

NO FAIL TRUST

THE FLIGHT MANUAL FOR
BUILDING TEAMS THAT
DELIVER UNDER PRESSURE



JASON O. HARRIS

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No Fail Trust: *The Flight Manual for Building Teams That Deliver Under Pressure*

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Kathy, my steady copilot in life.

*And to my daughter, Alena, who reminds me
every day why leadership matters.*

*To the airmen and service members from every branch with
whom I had the privilege to serve—both in combat and at
home—and to the leaders whose shoulders I stand on.*

CONTENTS

Introduction: Flying at the Speed of Trust 9

PART I: PREFLIGHT—The Essentials of No Fail Trust

Chapter One: Beyond Basic Agreement 23

Chapter Two: Building Psychological Safety 37

Chapter Three: Matching Competency to Confidence 59

PART II: TAKEOFF—The Three Pillars of Trust

Chapter Four: Trust the Training 77

Chapter Five: Trust the Process 93

Chapter Six: Trust the People 107

PART III: CLIMB and CRUISE—Lead Like It Matters

Chapter Seven: Right Button, Right Time, Right Reason 131

Chapter Eight: Problem-Solving and the Seven Skill Sets 145

Chapter Nine: Earning the Title 161

PART IV: LANDING THE PLANE—No Fail Trust in Action

Chapter Ten: Creating a Culture of Empowerment 181

Conclusion: Leadership That Doesn't Fail 197

Debrief: The Study 201

Acknowledgments 209

Sources 213

INTRODUCTION

FLYING AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

“Go around, go around, go around.”
We were in the middle of a mission, seconds away from touch-down at Baghdad International Airport, when I heard those six words spoken through my headset. On board the aircraft were sixty Marines, six crew members, and mission-critical equipment. We were on the final stretch of a long overnight mission, and now, from the back of our C-130 Hercules, the loadmaster was telling me *not* to land the plane.

This was not a drill. Whatever call I made as the pilot would determine not only my safety but that of our crew and the Marines on board, as well as that of the airmen and soldiers on the ground, not to mention millions of dollars in government equipment. At a moment like that, there's no time to question, no time to hesitate. You must act. It all comes down to how ready you are to meet the moment. I leapt into action.

Pushing the throttles forward, adding full power to the aircraft while pulling back on the controls, I raised the nose of the

aircraft, setting it at seven degrees above the horizon and initiated an immediate climb.

As the plane began to pull away from the ground, I commanded the copilot to set the flaps to 50 percent, letting the aircraft regain flying airspeed. He verified that we were climbing and told the crew “positive rate.”

I then commanded the copilot to bring the gear up. He reached over with his left hand and brought the gear handle to the up position, and we continued to climb.

Then we reconfigured the aircraft while running checklists to ensure everything was in the correct position. In the back of the aircraft, the loadmaster was doing her job, checking to make sure the passengers and cargo were safe and nothing was out of position.

As we did all this, we still had to keep our eyes out for other aircraft and helicopters that might present a mid-air collision hazard, all while flying through the air at hundreds of miles an hour.

For military pilots, moments like this are common. There’s always a lot going on and decisions have to be made precisely and quickly. The whole crew has to work together to ensure everyone remains safe. After we reached a safer altitude and were now away from the danger, we circled the runway to make another attempt. Minutes later, we were on the ground. And after running all our standard checklists, I asked over the radio, “Loadmaster, why did we go around?”

“Pilot,” she said, “there was something on the tarmac.”

I acknowledged and thanked her for doing her job, and then I breathed a sigh of relief. Because I knew *this*, and only this, was all that kept our aircraft from turning into a giant ball of flame on the runway—six simple words and the lifesaving power of trust.

TRUST CHANGES EVERYTHING

Let me ask you a question.

Would you trust a seventeen-, eighteen-, or even nineteen-year-old young person, fresh out of high school, with the keys to your luxury automobile?

What about with your book of business?

Would you entrust them with not just your life but the lives of sixty other adults and hundreds of millions of dollars in equipment?

If you're like most people, the answer is no. Absolutely not. And that's probably for the best. But when it comes to high-stakes military operations, that's exactly what the United States government does every time it assigns a newly minted loadmaster to an air crew. The loadmaster is rarely a seasoned veteran. Often just out of high school, theirs is an entry-level position. These crew members are young, usually not old enough to drink or rent a car yet. Still, they are entrusted with the safety of the aircraft they fly on—every single day. As the name suggests, loadmasters are responsible for loading and unloading people and vehicles, even precious cargo like explosives, onto and off of aircraft.

As part of their job, they also have to make tough calls in the midst of tight time crunches and sometimes in the heat of combat. Especially during takeoff and landing, they have eyes on the ground and on sensitive equipment in ways that pilots cannot.

During these times, their assessment carries the weight of absolute authority. To disregard it would be to invite catastrophe.

The previous story is but one example among many I've experienced over the decades as both a military and commercial airline pilot.

In my many years of flying, I've learned that good pilots trust their crews and good crews must trust their pilots. Both are trained to stake their lives on the fact that *there is no perfect view of reality*. When lives are on the line, what holds a team together is not just the individual perspective or capability of each person, but instead, it is the trust the entire team has in one another.

Here's another scenario to consider. Imagine you're a loadmaster-in-training standing in the back of an aircraft with a combat-proven instructor and the instructor tells you to direct the pilot to go around. But you, the trainee, hesitate. You have a lower rank, after all, and less experience than the pilot. Who are you to be giving commands to an officer?

"The pilot is in charge," you say. "They have the degree and rank."

The instructor confirms this but reminds you that the loadmaster has a point-of-view the pilot cannot see. The pilot has the same. And both are vital.

Meanwhile, there is a trainee in the cockpit who finds herself in a similar position, questioning whether she should be taking orders from a loadmaster. The instructor in the cockpit tells her that successful missions depend on each crew member's perspective, each of which is valid.

The pilot cannot see what the loadmaster can, and the loadmaster doesn't have control of the aircraft. Both must rely on each other, and when lives are on the line, hierarchy takes a back seat to safety. We all know what it feels like to not be trusted: to be disempowered by a boss, refused a question in a meeting, to be micromanaged by someone who doesn't believe in our capabilities. And if we're honest, we can probably think of times when *we* were

the ones not giving someone else the benefit of the doubt. This is not uncommon. In fact, I would say a lack of trust tends to be the norm in most workplaces. In the military, though, a lack of trust can get you killed. In business, it might simply mean getting crushed by the competition.

Either way, the results aren't pretty.

These days, I am more often standing on a stage or sitting at a desk than I am in the cockpit. I still fly commercially but far less often.

Still, I keep seeing the same lessons being repeated over and over. As a professional keynote speaker and organizational consultant, I've seen how trust is the glue that holds every team together.

Imagine someone from your company's mailroom waltzes into the next board meeting, and they tell everyone that the company needs to redirect this year's budget to a single line item. Would that person be taken seriously?

Of course not. But when a young airman just a few months into military service walks in to conduct a preflight inspection on one of his squadron's aircraft, he is given the utmost respect his position is due.

This young airman doesn't carry rank, ribbons, or years of experience. He's simply following standard operating procedures and a checklist.

If, however, during his inspection, he notices a single bolt out of place, something small the rest of the crew overlooked in their rush to prepare for the mission, his observation is taken seriously. By following protocol and speaking up, he will have saved hundreds of lives.

So, my question is: Where would you rather work? A place where rank and title beat perspective? Or where everyone's voice has a chance to be heard?

This doesn't mean everyone is talking all the time. It just means that in an environment where each opinion is wisely considered, the whole organization improves. When we trust each other, we elevate what we are able to achieve.

The military takes this for granted.

The business world, for the most part, does not.

It makes sense. In a dog-eat-dog world, the winner is the one who takes the least amount of risk, who keeps their head down, who doesn't cooperate too much with others—lest they become too vulnerable. They don't put it all on the line, and they keep their jobs, which is all most people can hope for.

But as a result of this low-trust, low-risk scenario, nothing really changes. Nothing really gets markedly better. Team members don't fully gel, and individuals never get to test their potential. Without trust, everything eventually falls apart or stagnates.

Graham Jones, a performance-psychology expert, says that this is what separates peak performers from average ones: not just the ability to act well under pressure but also the ability to earn and keep the trust of your teammates.

Similarly, business leaders for years have been calling trust the secret ingredient to high performance.

The business author Stephen M.R. Covey coined the term “the speed of trust,” using it to describe the pace at which high-performing organizations are able to move. When everyone is in sync with each other, anything is possible.

When we have more trust, we are able to make more money, accomplish bigger goals, and soar higher than we ever imagined.

The key to building world-class workplaces where we all have a chance to do and be our best is to elevate the confidence we have in ourselves and in each other. If you want your team to attempt the impossible, you have to get them to another level. And that takes work. But the reward is worth the effort. High-trust teams offer a level of freedom and confidence that is unparalleled in other organizations. On these teams, members feel empowered to speak up, take risks, and see how far they can go in their jobs.

They test boundaries, innovate in creative ways, and offer solutions to problems that previously seemed unsolvable. Work becomes meaningful, people get inspired, and the company rises to new heights. Trust really does change everything.

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

Recently, in the business world, people have been talking more about “empowerment” and “culture creation.” Consultants like to go on and on about “resiliency” or “psychological safety.” These are important ideas, of course, but they miss the mark.

Most organizations are operating in survival mode for most of the time, giving leaders little time to reflect on what’s most important at the company. Busy managers race from one important demand to the next, piling meeting after meeting onto already-packed schedules with little margin for conversation or connection outside of what’s already on the calendar.

Talk becomes the most important metric of progress, not action. People end up working after hours to catch up on all the work they

didn't get done during the day. And teams often feel confused, frustrated, and scared of making a mistake.

Empowerment and culture might get the spotlight once a year at the company retreat, but as soon as it's over, it's back to business as usual.

In the air, however, we are not allowed to be so careless. A thousand things can go wrong up there—and if they do, the results can be devastating. Because of the thoroughness of our training and our trust in one another, almost every flight is a safe one. This is what it takes to create a world-class organization. You have to be so committed to a rigorous set of systems and standards that failure becomes all but impossible. You have to elevate both the confidence and competency of each individual team member, setting the stage for peak performance.

Only then can you fly as high as you want to.

In my nearly three decades of military service, including time spent with Air Force Special Operations Command alongside elite units like Delta Force and SEAL Team 6, I've seen how trust can make or break the success of any mission. When Delta Force operators take out a terrorist cell under the cloak of darkness and Navy SEALs parachute onto vessels in the open ocean, that all takes trust. Not basic agreement. Not “do your job and you won't get fired.”

Real, radical, lifesaving trust.

The business world is a different matter altogether. Too often, leaders settle for a fear-based system of compliance instead of one of commitment earned through trust. Sure, a team might *say* they trust their boss. But how deep does that trust go? How high can a team fly if their core motivator is fear of getting fired? What we are seeing in our world today is a crisis of confidence in each other

and in our institutions. And what we need is an elevation of trust, one that can survive any crisis. Which is what I want to spend the rest of this book exploring.

THE STUDY

In 2024, I commissioned a comprehensive national research study through The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK), a global research and strategy firm that has led more than 150 studies on four continents. The study was called “From Trust to Transformation: Elevating Culture and Performance in the Modern Workforce.”

The study surveyed one thousand working Americans aged eighteen to fifty-five who were either employed full-time or part-time. You can read the findings in the debrief section of this book, but the highlights were striking.

From our research, we learned that a vast majority (nearly 90 percent) of working Americans said they were far more likely to stay longer at a company where they felt trusted. They also said they felt much more productive and efficient when they had a strong sense of trust in their leaders.

Over three quarters of the respondents said they would leave a company if they didn't feel like they could trust their leadership. And a vast majority said they thought their leaders should be evaluated on their ability to foster trust in the organization.

After reviewing this, it became clear to me that trust is the lifeblood of any organization. Without it, it's impossible to win. The odds are stacked too high against you. If you cannot earn the trust and confidence of your coworkers, and if they don't do the same, a company will never be able to retain top talent; and as a result, productivity will suffer and the organization will stagnate.

Which is precisely where many companies, nonprofits, and teams find themselves today.

True, you might be able to push through a few productive quarters, maybe even use coercion to motivate people to squeeze out a few more percentage points of efficiency. But in the long run, what every organization needs to thrive is a level of trust, commitment, and confidence that it is so rock solid it cannot fail.

This is what I call No Fail Trust.

No Fail Trust is the unshakable confidence that empowers decisive action when it matters most. It means delivering results when failure is not an option.

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In the military, everyone knows what their job is and what to expect of each other. As a result, teams perform at levels of efficiency and production that would astonish most civilian organizations. But that's just the culture.

When I was actively serving, it did not feel out of the ordinary or exceptional. The same, I found, was true in most commercial airlines. The best teams build trust into the very fiber of their organizations, so that when it's all on the line, things don't fall apart. They can't.

Great organizations are built on No Fail Trust, a commitment to excellence that helps otherwise ordinary teams achieve the impossible. And in this book, I want to show you how to do

the same. I want to demonstrate that it's possible for every person to build greater trust with their colleagues, regardless of title, rank, or position. We all can influence the workplace cultures we are a part of.

In the pages that follow, I will show you a clear framework for how to create and keep No Fail Trust in any organization. I'll identify what a culture of commitment looks like, and how to be the kind of leader who empowers others to do their best.

And I'll share examples both from my life and career in the military, as well as from my time as a commercial pilot and beyond, along with stories from others who are setting a high bar for us all.

Consider this book a map to high performance. It's meant for leaders but offers insights for any person who's a part of a team. Whether you're a frontline worker, mid-level manager, or C-suite executive, there is something to glean here. The principles of No Fail Trust aren't just theory. They're battle tested and based on real-life situations in the business world, on the field of combat, at home, and beyond. These are the lessons I've learned from the frontlines, and I believe they can help you, too.

Just as loadmasters in military cargo planes make lifesaving calls, we all have the power to change things, to make things better. We can all fly higher together. It just takes trust.