



# The Basic Principles: Building Blocks of Trust

by Craig Perrin, Chris Blauth



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century workforce™

## Today's Leader: A Slice of Life

The pressure on leaders to perform—under the most trying conditions—has never been greater. Leaders and employees report working longer and harder to meet higher expectations, often with fewer resources. One early morning in the life of “Claudia,” a typical leader, might represent leaders everywhere looking for answers.

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**4:24 a.m.** Teleconference in 5 minutes. Claudia reviews her notes: complaints from team members in India about being out of the loop, the need to get people fully on board to meet the scary revenue goals, another reminder from her boss that the senior team is counting on her...

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**5:20 a.m.** Productive meeting. Claudia makes a mental note to ask Lois in Denver to use less slang or she'll lose people who don't know the “Americanisms.”

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**5:30 a.m.** Claudia sips her second cup and scans the online *Journal*. Her eyes widen at the headline about a new competitor: “Upstart Firm Signs Contract Worth Millions.”

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**5:45 a.m.** 43 new e-mails. Claudia deletes what she dares and opens the “invitation” to required software training for her team. More technology promising productivity? She mentally starts re-juggling resources.

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**6:15 a.m.** Off to the breakfast launch of the “Bright Idea Team.” New voice mail (When did this come in?): “You said Dan was good, but the customer knew more about us than he did! Call me.” Someone else leaves a voice mail as she leaves one for Dan.

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**6:16 a.m.** New voice mail: “Just a heads-up before the breakfast meeting. You brought me in for some fresh thinking—and all I get is why they won't let us. I thought we were they! See you at 9.”

## Seven Types of Complexity

Leaders like Claudia are everywhere. AchieveGlobal's worldwide study of demands on leaders today, a rigorous review of leadership journals, focus groups, and a survey of 971 leaders in every global region, identified seven top challenges:

- *Far-reaching globalization:*  
“I interact with customers, colleagues, and suppliers in all corners of the world,” said one respondent in our study. “That's a given if we're going to succeed.”

- *Demand for higher and higher productivity:*  
“The bar keeps getting higher. We have to do more than ever before—and faster—with less people. And if we don’t, someone else who can will get the business.”
- *Intense, unpredictable competition:*  
“I used to know exactly who competed with us for projects,” said a sales leader. “Now my life is filled with nasty surprises.”
- *Escalating customer demands:*  
“Consumers know what they want and more than one place to get it,” said another leader. “We used to have long-term customers; that’s barely the case any more.”
- *Managing costs while growing the business:*  
“Cutting costs only takes you so far,” said this respondent. “We need new revenue, which takes real creativity and ability to deliver.”
- *Dizzying technological change:*  
“It offers tremendous opportunity,” we heard in a typical comment, “but it changes so fast we can’t keep up.”
- *Increasingly diverse workforce and customers:*  
“Our industry draws a younger crowd, yet we still have seasoned people. Getting them together is a challenge.”

All these challenges imply a central question for Claudia and leaders like her: “How do I motivate performance when energy is low and tensions are high?”

## The Not-So-Secret Ingredient

Today’s employees want leaders they can trust—both in a difficult present and a change-filled future. We don’t know precisely what those changes will be; we do know they will require focus, collaborative problem solving, and shared accountability. What does it take for employees to collaborate with leaders and accelerate productivity?

“Motivation is critical,” said a leader in our study. “It has to be constant and consistent.”

As a perennial issue in search of a solution, motivation—“employee engagement” in today’s vocabulary—is essential to creating and sustaining

the energy required by today’s business challenges. How do leaders engage employees under less-than-ideal conditions? In a word: “Trust.” According to several managers in our study:

- “An economic downturn destroys trust between management and employees.”
- “Some managers fold under the pressure. They see their power in negative reinforcement, which drives people away. It makes a bad situation worse by destroying trust.”

And this from a leader on the employee’s mind-set:

- “Why should I do something extra for someone who doesn’t care about me?”

So trust, our study confirmed, is at the root of motivation. It promotes candid dialogue, productive conflict, and measured risk taking—all required for the innovation critical to improved results. Leaders who search in vain for a magic formula miss what successful leaders have known all along.

## Timeless Advice for Pressure-Packed Times

If trust is an asset on the leadership balance sheet, The Basic Principles are the currency—six universal guidelines that, if spent wisely, build trust with others, even in today’s high-pressure business climate:

1. Focus on the situation, issue, or behavior, not on the person.
2. Maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others.
3. Maintain constructive relationships.
4. Take initiative to make things better.
5. Lead by example.
6. Think beyond the moment.

Leaders in thousands of organizations have applied these principles since the 1970s to achieve solid business results. More recently, another AchieveGlobal survey of 700 leaders and employees worldwide confirmed the enduring value of The Basic Principles. One survey section had respondents identify an outstanding leader in their organization and rate that person on each principle. Results furnished strong

proof that highly motivational leaders, naturally follow The Basic Principles.

Despite their proven value, The Basic Principles may seem exactly that: basic. For some, basic means “simplistic, easy to master.” Yet basic also means “foundational,” a core or essence, in this case of motivational leadership. A principle is simply an unequivocal starting point for more complex activities.

An analogy may help. Leading under pressure is like doing higher math. Without a thorough grounding in the basics, you have little chance of solving truly difficult problems. The Basic Principles are the algebra and geometry of leadership. Without them, it’s much more difficult to perform the “leadership calculus” required for highly charged, high-impact problems like these:

- A conflict among team members or with colleagues or superiors
- A critical change resisted by fearful stakeholders
- A need to renegotiate unrealistic demands
- An action or request that may hurt the organization or customer
- An individual failing to meet expectations

For new or seasoned leaders, the deceptively simple Basic Principles often resonate with deep beliefs about the right way to treat others and be treated by them. Therefore, the real challenge is not in understanding or accepting these principles, but in applying them under pressure—exactly when leaders need them most.

## SHORT HISTORY OF THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

John H. (Jack) Zenger, co-founder of Zenger Miller, now AchieveGlobal, has described the historical roots of The Basic Principles, six guidelines for building trust and motivating others. Today’s Basic Principles grew from “summary learning points” developed in the 1970s by two Syracuse University professors of industrial and organizational psychology. Zenger and his partner, Dale Miller, reworked these ideas into the first three principles, adding two more in the 1980s. In response to the spread of unethical business practices, followers added Basic Principle 6 in 2003. Today, more than one million leaders and employees worldwide have learned and applied The Basic Principles to:

- Build trust with others, even under pressure-packed conditions
- Establish a wide network of effective relationships
- Maintain a positive work environment
- Defuse highly-charged situations with others

## Creating New Cultural Norms

Leaders under pressure have choices to make. In tense moments, they either choose to build trust and credibility—or they default to a negative pressure-point reaction like those outlined in the chart below. So, will a few simple guidelines produce super-leaders who never misstep under stress? Of course not. In leaders and everyone else the temptation is strong to respond in kind. Such is the central challenge of The Basic Principles: to use them when others don’t.

The Basic Principles	Common Pressure-Point Responses
Focus on the situation, issue, or behavior, not on the person.	Blame, label, generalize.
Maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others.	Demean or threaten.
Maintain constructive relationships.	Withhold help, information, or resources.
Take initiative to make things better.	Complain and wait for others to act.
Lead by example.	Tell others, rather than show them the way.
Think beyond the moment.	Promote a private agenda.

To create a climate of trust, strong leaders reflect on how they use The Basic Principles, especially in tense discussions, noting which principles feel natural and which take more effort. A leader's thoughtful use of the principles helps make them a cultural norm, the way everyone interacts day to day. The resulting atmosphere breeds the optimism and pervasive self-confidence that encourage positive action.

## What's Next?

How can leaders create an environment that builds trust and motivates others in these pressure-packed times? Here's the call to action.

Effective leaders must make every interaction an opportunity to apply The Basic Principles, and every major misstep (no one is immune) an opportunity to demonstrate individual accountability. Leaders serious about building trust invite feedback on their use of

The Basic Principles. They invite advice and let people know whether and how they intend to act on it.

Leaders like Claudia have learned to motivate others to excel under demanding conditions. To do so, these leaders built trust, not always with grand gestures, but consistently, often quietly. These efforts help create a critical mass of people who know and apply The Basic Principles every day to create a high-performing culture—one interaction at a time.

A final analogy may shed further light. If you stand on a dock near a large vessel—a super-tanker or luxury liner—and learn forward to apply steady pressure through one finger... that ship will move! The Basic Principles, slight as they may seem in the maelstrom of organizational change, are that single finger. Through the power of trust, they can transform and re-direct energy often expressed as apathy, resistance, hostility, suspicion, insecurity, and other counter-productive reactions in today's high-pressure workplace.

## Building Trust with The Basic Principles: A Closer Look

### 1. Focus on the situation, issue, or behavior, not on the person.

Employees trust objective, clear-headed leaders who look at the big picture, focus on facts, and keep an open mind. Basic Principle 1 helps everyone solve problems more efficiently, make better decisions, and avoid emotional outbursts.

### 2. Maintain the self-confidence and self-esteem of others.

Contributing fully is easier in a climate of trust and acceptance. When people can express themselves without fear of attack, they are more willing to take risks and stretch their abilities. Self-confidence helps others respond to the constant change inherent in today's workplace.

### 3. Maintain constructive relationships.

Getting things done depends on a network of trusting colleagues, today never more diverse in age, background, education, geography, and perspective. Leaders who leverage these differences help generate innovative thinking required to solve today's problems.

### 4. Take initiative to make things better.

Playing the victim or dwelling on what can't be done only saps energy and amplifies stress. To gain credibility and trust, leaders must demonstrate their readiness to risk failure for a larger purpose—which often begins by owning up to past mistakes.

### 5. Lead by example.

In the normal course of setbacks, stress, and pressure to deliver, leaders have a lot to gain in modeling the needed actions and attitudes. Leaders who set a high standard for others earn the trust and credibility critical in today's demanding work environment.

### 6. Think beyond the moment.

Effective leaders consider the impact of their decisions and avoid decisions that benefit themselves at the expense of others. When leaders set compelling goals, make thoughtful plans, and behave ethically, they promote business success and inspire trust in everyone around them.

## About Craig Perrin

As AchieveGlobal's Director of Solution Development, Craig is a thought leader who works cross-functionally and with clients to guide creation of a range of responses to market needs. Since 1986 he has played a central role in developing the company's flagship programs in leadership, sales, and customer service; co-authored two best-selling books; written many articles and position papers; and produced eLearning and video that have earned scores of national and international awards. In 1998, Craig was named Times Mirror Editor of the Year. Craig's positions before AchieveGlobal include curriculum designer, stand-up facilitator, college instructor, and art curator. Craig holds a B.A. and M.A. from San Francisco State University.

## About Chris Blauth

Chris, Director of Product Strategy, spearheads AchieveGlobal's efforts to develop and maintain products that will prepare leaders at all levels of an organization. He has also been involved with Web-based learning, launching an asynchronous Web-based tool to reinforce the skills taught in AchieveGlobal's flagship sales program, *Professional Selling Skills*®. Prior to joining AchieveGlobal, Chris spent seven years with Leica Microsystems, Inc., where he was a financial analyst and product manager. Chris holds a B.S. in Accounting and Finance from the University at Buffalo, and an MBA in Marketing from Canisius College. He is a member of Beta Gamma Sigma Honor Society and the American Management Association.

## About AchieveGlobal

In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

These are things technology can't do. Think. Learn. Solve problems. Listen. Motivate. Explain. People with these skills have a bright future in the 21st century. AchieveGlobal prepares you for that world.



World Headquarters  
8875 Hidden River Parkway, Suite 400  
Tampa, Florida 33637 USA  
Toll Free: 800.456.9390  
[www.achieveglobal.com](http://www.achieveglobal.com)