

📍 Faith-Based Leadership

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Trust in Motion: A Biblical and Behavioral Framework for Trust-Based Transformational Leadership

Leadership literature is crowded — a "gridlocked freeway" of overlapping styles. This paper answers the call for a "full-range" model by introducing Trust-Based Transformational Leadership (TBTRL) and the TrustFlow™ construct: trust as the behavioral infrastructure beneath every transformational outcome.

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ABSTRACT

Leadership literature is crowded. In fact, leadership literature can be compared to a "gridlocked" freeway during rush hour. Since 2000, scholars and practitioners have proposed many leadership styles (e.g., authentic, ethical, spiritual, servant, and distributed) and have identified a critical problem. Anderson and Sun (2017) identified a critical problem in leadership literature: these styles overlap significantly with transformational leadership (TRL) and with one another. The result: confusion and no clarity. They issued a call for a new "full-range" model that creates a distinctive

approach that can be replicated across diverse markets, cultures, and leadership contexts. The full-range model should answer the age-old question: What is genuinely unique about effective leadership? This paper answers that call by introducing Trust-Based Transformational Leadership (TBTRL). TBTRL is a proprietary methodology that introduces a new concept, "TrustFlow™."

TrustFlow™ defines trust not as a value that an organization states on its website, but as a whole-life trust-based ecosystem — an ecosystem that is a consistent, measurable, repeatable, and self-reinforcing behavioral state (Morris, 2024). The TrustFlow™ model operationalizes trust-building through the 12 Cs: twelve observable micro-behaviors with Character, Competence, Communication, Connection, Consistency, and Caring among its core pillars, providing leaders with a systematic methodology for creating and sustaining high-trust environments. Bentzen (2022) and Babu et al. (2023) reflect the most recent research on trust-based leadership. Northouse (2022) provides the foundational framework for understanding TRL's Four I's. Biblical TBTRL heroes include Nehemiah and Joseph. This paper explores TBTRL's fundamental belief: "Trust is everything!" TBTRL offers a robust solution to the problem of abstract and overlapping leadership methodologies.

Key takeaways

- ✓ Leadership scholarship suffers from overlapping, hard-to-differentiate styles; Anderson and Sun (2017) called for a "full-range" model that names what is genuinely unique about effective leadership. TBTRL is offered as that answer.
- ✓ TBTRL builds on transformational leadership and introduces TrustFlow™ — the highest level of trust, where individuals, teams, and organizations operate in seamless alignment.

- ✓ The 12 Cs of TrustFlow™ form a "behavioral scorecard" — observable, measurable, coachable micro-behaviors in four quadrants (Foundations, Essentials, Work, Results). Strengthen one C and a "trust ripple" travels across the system.
- ✓ Biblical leaders — Nehemiah (Clarity, Collaboration, Closeout, Coaching), Joseph (Character, Competence, Consistency), Barnabas (Connection, Collaboration, Character, Caring), Timothy (Commitment, Competency, Consistency) — model the 12 Cs across cultures, contexts, and centuries.
- ✓ TBTRL's biblical foundation (Imago Dei, stewardship) reframes trust as a sacred responsibility — honoring followers as "human beings," not "human doings" — distinguishing it from secular trust models that optimize for outcomes rather than faithfulness.

Trust in motion: a biblical and behavioral framework for trust-based transformational leadership

There is a "trust deficit" in the business marketplace. Corporate teams often perform below their collective capabilities because of a "trust deficit." Practitioner research on 95 cross-functional teams in 25 large corporations reported that nearly 75% were "dysfunctional," failing on at least three of five key performance criteria (Tabrizi, 2015). Common issues for less than stellar performance include role ambiguity, conflicting priorities, and accountability gaps. Cross-functional failure is not just a structural issue; there is an undercurrent just beneath the surface — the team's "trust deficit."

Anderson and Sun (2017) identified a critical problem plaguing leadership scholarship: overlapping leadership methodologies, each promising to "one-up" the other. Since 2000, the field has been flooded with new styles — authentic, ethical, spiritual, servant, and distributed — each claiming to capture what transformational leadership (TRL) supposedly misses. The result is a gridlocked freeway of theories where leaders cannot distinguish one lane from another.

Anderson and Sun issued a call for a new "full-range" model that distills what is genuinely unique about effective leadership. This paper answers that call.

Few scholars, practitioners, and business executives know how to make trust more than a value on their website. Because of this lack of knowledge, organizations face the reality that there is little to no trust in the ranks. This is the gap that Trust-Based Transformational Leadership (TBTRL) is designed to fill. TBTRL builds upon the foundations of transformational leadership. TBTRL introduces a proprietary theoretical construct: TrustFlow™. TrustFlow™ is the highest level of trust, where individuals, teams, and organizations operate in seamless alignment. Trust becomes more than just "lip service." TrustFlow™ ignites trust into action, allowing for the building of "trust muscles." The result is that individuals and teams are energized, creative, and innovative — creating high performance and high reliability among teammates (Morris, 2024).

TrustFlow™ is the culmination of NeuroTrust and behaviorally based trust, ensuring an optimized, self-sustaining "whole life trust ecosystem." Dirks and Ferrin's (2002) meta-analysis of trust in leadership found that trust significantly predicts follower job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and commitment — outcomes that TBTRL is designed to systematically cultivate through the 12 Cs. TBTRL reframes the Four I's of TRL not just as behaviors to perform but as natural outcomes of a leader operating in a TrustFlow™ state. The TrustFlow™ scorecard includes 12 Cs broken into four quadrants.

The 12 Cs dashboard

To convert insight into action, TrustFlow™ uses an expanded 12 Cs behavioral dashboard — a systems view of trust-building behaviors. The TrustFlow™ framework organizes the 12 Cs into four interconnected quadrants that reflect how trust is built from the inside out: grounded in foundational virtues, expressed through relational essentials, strengthened through daily work behaviors, and

proven through consistent results. Each quadrant builds on the one before it. Trust does not scale by accident — it scales by design.

The 12 Cs of TrustFlow™ — the behavioral scorecard.

Quadrant	The Cs	Why this matters
I. Foundations of Trust Who we are and what we stand for	Character · Courage · Commitment	Establishes the moral center and credibility of the leader and team. Without trust at the foundation, teams may perform temporarily — but they will not endure.
II. Essentials of Trust How trust is felt and experienced	Connection · Communication · Caring	The relational essentials that create safety, belonging, and openness. When the essentials are missing, people disengage, misunderstandings multiply, and trust erodes quietly.
III. The Work of Trust How we build trust in real time	Clarify · Collaboration · Coaching	Operationalizes trust through repeatable behaviors and coaching disciplines that reduce friction, increase alignment, and strengthen execution. Trust becomes durable when it is practiced — not assumed.
IV. Results of Trust How trust is proven over time	Consistency · Competence · Closeout	The proof points of TrustFlow™: reliability, capability, and disciplined follow-through. Results without trust are brittle; trust without results is incomplete. TrustFlow™ requires both.

Each "C" is defined and operationalized through a one-line micro-behavior (e.g., "state commitments with clear owners and dates," "invite dissent before decisions"), a practice window (when/where/trigger), a metric (frequency, qualitative rating, or alignment with agreed norms), and evidence (artifact, interaction, or stakeholder feedback). This structure allows individuals to set weekly micro-behavioral commitments and rate themselves (e.g., on a 1–5 scale),

creating a behavioral time series for trust at the individual level. The Cs map onto contemporary scholarship: Character to ethical leadership (Chaiyasat et al., 2025); Courage to courageous leadership and psychological safety (Abunab et al., 2026); Commitment to trust and organizational commitment (Rai & Koodamara, 2025); Connection to interpersonal connection and retention (Costa & Rodrigues, 2025); Communication to coaching leadership and change behavior (Hu et al., 2025); Caring to compassionate leadership (Westover, 2024); Clarify to role clarity and resilience (Bernuzzi et al., 2023); Collaboration to coaching-based collaborative teams (International Coach Federation Thought Leadership Institute, 2023); Coaching to coaching competences and leader commitment (Alves & Nunes Figueiredo, 2024); Consistency to consistency and developmental feedback (Van Strydonck et al., 2025); Competence to competence frameworks (Fitsilis, 2024); and Closeout to accountability culture (Westover, 2025).

Each C lives and breathes on its own. Each C is a "micro-behavior" that connects to form a "whole life trust ecosystem." Each "C" influences and reinforces the others. When one C is underdeveloped, there will be a noticeable "trust deficit." Strengthening one "C" often creates a positive ripple effect (a trust ripple) across the entire system, enhancing your overall TrustFlow™. The Cs are "behavioral micro-trust activations" that build "trust muscles." These trust muscles become hard-wired through the process of neuroplasticity. The 12 Cs represent a "whole life trust-based ecosystem." Each C can be observed, measured, and coached in real time. This paper integrates contemporary research (Bentzen, 2022; Babu et al., 2023) with biblical leadership examples to demonstrate that TrustFlow™ is not a new invention but a rediscovery of principles that have always separated effective leaders from the rest. TBTRL does not add another overlapping style to the pile. It provides the foundational infrastructure — trust — upon which all transformational outcomes are built.

Biblical foundations: trust as timeless leadership

infrastructure

Anderson and Sun (2017) note the disjointed state of contemporary leadership literature. Styles compete but are not complete. Each style has gaps, with little to no distinction between them. Biblical leadership, by contrast, has always been integrated. Nehemiah did not choose between being a "servant leader" or a "transformational leader" — he led with Clarity, Collaboration, and Closeout, building TrustFlow™ at every level. The fragmentation Anderson and Sun critique is a modern problem, not a timeless one. The life of Jesus Christ, the only perfect leader, inspires the 12 Cs; He modeled all the Cs during His earthly ministry. Throughout history, faith-fueled believers have integrated TBTRL principles. These leaders changed history.

Nehemiah: the TBTRL project leader (Clarity, Collaboration, Closeout, Coaching)

Nehemiah's leadership during the building of the wall displays TrustFlow™ in a per-project environment in an ancient context. Compressed for time, in the face of fear, and with little to no resources, Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem's wall in fifty-two days. His leadership exemplifies TrustFlow™ in per-project environments. The Cs of Clarity, Collaboration, and Closeout are evident throughout Nehemiah's heroic narrative. Nehemiah provided clarity to his people: "You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!" (NLT, 2015/1996, Nehemiah 2:17–18). TrustFlow™ inspires collaboration. Nehemiah's record-breaking closeout was made possible by the clarity and collaboration needed for the project. Merida (2015) emphasizes that Nehemiah's leadership was marked by prayer-centered dependence on God, demonstrating that vertical trust with God enables horizontal trust with people. Nehemiah did not manipulate people. He did not charm. Instead, he got the vertical relationship right and connected horizontally with the families rebuilding the wall. This is TrustFlow™ in action: Clarity, Collaboration, and Closeout.

Joseph: the consistent leader (Character, Competence, Consistency)

Joseph's TrustFlow™ was sustained across three radically different environments. Joseph's TrustFlow™ score could have been close to a ten. We never hear of Joseph being bitter, angry, or upset. He displayed three of the 12 Cs throughout his biblical narrative. Character for Joseph comes to mind. He was falsely accused. He was forgotten, though he solved a problem. He ran Pharaoh's house so well that his character was not challenged. God was with Joseph, so he succeeded at everything he touched: "Potiphar noticed this and realized that the LORD was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did" (NLT, 2015/1996, Genesis 39:2–4). To be second in command while being from another culture at this time in history would have been difficult. For Pharaoh to recognize Joseph's competence speaks to a highly skilled man. Throughout Joseph's narrative, we see him being consistent. He never complains; he trusts God to rescue him from a pit of despair and to defend his character. God looks at a man's heart, not his outward activities. God smiled upon Joseph! Joseph modeled Character, Consistency, and Competence. Joseph demonstrates that TrustFlow™ is applicable in diverse contexts (slavery, prison, running a country). TBTRL transcends circumstances because it is rooted in behavioral disciplines rather than situational advantages.

Barnabas: the relational leader (Connection, Collaboration, Character, Caring)

"Son of Encouragement" — the nickname for one of the Bible's most profound connectors of people. Barnabas was a connector — one of the 12 Cs. He was also a collaborator — another one of the 12 Cs. Lastly, he was a man who was etched from the inside by God. Some call God's etching "character." All feared Paul "the Christian killer." God tasked Barnabas with the assignment of befriending a murderer of the brethren. Paul and Barnabas eventually went on a mission trip together. Only a man who had God's fingerprints deeply inside him would have the fortitude and character to approach a man no one trusted. "He was a good man, full of God's Holy Spirit and filled with faith" (NLT, 2015/1996, Acts 11:22–26). He connected with the believers through his generous giving: "He sold a field that he

owned and gave the proceeds to the apostles" (NLT, 2015/1996, Acts 4:36–37). TrustFlow™ is not solely focused on the "results" of a project. Connection and Collaboration are learned behaviors that leaders can model. Followers often imitate the behaviors they see from their leaders. Barnabas's life is another example of TBTRL in a real-world context, highlighting its applicability across diverse contexts and different leadership styles.

Timothy: the developing leader (Commitment, Competency, Consistency)

Timothy's biblical narrative highlights the TrustFlow™ Cs — Commitment, Consistency, and Competency. Paul treated young Timothy as a son. He mentored Timothy and eventually trusted him to become one of the early church's best problem solvers. Paul referenced Timothy's commitment to the church: "All the others care only for themselves and not for what matters to Jesus Christ" (NLT, 2015/1996, Philippians 2:19–22). Timothy would go on to become one of the teachers of "the Way," the early church. Timothy watched Paul, was mentored by Paul, and taught what he had learned to others (NLT, 2015/1996, 2 Timothy 2:2). Timothy's character was formed during the early stages of his life. Paul encouraged a young Timothy to "stand tall" and not look down on his youth: "Timothy's youth was not a hindrance to his walk with Christ" (NLT, 2015/1996, 1 Timothy 4:12). Timothy's development under Paul's mentorship illustrates how TrustFlow™ is cultivated through consistent, disciplined practice of the 12 Cs — not just innate talent.

These biblical leaders did not need leadership gurus or the latest management trends. They modeled the 12 Cs of TrustFlow™ through consistent and repeatable behaviors. TrustFlow™ is not the latest and greatest leadership methodology; it is a rediscovery of timeless principles validated by contemporary research and demonstrated by leaders who built trust across cultures, contexts, and centuries.

The TrustFlow™ model: operationalizing trust through the 12 Cs

Anderson and Sun (2017) identified a core problem in their work: leadership styles overlap without clear differentiation, and trust is mentioned but never systematically operationalized. Most leaders know trust matters. Few know how to build it. This is the gap TBTRL fills. TrustFlow™ is not another abstract concept in the traffic jam of leadership literature. TrustFlow™ systematizes trust at every level of an organization. TBTRL leaders can integrate the many tools inside the TrustFlow™ methodology into their everyday roles and responsibilities. TrustFlow™ provides a systematic method for creating and sustaining high-trust environments. TrustFlow™ is a neuroscience-informed, behaviorally grounded leadership methodology that uses micro-behaviors, structured coaching, and performance metrics to move people, teams, and organizations into a sustained state of "TrustFlow™" — accountability and high performance.

The theory of TrustFlow™ hypothesizes that systematically building behavioral trust (via the 12 Cs) enhances connections among colleagues and trust at the organizational level. Meta-analytic evidence confirms across 112 studies of 7,763 teams that intrateam trust predicts team performance with a corrected correlation of $\rho \approx .30$, and the relationship is particularly strong in virtual and high-uncertainty contexts where TrustFlow™ is most needed (De Jong et al., 2016; Breuer et al., 2016). Teams that improve their "TrustFlow™" may reduce the probability that cross-functional teams will fall into the "dysfunctional 75%."

The three-stage TrustFlow™ model

TrustFlow™ operates sequentially, each stage building upon the previous one to create a self-reinforcing "whole life" trust ecosystem. TrustFlow™ sits inside the "High Trust Guy" formula and unfolds in three progressive steps.

Step 1 — NeuroTrust (prime the brain for trust)

Neuroscience and behavioral psychology come together to create immediate and enduring trust. A **TrustSpark™** is a brief micro-moment in which a person is unconsciously determining whether someone is "safe" or not. If the amygdala determines it is "safe to engage," evaluation shifts from defensiveness to "I might be able to trust you." TrustSparks™ are elicited via small behaviors — attuned eye contact, congruent nonverbal behavior, calibrated tone and pacing, micro-validations, and short anchoring statements (e.g., "You belong here," "What matters most right now?"). Zak (2017) links the brain's trust chemical, oxytocin, to its release during interactions. The brain is quickly determining whether the person or situation is "safe" or "not safe." Certain behaviors act as "behavioral triggers." These triggers activate neurological responses that predispose individuals to trust. This science is fascinating — you may only have 30–90 seconds to build NeuroTrust.

Step 2 — Behaviorally Based Trust (align with Behavioral SuperPowers)

Deep trust is created when people understand their own and others' Behavioral SuperPowers™. Behavioral SuperPowers (BSPs) give insights into consistent strengths, struggles, money temperament, and communication styles. More importantly, understanding one's Behavioral SuperPowers can help navigate the differences among colleagues or teammates. Trust is built through predictable, wiring-aligned behaviors in day-to-day work. Job performance, workplace behavior, and organizational commitment can be tied to "behaviorally based trust" (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Step 3 — TrustFlow™ (the peak behavioral state of high trust)

The optimal psychological state where individuals are fully immersed, energized, and intrinsically motivated by the task at hand is known as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Athletes, performers, and artists all talk about the "flow state." Time stops, concentration is enhanced, motions become effortless in a "flow state." Flow can be replicated across individuals, teams, and entire organizations — not easy, but possible. In the TrustFlow™ Wave Theory™, trust is not a binary event

but a behaviorally activated flow state. The behavioral flow state is ignited by "TrustSparks™" and "micro-trust activations." Repeatable habits and consistent actions over time induce "TrustFlow™." These "TrustSparks" and "micro-trust activations" ripple outward, building from internal alignment to relational synchronization to team momentum to organizational transformation. These activations are the "entry points" into TrustFlow™ — small acts with massive compounding effects. One ripple... then another... eventually, what was once a ripple becomes a wave — a "behavioral wave" — a "Trust Tsunami Effect™."

Multilevel integration: from individual to organization

TrustFlow™'s multilevel structure aligns with the need for trust to work on three levels (Bentzen, 2022). The three levels include individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole — a "tripod of trust." The multilevel approach creates structural changes at the organizational level while impacting individuals and teams. At the individual level, leaders master the 12 Cs. At the team level, decisions are made more efficiently, frictions among colleagues are reduced, and psychological safety becomes paramount. At the organizational level, TrustFlow™ becomes a part of the organization's culture. Bentzen's framework provides academic validation; TrustFlow™ provides a practical methodology. When "trust flows," everybody knows.

Adding value — filling in the gaps, reframing Northouse's Four I's

The Four I's of transformational leadership include Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration (Northouse, 2022). TBTRL reframes these not as behaviors to perform but as natural outcomes of a leader operating in a TrustFlow™ state. Idealized Influence flows from Character and Consistency. Inspirational Motivation flows from Clarity and Commitment. Intellectual Stimulation flows from Courage and Collaboration. Individualized Consideration flows from Connection and Communication. The 12 Cs fill in gaps in the existing TRL leadership methodology.

The importance of biblical truth in TBTRL

TBTRL is not a secular leadership theory with a Bible verse tacked on. TBTRL provides leaders with a system for building a "whole-life trust ecosystem." TrustFlow™ can begin at home, extend to the workplace, and impact the faith community. This theological foundation distinguishes TBTRL from trust models that treat people as "human doings." Followers led by TBTRL leaders are seen as assets — instruments to be optimized, image-bearers to be honored — "human beings," not "human doings."

Imago Dei: the foundation of trust

Genesis 1:27 declares, "So God created human beings in his own image" (New Living Translation, 2015/1996). This is not poetry. This is ontology. Every person carries the fingerprint of the Creator. When leaders recognize Imago Dei, trust shifts from a transactional calculation to a sacred responsibility. Organizations talk about their people being the most important asset, but few consider the total well-being of their "most important asset." High performance begins with "total wellbeing." This changes everything.

Stewardship: trust as responsibility, not commodity

TBTRL leaders are stewards of trust. TBTRL leaders understand that trust is their chief responsibility and is earned, not given. They know how to repair trust if it has been broken. They earn "trust dividends" with each "TrustSpark™" and micro-trust activation. TBTRL reframes trust as a stewardship issue for leaders. This is the difference between transformational leadership that manipulates emotions and TBTRL that honors the dignity of every person. When leaders get the vertical relationship right, the horizontal relationships align. Merida (2015) notes that Nehemiah's leadership was marked by prayer-centered dependence on God, demonstrating that vertical trust with God enables horizontal trust with people.

The 12 Cs as biblical disciplines

The 12 Cs are not secular competencies rebranded with Scripture. They are biblical disciplines modeled by Jesus Christ and practiced by leaders throughout Scripture. Jesus embodied Character (John 8:46), Competence (Mark 1:22), Communication (Luke 4:22), Connection (John 1:14), Consistency (Hebrews 13:8), Courage (John 2:15–16), Commitment (Luke 9:51), Clarity (Matthew 5:37), Collaboration (Mark 6:7), and Closeout (John 19:30). There is none more "trustworthy" than Jesus, and His Father, Jehovah God. Trust is a theme throughout all Scripture. God-honoring leadership builds trust, sustains trust, and repairs trust when it is broken.

Biblical truth as differentiator

What separates TBTRL from secular trust models is not just the addition of biblical examples but the integration of biblical truth as the foundational lens. Secular trust models ask, "How can I manipulate and cajole to build trust to achieve my goals?" TBTRL asks, "How can I steward the trust given, honor God, and serve others?" The first treats people as "means to an end." The second treats people as "image-bearers" of Jehovah God. The first optimizes for outcomes. The second optimizes for faithfulness. This is not a minor distinction. It is a tectonic shift in leadership ideology.

Conclusion

Anderson and Sun (2017) issued a call for a new "full-range" model that distills what is genuinely unique about effective leadership. TBTRL is that answer — a behavioral-science approach to building unstoppable momentum through "TrustSparks" and "micro-trust activations." TBTRL does not add another overlapping style to the gridlocked freeway of leadership literature. TrustFlow™ is the "missing link" in most secular-based trust ideology. Transformational outcomes are built one "TrustSpark™" and one "micro-trust activation" at a time. The 12 Cs have elements of authentic, ethical, servant, and transformational leadership,

making it adaptive, flexible across cultures, and resilient as the business marketplace ebbs and flows, shifts, and pivots. This is not fragmentation. This is integration.

TrustFlow™ is not a theoretical abstraction. Intrinsic psychology and applied behavioral trust-building are at the heart of TBTRL. While other trust models (e.g., OVATION, Speed of Trust) stay at the cognitive or relational level, TrustFlow™ extends the concept into behavioral habit loops and team-based performance elevation. Trust becomes a "tsunami" — not just a value, nice to have, or a feeling. The three-stage model — NeuroTrust, Behaviorally Based Trust, and the TrustFlow™ State — provides leaders with a systematic pathway to make trust a part of every level of their organization. The 12 Cs offer a reliable "behavioral scorecard." The biblical foundation provides the compass. TBTRL leaders honor the Imago Dei of their followers. Trust is stewarded and produces psychological capital that enables teams to thrive under pressure.

Biblical leaders had no business gurus to turn to; they had a much more reliable source — Jehovah God. They practiced the 12 Cs to move the heart of God and lead their people. Nehemiah provided Clarity, urged Collaboration, and ensured Closeout. Joseph demonstrated Character, Competence, and Consistency. Barnabas embodied Connection, Collaboration, and Character. Timothy exemplified Commitment, Competency, and Consistency. Jesus modeled all 12 Cs. The 12 Cs are not another leadership theory to get excited about. They are a rediscovery of what God-honoring, trust-building leadership has always looked like. TBTRL does not replace transformational leadership. It completes it. When trust flows, everybody knows.

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ABOUT

Jeff Morris — "The High Trust Guy"