For Researchers & Academics | Whitepaper · January 2026 | ~15 min read

The TrustFlow™ Methodology — Academic Edition

A multilevel, behaviorally anchored framework for operationalizing trust in organizations — integrating neuroscience, behavioral profiling, team and individual coaching, and performance metrics to transform trust into observable, repeatable micro-behaviors.

By Jeff Morris, "The High Trust Guy"
DreamSmart Behavioral Solutions

January 2026 · Version 1.0

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OVERVIEW

The TrustFlow™ methodology is a multilevel, behaviorally anchored framework for operationalizing trust in organizations. It integrates neuroscience, behavioral profiling, team and individual coaching, and performance metrics to transform trust from an abstract, relational quality into observable, repeatable micro-behaviors that can be measured and improved at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

Keywords: TrustFlow, organizational trust, 12 Cs, NeuroTrust, behaviorally based trust, trust progression curve, Behavioral SuperPowers, cross-functional teams

Key takeaways

- ✓ Cross-functional teams are widely used but systematically fragile — and the fragility is not only a design problem but a trust problem, as decades of meta-analytic evidence on trust and team performance show.
- ✓ TrustFlow™ sits at the intersection of four literatures: the neuroscience of trust, team trust and performance, trust in leadership and ethical behavior, and flow / optimal functioning.
- ✓ The methodology is a three-step progression — NeuroTrust → Behaviorally Based Trust → TrustFlow — supported by TrustSparks™, the Behavioral SuperPowers™ / Trust Factor™ diagnostic, and the 12 Cs behavioral dashboard.
- ✓ The 12 Cs are organized into four quadrants (Foundations, Essentials, Work, Results); each "C" is specified as a one-line micro-behavior with a practice window, a metric, and evidence.
- ✓ Because it is fully behaviorally specified, TrustFlow™ is empirically testable: interventions can be evaluated with established trust and team-effectiveness scales plus TrustFlow-specific behavioral indicators.

What TrustFlow™ is

The TrustFlow™ methodology is a multilevel, behaviorally anchored framework for operationalizing trust in organizations. It integrates neuroscience, behavioral profiling, team and individual coaching, and performance metrics to transform trust from an abstract, relational quality into observable, repeatable micro-behaviors that can be measured and improved at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

Problem framing: cross-functional teams and the trust gap

Organizations increasingly rely on cross-functional teams to manage complex projects, innovation, and strategic change. Yet the empirical record shows that these teams are consistently difficult to lead and often underperform. In a field study of 95 cross-functional teams across 25 large corporations, Tabrizi (2015) reported that nearly 75% of teams were "dysfunctional," failing on at least three of five criteria: staying on schedule, staying on budget, meeting specifications, delivering customer value, and remaining aligned with corporate goals. Although this study appears in *Harvard Business Review* rather than a peer-reviewed journal, it is widely cited as a practical indicator of how frequently cross-functional collaboration breaks down (Morrissette & Kisamore, 2020).

Peer-reviewed research across time, sectors, and countries converges on a similar pattern. A systematic review of matrix organizations and cross-functional teams in the public sector concluded that, while such structures are widely deployed, they frequently suffer from role ambiguity, conflicting priorities, and accountability gaps, and the evidence for clear performance benefits is mixed (Pakarinen & Virtanen, 2017). Studies of cross-functional innovation teams show that their positive impact on project performance is highly contingent on context (e.g., organizational structure and connectedness); in some conditions, cross-functionality does not improve outcomes or can even hurt them (Blindenbach-Driessen, 2015). Research on new product development similarly finds that cross-functional collaboration does not automatically translate into better performance; under high competitive intensity, coordination and conflict costs can offset the benefits unless knowledge integration mechanisms are deliberately designed.

More recent work highlights social and structural risks. A 2022 structural-equation study of cross-functional teams found that competition and knowledge hiding significantly reduce team efficiency, underscoring that assembling diverse expertise can backfire when relational dynamics are not managed (Ton et al.,

2022). A 2023 study of cross-functional collaboration in the early phases of capital projects identified multiple barriers — misaligned incentives, unclear roles, information asymmetries, and conflicting priorities — that systematically undermine collaboration. Research on cross-functional team structure further concludes that collaboration across functional boundaries is "inherently challenging" and that, in larger multiteam systems, excessive cross-boundary communication can worsen outcomes, leading to overload and coordination drag (Larson et al., 2023).

Taken together, evidence spanning more than a decade, across sectors (public, manufacturing, innovation, capital projects) and national settings, suggests that cross-functional structures are widely used but systematically fragile. Structural and process redesigns help, but they do not fully address the recurrent breakdowns in coordination, accountability, and learning.

From structural fragility to TrustFlow™

A growing body of work indicates that this fragility is not only a design problem but also a trust problem. A meta-analysis of 112 independent studies (7,763 teams) found that intrateam trust is positively related to team performance, with an above-average effect size ($\rho \approx .30$); this relationship remained robust after controlling for other predictors and covariates (De Jong et al., 2016). A more recent meta-analysis focusing on business teams reported a strong, positive trust–performance relationship, with particularly strong effects in decision-making and self-directed teams — contexts that closely resemble cross-functional work (Morrissette & Kisamore, 2020).

Additional evidence speaks to today's distributed, hybrid, and virtual settings. A meta-analysis of virtual versus face-to-face teams showed that trust matters even more in virtual teams, where coordination costs, perceived risk, and reliance on digital communication are higher (Morris, 2024). Process-oriented studies further demonstrate that trust improves performance through team monitoring, effort, and

reflexivity — exactly the capabilities cross-functional teams require to manage interdependencies, negotiate trade-offs, and adapt to changing requirements (Morris, 2024).

Seen through this lens, Tabrizi's "75% dysfunctional" finding is not an anomaly but a symptom of a deeper pattern: cross-functional teams are placed in high-interdependence, high-ambiguity, high-risk environments, yet most organizations lack a behavioral trust methodology robust enough to support them. Structural solutions (e.g., revised reporting lines, new governance processes) are necessary but insufficient. What is missing is a systematic way to translate "trust" into micro-behavioral practices that leaders and team members can enact and track in real time. The TrustFlow™ methodology is designed to address this gap.

Conceptual foundations of TrustFlow™

TrustFlow™ sits at the intersection of four key literatures.

Neuroscience of trust

Experimental and neuroimaging studies show that interpersonal trust is associated with oxytocin release and activity in neural circuits related to reward and emotion regulation; oxytocin administration has been linked to increased trusting behavior in economic exchanges, suggesting a biological basis for cooperative behavior (Zak, 2008).

Team trust and performance

Meta-analyses confirm that intrateam trust is a robust predictor of team performance, above and beyond alternative predictors, across a wide range of tasks, industries, and cultures (De Jong et al., 2016).

Trust in leadership and ethical behavior

Research on trust in leadership has shown consistent links with work attitudes, citizenship behavior, and in-role performance; work on authentic and ethical leadership suggests that leader character and behavioral integrity shape flourishing and ethical conduct via trusted relationships (Larson et al., 2023).

Flow and optimal functioning

Flow theory describes a state of deep absorption with clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance between challenge and skill; this state is associated with high performance and intrinsic motivation, and emerging work connects flow to characteristic neurophysiological profiles (Larson et al., 2023).

TrustFlow™ extends flow theory by positing a **trust-enabled flow state**, a condition in which robust relational trust and well-designed tasks combine to produce sustained periods of high engagement and performance in individuals and teams. It also aligns systemic team-coaching approaches that view teams within their stakeholder ecosystems and emphasize psychological safety, adaptive leadership, and reflective learning (Morrissette & Kisamore, 2020).

The three-step TrustFlow™ formula

TrustFlow™ is structured as a three-step progression: **NeuroTrust → Behaviorally Based Trust → TrustFlow**, each associated with specific processes and tools.

Step 1: NeuroTrust — priming the brain for trust

NeuroTrust refers to the deliberate use of neuro- and behavioral science to create immediate psychological safety and openness in early interactions. Drawing on evidence linking trust signals to oxytocin release and reduced threat responses, this step focuses on the **TrustSpark™**, the initial micro-moment when a person's nervous system shifts from guardedness to openness.

A TrustSpark is the first flicker of behavioral connection, when someone feels sufficiently seen, heard, and valued that their internal evaluation shifts to "maybe I can trust this person." It is elicited through small, trainable behaviors, such as (1) attuned eye contact, (2) congruent nonverbal behavior, (3) calibrated tone, pacing, and turn-taking, (4) micro-validations and curiosity-based questions, and (5) brief anchoring statements that convey safety and support (e.g., "You belong here," "What matters most to you right now?"). In cross-functional contexts — such as kickoff meetings, conflict escalations, and decision bottlenecks — NeuroTrust specifies the activation window in which these TrustSpark behaviors reduce perceived threat and enable productive collaboration.

Step 2: Behaviorally Based Trust — aligning with Behavioral SuperPowers™

Behaviorally Based Trust is trust built on an accurate understanding of individuals' relatively stable behavioral patterns, conceptualized as Behavioral SuperPowers™ (BSPs). A proprietary BSP assessment produces (1) a behavioral profile (e.g., strategic/analytical, relational/influencer, adaptive/bridge-builder styles), (2) a Trust Factor™ score on a skeptical–trusting continuum, and (3) insight into communication, decision-making, and conflict tendencies.

These data are used in **TrustFactor Coaching**, where leaders and team members explore questions such as: How does my SuperPower create trust deposits or withdrawals for others? How can I adapt my default style to be more trust-congruent, especially in cross-functional, high-stakes situations?

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™ — four quadrants, twelve micro-behaviors.

Quadrant	The Cs	What this quadrant does
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 the team — the bedrock on which TrustFlow™ is built. 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.

The Cs map onto established scholarship: Character to ethical leadership (Chaiyasat et al., 2025); Courage to courageous leadership and psychological safety (Abunab et al., 2026); Commitment to trust-and-commitment links (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" 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 (e.g., 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.

Step 3: TrustFlow — trust-enabled flow

TrustFlow is the peak behavioral state in which individuals, teams, and organizations operate with high trust, high alignment, and low relational friction. When NeuroTrust has reduced threat and created initial openness, and Behaviorally Based Trust has stabilized interactions through predictable, wiring-congruent behaviors, teams are more likely to enter sustained periods of trust-enabled flow characterized by efficient coordination, candid dialogue, and intrinsically motivated effort.

At the team level, the **Trust Progression Curve** describes four developmental stages: (1) Functional trust ("Can you do your job?"), (2) Humility-based trust ("Can I lower my guard with you?"), (3) Behaviorally based trust ("Do I understand how you are wired and lead you accordingly?"), and (4) Blind trust ("I will follow your judgment in high-stakes situations even when I cannot see the full path"). This curve provides a developmental map for diagnosing where a team is and what

kinds of TrustFlow interventions (e.g., TrustSparks, 12 Cs micro-behaviors, BSP-informed coaching) are needed to move to the next level.

Multilevel architecture: individual, team, and organizational levels

TrustFlow™ is explicitly designed as a multilevel methodology.

Individual level

At the individual level, TrustFlow™ emphasizes TrustSpark micro-behaviors as the first unit of change; BSP and Trust Factor™ profiles as trait-level indicators of trust propensity and style; and the 12 Cs dashboard as a self-coaching tool for weekly micro-behavior planning and reflection. These elements support the development of self-trust and credibility, consistent with evidence that competence- and character-based trust are critical antecedents of performance and learning behaviors.

Team level

At the team level, TrustFlow™ is operationalized through the Ten Elements of a DreamSmart Team (e.g., systemic team coaching, BSP-based role design, psychological safety practices, behavioral conflict protocols, and behavioral metrics for performance evaluation). This architecture dovetails with systemic team-coaching models and provides a structured way to embed Behavioral SuperPowers, TrustSpark practices, and 12 Cs habits into recurring team rituals. The combination of the Ten Elements and the Trust Progression Curve gives teams a diagnostic of current trust maturity, a shared language for discussing trust (e.g., "we are strong in functional trust but weak in humility-based trust"), and concrete behavioral commitments to progress along the curve.

Organizational level

At the organizational level, TrustFlow™ offers a template for integrating trust into leadership systems and metrics: aggregating 12 Cs scores and trust-progression data across teams into a TrustFlow dashboard aligned with key performance indicators (engagement, retention, project success, customer satisfaction); integrating BSP and trust data into selection, development, and succession processes; and designing TrustSpark-friendly cultures, in which onboarding, leadership rituals, and communication norms deliberately support early trust activation. This multilevel design responds to calls in the literature to examine cross-level interactions in the trust–performance relationship, recognizing that team trust is shaped by individual dispositions and organizational practices (De Jong et al., 2016).

Measurement and implications for research

A core advantage of TrustFlow™ is that it is empirically testable. Interventions can be evaluated using established measures in the trust and team-effectiveness literature, combined with TrustFlow-specific behavioral indicators.

Trust constructs. Team trust can be measured using multifaceted intrateam trust scales; trust in leadership can be assessed with established instruments summarized in prior meta-analyses (De Jong et al., 2016).

Process mediators. Team monitoring, effort, and reflexivity — identified in prior work as mediators of the trust–performance relationship — can be included as intervening variables, along with psychological safety and knowledge-sharing measures (Morris, 2024).

Outcomes. Outcomes can be aligned with both Tabrizi's criteria and more recent cross-functional work: on-time and on-budget delivery, adherence to specifications/quality thresholds, stakeholder or customer value, and strategic

alignment, supplemented by engagement, intent to stay, and perceived team effectiveness (Morrissette & Kisamore, 2020).

In empirical terms, TrustFlow™ can be framed as a set of hypotheses, such as: increasing TrustFlow behaviors (via TrustSparks and 12 Cs micro-practices) will raise intrateam and cross-functional trust, which prior meta-analyses link to higher team performance, thereby reducing the probability that cross-functional teams fall into the "dysfunctional 75%." Because the underlying evidence base spans multiple decades, industries, and cultures, TrustFlow™ is positioned not as a break from existing research but as a behavioral implementation framework that translates what is known about trust into concrete, repeatable leadership practice.

How to cite this whitepaper

Morris, J. (2026). *The TrustFlow™ methodology — Academic edition* (Whitepaper, Version 1.0). DreamSmart Behavioral Solutions. https://dreamsmartbehavioralsolutions.com/resources/whitepapers/trustflow-methodology-academic-edition

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