that allowed them to thrive at the extremes of performance and risk. We really did trust one another with our lives, and the method the team developed to ingrain that kind of dynamic was nothing short of phenomenal. By the time I came on board, our organization had been refined by 48 generations of Thunderbird teams that streamed seamlessly into the one I led. The process that lineage passed on to our team was the best I've ever known. My goal in writing this book is to share the steps for generating trust at this level—trust that can further the nature of your team or workplace, no matter what you do.

Along the way I intend to engage a bias you may be carrying—that leading in the military is somehow different from leading in your world. Even in combat, getting people to deliver what your team needs depends on something much more than blind obedience. It relies on your deliberately building the foundational elements that compel the desire to follow. The biggest of those elements is trust.

All the stories in this book are true, and while many of the names are those of actual people, others were changed to protect individual and organizational trajectories beyond our time together. The world of the fighter pilot is big on call signs (nicknames), and you will find many in the pages that follow. Some are simple, some are creative, and some are designed to make a relatively intense occupation a little more enjoyable.

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Breaking the
Trust Barrier

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Introduction

Trust. No team or organization can excel over the long haul without it, and for many leaders the path to establishing it is anything but clear. Trust is the willingness to put yourself or your team at risk with the belief that another will follow through with a task, in a role, or with a mission. Expressions of trust that lack an element of risk are merely expressions.

Because you picked up this book, I will make some assumptions about you. You are a leader who cares about the performance and well-being of your people, but you sense that something—maybe gaps in trust or communication—are holding you and your team back. The good news is that you've taken a great step toward increasing the cohesion and performance of your team by just reading the introduction to this book. With each successive page, you will learn a bit more about a predictable, repeatable process for building trust within your team—a process that begins with an individual's desire for commitment from you and ends with his or her trust in you. Once you have finished

the last page, you will see the process everywhere you turn and in every facet of your life.

I will warn you right now that there are no shortcuts or quick solutions offered herein. As a matter of fact, I will ask you to take risks and move to engage your team in ways others might consider idealistic or unnecessary, but I promise you will be rewarded for your efforts.

Biases: The Barrier to Trust

Whom do you trust, and what made you cross that threshold? Whom don't you trust, and what keeps you from believing in that person? Very often the decision comes not just from what we see but from the events and experiences stored in the processors in our heads and our hearts. Any relationship begins with an introduction, and that first impression is lasting for reasons that are often hard to understand. Consciously or unconsciously, some facet about that person matches something inside of us—something that was coded in us during adolescence or that we absorbed (or coded in ourselves) along the path of our adult lives. Call them predispositions or intuition if you'd like, but, right or wrong, biases reside in all of us.

> **biases**
> Internal layers of protection that help us resist putting our physical, emotional, or financial well-being at risk.

Biases are internal layers of protection that help us resist putting our physical, emotional, or financial well-being at risk. How you dress, act, and sound fit an internal mold in another's mind—a mold cast by a whole host of characters and events, good and bad, in their lives. Where

you were raised and your culture, dialect, manners, and mannerisms match biases that directly or unconsciously shape how you view others—and how others view you. Biases form the barrier to trust we are up against as leaders.

Breaking the Trust Barrier

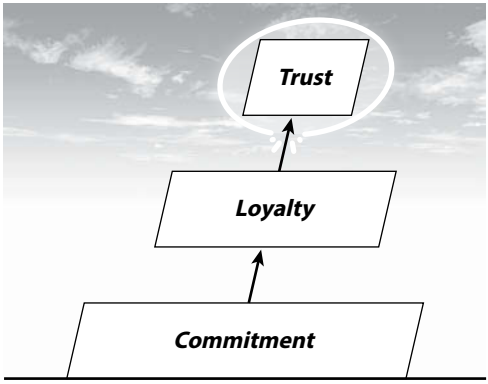
The challenging thing about biases is that you may never fully understand what they are in your own mind, much less in the minds of your people. With that as backdrop, there is little use in dwelling on the indicators, or rationales, for biases—we can leave them to people who study behavior. Our job as leaders is to overcome biases by building a portfolio of seamless actions and engagements that inspires our people to write new code—code that will incrementally entice them to close the trust gap.

We will talk a great deal about gaps in this book, but the critical thing to remember is that closing the gaps on trust relies on the *whole you*. It begins with your commitment to the individuals on your team—your willingness to actively engage and listen to the people you lead—and then your moving on the interests and passions you discover within those engagements to foster loyalty.

The effort you spend building commitment and loyalty will take you to the threshold, but closing beyond the trust barrier relies on pulling your team forward with your integrity and your deeply seated principles (see Breaking Through).

This book steps you through the process of closing gaps by introducing a new system of leadership called *drafting.* You have seen the aerodynamic phenomenon at work

Breaking Through: *First Commitment, Then Loyalty, and Finally Trust*



through the V formations of migratory birds, a train of speed skaters, stock car racers, and the likes, where the efficiencies and effects of teams are magnified with proximity.

My two years on the point of the Thunderbirds offered some incredible insights on trust—and the real effects and power of drafting. It was that experience—and that incredible team—that served as my inspiration for writing this book. Through 26 years of service and two tours of combat duty, I can say without reservation that every team I flew with or served on relied on trust. But as you read through each chapter, you will discover what I did about Thunderbirds: that our mission required a level of trust that few organizations will ever know or enjoy—it really was something else.

Our process for building and sustaining trust is laid out here for you and your team. Read on, take hold of the reins, and break your barriers to trust.

PART I

PART I

Are There Gaps on Your Team?

A leader has three primary roles: set the direction—the vision for the team; attract and retain the best talent you can find; and build and protect the corporate culture.

—Robert Walter
Founder and Former CEO
Cardinal Health

Leo Van Wart is a professional golfer who helped propel Notah Begay III to the ranks of the Professional Golfers Association of America. Leo was hired to run a golf complex just outside of Las Vegas, and shortly after he arrived he hopped in a golf cart and drove the expanse of his new course. Many fairways and greens were in disrepair, and the desert had all but reclaimed his new driving range. When he stopped by the grill and sampled its marquee item—a flavorless cheeseburger—he had a complete picture of why the course was bleeding money. The biggest gap he found in the operation was ownership. No one on the small team took pride of ownership in the work—there was no sense of cohesion or unity. To them the course was just a job. Does that sound familiar?

A *gap* is a physical or emotional distance caused by a lack of competence, a lack of confidence, or an unmet social need. No matter what your profession is or how impressive your team may be to an outsider, you know

that there are gaps keeping your team from maximizing its potential. That is true for every organization—and it was certainly true for the Thunderbirds.

We billed ourselves as *the Air Force's number one recruiting tool,* and our books said that more than 10 million people experienced the Thunderbirds in one way or another every year. We put on an airshow that was first-rate. By all appearances the team was firing on every cylinder when I came on board, but shortly thereafter I found a few things that were hard to reconcile.

The Air Force Recruiting Service ran a series of high-profile television commercials the year I took command, and the Thunderbirds—the Air Force's number one recruiting tool—was not in a single frame. That was telling. The more I listened, the more I heard my new team complain about strained, deteriorating, or nonexistent relationships with the Air Force Recruiting Service, with our parent public affairs organization, and with other offices and agencies we should have been supporting or whose support we needed to conduct our mission.

The more I sought out the math surrounding that 10-million-people-per-year figure, the more elusive it became, and our metrics, methods, and alliances were not adding up to that powerful slogan. Positive exposure to the general public was our mission, and even under that banner you could find issues. We had endured a series of aircraft mishaps and personal conduct issues in our more recent history, which caused senior leaders to pull signature maneuvers and formations from the demonstration. The

trends were clear, and our critical metrics were headed in the wrong direction.

Gaps in the Thunderbird Operation

The team was running hard, but our laser focus on operations—on flying the demonstration—allowed gaps to develop in the performance of our overall mission, and we were falling short of our real potential to reach the public. Again, from the outside we were holding our own, but we clearly had three organizational gaps in performance: outreach, complacency, and discipline.

Spotting the Gaps on Your Team

If you are new to an operation, just walking the grounds will give you a great deal of perspective. If you have been with the team for a while, get away for long enough to gain a bit of perspective, then come back and take a fresh look. As you move about, make sure you take the time to watch and listen to your people. Most of us get elevated into leadership roles on our ability to speak up, but the move to a position on point requires an adjustment. One of the best pieces of advice I received for spotting gaps was from Brigadier General Thomas "Griz" Wolters, USAF, Retired: "Never miss the opportunity to shut the [*expletive*] up." Your people will talk freely if you let them, and their words will paint a picture of the exceptional areas—and the gaps—in your operation. Once you have an assessment in hand, you can build or refine your team's goals, elevate its trajectory, and craft a plan to close the gaps to the point where you break the barrier to trust.

The Road Ahead

We ease into the process of drafting by giving you a vivid glimpse of how it all began. From there we step into the Thunderbird hangar and show you how we took people who didn't know one another and had never flown formation acrobatics before and, in a little more than three months, moved them from commitment to unqualified trust. There is a surge in momentum waiting for you just ahead, so strap yourself in and let's get started.

CHAPTER 1

Draft Your Team to Trust

It was a gorgeous day in the middle of the Thunderbirds' show season, and we were flying over some of the most breathtaking countryside I had ever seen. The radios were crisp, and from the moment we released brakes we were hitting all the marks in a compressed maneuver sequence we had been perfecting for months.

The four of us completed our reposition behind the crowd line and then stabilized for just a second. The moment we passed over those 40,000 people, I pulled the trigger on the next maneuver. The 4 G* pull that started our trail-to-diamond cloverloop stabilized, and just as we approached the vertical I called the three jets behind me to move from their trail position to our signature diamond.

At the start of training season, the distance between jets was the same as we had flown throughout our

*Short for *gravitational force,* or *g-force:* A measurement of the type of acceleration that causes weight; 1 G is equal to the force of gravity experienced under normal conditions. At 1 G a pilot's head and helmet weigh approximately 20 pounds. They effectively weigh 180 pounds at 9 Gs.

operational lives, but now the formations were so tight—and the gaps between us so small—that I thought I could *feel* a shift as the left and right wingmen moved into position. So far as I knew, the surge that came with Rick "Chase" Boutwell and Jon "Skid" Greene moving into their respective formations was emotional, but it felt like they were literally lifting the wings of my jet.

As each accelerated into position that day, a very subtle shift took hold of our trajectory. The pressure came on as if a giant hand were pushing up on my left wing. The ensuing right turn began to take us away from a pure vertical loop, and, almost unconsciously, I countered with the call for "a little left turn" and the slightest amount of pressure on the stick to bring us back on plumb.

From the crowd's perspective, this would be one of the best demonstrations of the year, and most spectators would leave with a level of pride that matched the wave of exhilaration we were riding as the last jet touched down. And yet the blemish of that trail-to-diamond cloverloop was still lingering in the back of my mind. I knew I hadn't consciously turned the flight, but I was at a loss as to how the maneuver had gone wrong. After I watched the video recording of our demonstration in the debrief, I noticed a small difference.

My left wingman was more aggressive on his move forward, and he tucked into position a bit more quickly and closely than the jet on my right—and he stayed there. He was so close that he caused my left wing to become more efficient, to produce more lift than my right wing. Efficiencies—it was aerodynamic efficiencies! It wasn't just a *feeling* that I was being carried by the team around me;

the surge brought on from their proximity was *real.* That thought would change the way I looked at everything: we were *drafting.*

The Phenomenon of Drafting

The aerodynamic phenomenon of drafting was discovered in the late 1950s by stock car racers who figured out that two cars running close together, nose-to-tail, could sustain a faster speed than either car could achieve on its own. Over time they figured out the cause of the effect: the lead car was taking on the wall of air for both, while the trailer was close enough to the leader's bumper to relieve it from the drag it created as it moved down the track (see Aerodynamic Drafting).

Aerodynamic Drafting: *Closing the Gap Benefits Both Team Members*

The lead car plows a path through air. Another car trailing behind will experience less resistance and a boost in performance.

The benefits for the trailing car increase as it closes the gap on the leader. When the trailer closes inside of one car length, the leader's drag decreases, allowing that car to accelerate.

When the gap is closed, the collective effect allows a team of two cars to accelerate to a speed that neither car could achieve on its own.

While the effects are mutually beneficial, they are a little lopsided—at least at first. When a car speeds down the track, its movement plows a path through the air to create a vacuum of sorts that can help *pull* a trail car forward when it is still several car lengths behind the leader. And if the trailer *elects* to close on the leader's bumper, the pull becomes more significant with every foot of closure on the leader's car.

But, funny enough, the leader gains no relief from its drag until the trailer is within a single car length. As the trail car closes inside that distance, the leader's drag begins to transfer from its bumper to that of the trailer. When the gap closes, the collective effect allows the team of two cars to accelerate to a speed that neither car could achieve on its own. It is closing the distance—the gaps between elements on a team—that makes drafting work. The more I thought about it, the more I could see drafting's effects on the Thunderbirds everywhere I turned.

Every unit within our organization, from accounting and finance to maintenance and public affairs—literally every shop—was minimally staffed, and each relied on the others to help it execute its role. Those amazing people were lined up, bumper to bumper, taking the weight—the drag—off the individual or element in front of them while they sustained the draft for those behind them.

Drafting, in teamwork, is a phenomenon that replicates the aerodynamic benefits of bodies moving closely together. It requires leaders to inspire closure between individuals and entities to deliver cohesion, unity of effort, and team acceleration.

drafting

(aerodynamics) The phenomenon whereby two objects moving close together sustain a faster speed than either object could achieve on its own.

(teamwork) The phenomenon inspired by the aerodynamic property of bodies moving closely together; it requires leaders to inspire closure between individuals and entities to deliver cohesion, unity of effort, and team acceleration.

Think about that in terms of you and your team. How many folks are snuggled up against your bumper, taking the drag off your efforts, and how many are sitting two car lengths back, smoking a Lucky while basking in the warmth of your draft? It is absolutely up to the folks in your wake to close the distance—you cannot *make* them close. It is up to us as leaders to set the conditions that will make them *want* to close the gaps. By incrementally building mutual commitment, then loyalty, and finally the kind of trust that will further the momentum of the whole team, we maximize the effects of drafting.

Closing the Gaps with Commitment, Loyalty, and Trust

Trust comes through a series of methodical actions that begin and end with the leader. No pilot begins the first day of his tour with the Thunderbirds flying inches away from another's wing. That kind of proximity relies on trust that is built over time. Closing those gaps must be done incrementally, through a methodical process that, more than any other facet, relies on *you*.

Before we go into the process of building trust, let's clear up one possible misconception right up front: the Thunderbirds are not all that different from your team. Certainly, some aspects of our mission made us unique, so let's get them out of the way now.

Differences from Team to Team

The Thunderbirds' flight-training program taught pilots who had never flown formation aerobatics everything from basic formations to the entire jet demonstration sequence. We started in mid-November, flying two jets, side by side, executing one maneuver over and over, 1 mile above the desert floor, with 3 feet of separation between jets. As the training progressed, we would methodically add jets and maneuver elements, lower the maneuvering floor until we had all six F-16 fighters flying maneuvers 400 feet above the ground. By the end of the training season, the gaps between aircraft were as small as 18 inches.

In mid-March the team packed up and went on the road for the next eight months to fly airshows all over the world. With the deployments, practices, airshows, and redeployments home, we flew six days a week through the middle of November. The day after we finished the last airshow, we started the team-building process all over again.

While the differences may seem stark between our operation and yours, the parallels and personalities are an absolute match. Without question, the mission of the Thunderbirds was unique and the expectations for precision were very high. But the makeup of personnel in our hangar was very similar to the composition of your team right now.

Similarities from Team to Team

Any industry in the world includes tens, hundreds, even thousands of organizations that perform the same basic task, build the same kind of equipment, or deliver the same service. Some of those organizations deliver the gold standard and always produce the very highest levels of quality within their industry. Other organizations produce solid, reliable results, and still others struggle to deliver a competent service or reliable product on time.

The difference between high-performing organizations and those that fall short of the gold standard is not just talent but how well leaders develop their team's draft with the talent they have. Your role in that process is critical, as you will not only plow the path for the people behind you to follow but also set the conditions that will compel them to close the gaps between individuals, elements, and teams—the gaps that slow you down.

Drafting Is All about Closing the Gaps

To harness the effects of drafting and bring trust to bear within your team, you need to focus on closing the gaps. As mentioned, a ***gap*** is physical or emotional distance caused by a lack of competence, a lack of confidence, or an unmet social need that degrades performance. Left unaddressed, gaps are momentum killers that will thwart any hope of trust.

gap
Physical or emotional distance caused by a lack of competence, a lack of confidence, or an unmet social need that degrades performance.

The explanation for team members' gaps varies with both tenure and competence. A new hire will sustain his or her distance until a level of *traction*—technical competence and social acceptance—makes it safe to close. The reasons for gaps in more seasoned individuals take longer to figure out. Even after their needs are met, the smart ones will take their time closing because, as in our demonstration, distance gives them the reaction time they need to preserve their well-being.

Proximity Narrows Focus

When flying, the closer you get to the lead jet, the greater the demand on your eyes and reflexes to keep you out of harm's way. The more you close, the quicker you must shift your eyes—your ***crosscheck***—between the leader, the other jets in the formation, and the threats to your well-being, such as the ground. When you are 50 feet back, your crosscheck can be slow and methodical and still allow you to sustain safe separation from the leader throughout some pretty aggressive maneuvering. Close some of that distance, however, and your focus must intensify because the area you can cover in your crosscheck narrows. Close a bit more and you'll gain some of the aerodynamic benefits from the jet in front of you while preserving just enough reaction time to get out of Dodge if things go south.

crosscheck
Taking stock of your immediate environment by shifting your focus between two or more objects.

You have lived that distance when moving at speed during rush-hour traffic. Your focus on the bumper in front

of you gives you little time to check the status and intentions of the cars to your left and right, but, in your mind, your quick reflexes will allow you to react in time to avoid hitting the car in front of you if conditions deteriorate in a hurry.

During one maneuver in our demonstration, the distance between our jets was often less than that from my elbow to the tip of my fingers. If you were driving that close while clipping along at 65 miles per hour, your focus on the car in front of you would take all of your concentration—while you hope that the car you're trailing holds its speed. Flying that close maximized the effects of our team, but it also reduced reaction times to the point where the pilots on my wing could not save their own lives if I made a catastrophic mistake. Making a living flying that close to a jet moving in all three dimensions—400 feet off the ground at 500 miles per hour—takes much more than faith or concentration; it requires the deepest levels of trust.

Our Thunderbird team spent hundreds of hours together methodically developing every reinforcing input we could collect on one another to close the gaps in our formation. The whole time we were flying over the practice range, a supervisor on the ground was grading our every maneuver. I also knew that there were five other sets of eyes flying alongside me that were watching *my* every move—watching not just how I executed the maneuvers (my job) but also every other insight they could glean in the air (and on the ground) to see how I added up. They needed to know they could trust me before they closed the gaps to the point where they put themselves at risk on my wing.

The Real Benefits of Closure

The bigger the gaps between you and your followers, the more weight you will carry. Trailers who continually show up late for work, who greet initiatives with antagonism, or who consistently meet deadlines with disappointment can thwart every effort to accelerate your team. Getting those individuals to close the gap of commitment will take that administrative weight off your plate. Draw them further forward into loyalty, and you will have solid performers who serve as advocates that positively shape the attitudes and mind-sets of the team around them. Close the gap of trust, and your empowerment of key players to handle significant efforts will give you more energy and bandwidth to elevate the trajectory of the organization behind you.

How do you close that distance? How do you get your followers to let go of whatever is holding them back? To get them to close those gaps to the point where you realize the surge of drafting, you need to develop a plan to fulfill the needs, the wants, and unfulfilled elements of their working lives. The first step in that plan, the first thing they will look for, is commitment—your commitment to their place on the team.

Drafting's First Step: Closing the Commitment Gap

The Thunderbirds had 130 team members from 24 different job specialties and career fields throughout the Air Force—and every one of them arrived with his or her own tribal mind-set. We had all been in the Air Force prior to joining the Thunderbirds, but we had never been required to work together in a single hangar. Getting people who

identified themselves as fighter pilots, engine mechanics, videographers, public affairs professionals, and the like to shed their stove-piped mind-sets and meld together as a team required a concerted effort. The first step in that process was building *commitment,* and we did that through our onboarding program.

The impressions that new hires take from the first days and weeks on your team are lasting and will affect their commitment to you and your draft throughout their tenure with the team. The single biggest factor in their long-term commitment is how much their new team values *them*—how much time and effort you are willing to invest to get them settled in, socially integrated, and technically qualified.

In some ways the more experience a team member has, the more challenging the first steps to commitment might be. Not everyone will fight new goals or course corrections, but even your hardest-working folks crave stability, and getting your people to commit to a different path can be challenging. Even military leaders holding the kind of authority their subordinates have sworn to follow face the same challenges you do in compelling their people to align on a new direction.

People will not always move based on logical reasoning, like the promise of more responsibility or a bigger compensation package, but they will always close on emotions. Your challenge lies in figuring out which emotions to tap to get your followers' commitment, as well as on your making first contact with the elements and obstacles that slow them down. My efforts to engage every aspect of that challenge began the first week of an individual's onboarding.

Being genuinely curious about the people behind you and showing interest in their challenges, goals, and dreams will get them to close on the emotion of *hope*—the hope that you will do something for them in the future. Follow through with one or two of the things you learn along the way, and you can get them to close into the lane of loyalty.

Drafting's Second Step: Closing the Loyalty Gap

Loyalty is cohesion within a relationship—the kind that can be built only on the foundation of commitment. Once your trailers know that you are committed to their well-being, they will open up and, with a little encouragement, shed their outward personas—their overt positions—and tell you about their *real* motivations and genuine passions.

> **loyalty**
> Cohesion within a relationship–the kind that can be built only on the foundation of commitment. It is fostered by a leader's willingness to go the distance to support his or her team without the expectation that they will respond in kind.

Most people have several foundational elements or *pillars* within their lives that drive their actions. At times the important pillars are obvious; at other times they are well masked. With just a little forethought, you can find a trove of information that will help you motivate your people more than any other tangible benefit you can offer. Remember, however, that the performance—and loyalty—of others is often tied to growth in areas that are not directly related to work.

The opportunity to give individuals a leg up or to bolster another central element or pillar in their lives can be

a very powerful motivator. Discovering those passions and then helping individuals further them can help bring more of their potential to bear for and within the team. Once you know their passions, you will know how to reach into their chests and begin pulling them forward on their wants and needs. Do that and you'll instill a sense of your confidence in them and bring on a feeling of unity you'll both revel in. Only you, the leader, can initiate this action—and you do not want to miss it.

Building respect Moving with the talents, and on the judgment of the people who work for you, is the first step toward empowering them to handle some of your responsibility. In the quest for opportunities to increase the exposure of the Thunderbirds to the public, our team came up with several novel ideas. While public affairs would be the central hub of our efforts, we wanted to get the entire team involved. One of the best ideas actually came from a member of our maintenance team.

Each jet had two cameras that captured spectacular cockpit footage throughout our demonstration. The cameras were there for safety, but if we could figure out a way to share that live footage on the Internet and with local television and airshow audiences, there was potential to increase the number of folks who saw any and every one of our demonstrations.

With a few guiding thoughts and no budget for the project, I asked our maintenance officer to flesh out the idea. Within a few weeks, his team had designed a system around the components of obsolete data-link equipment designed for another aircraft. Giving him my backing to

move on a solution his team had dreamt up was an unmistakable sign of my confidence in him.

Once you show your key players that they have your confidence, they will shift their focus from the performance of their roles to how *you* execute *yours.* They will watch for your willingness and ability to move others on the goals you claim to hold dear. Like every other aspect of their development, your team's respect for *you* needs to be consciously developed. Inspire and reinforce that respect, and you will chamber the kind of loyalty that will last well beyond their time on the team—the kind that will pull them right up to the line of trust.

Drafting at Full Throttle: Breaking the Trust Barrier

Every year our training season culminated at the end of February. In the weeks leading up to our graduation from training, we were flying an entire 36-maneuver demonstration package 500 feet above the ground with all six jets. That altitude, coupled with the training spreads (gaps) between jets, gave every pilot enough reaction time and space to recover from an errant maneuver—but we were about to move beyond that threshold.

The conscious decision to fly even tighter formations at lower minimum altitudes—the ones we'd be flying during airshows—relied on every bit of faith and confidence we had built in one another; we knew the risks went way up from here. Closing the gaps to airshow spreads and lowering our target minimum altitude to 400 feet meant the pad was gone. If I made a catastrophic mistake in the lead aircraft, the peripherals would not allow the wingmen to recognize pending ground impact in time for them to save

their own lives. Closing the final gaps and dropping down to airshow altitude required the highest levels of trust.

Trust was a big deal on the Thunderbirds. Since the team's inception in 1953, 19 men have died flying the demonstration; our lives really did depend on the other team members. Trust may just as well have been written on the inside of our visors—as we looked for it everywhere, constantly taking in every insight, every nuance, that would reinstill our belief in one another.

During our seemingly endless hours over the practice range and through the execution of thousands of maneuvers, we were slowly writing new code on one another—programming code about the people around us that we would use as the basis of trust. Every time I executed my role correctly, or fessed up after I didn't, I was shaping their insights into my character—consciously pulling them toward trust. Although we made those assessments in the air, the same thing was true for the team members on the ground.

Building trust If it isn't already clear, your actions as a leader initiate the process of drafting, and the effort required (and the scrutiny you'll receive) is significant—but the benefits and pride that emerge when you pull your team in tight are extraordinary. This is when your people are close enough to take the weight from your wings and when the efficiencies of drafting are highest. When key members of your team are empowered, you give them your authority to take big efforts off your desk, freeing you up to plan and then elevate the trajectory of the entire team. You will move

faster and accomplish more together than you ever could have done on your own.

Developing the kind of trust that leads to a Thunderbird-level of closure can be very powerful. Feeling those jets tuck in to position was as much emotional as it was physical. There is nothing more powerful or electrifying, nothing that will accelerate your team faster or make them want to stay with you longer, than building an effective draft. The secrets, techniques, and lessons that will help you lead your team to that kind of closure are detailed in the chapters that follow. Read on.