

Trust, Traitors, and a Marble Jar: What Reality TV Teaches Us About Leadership

Let's Talk About Celebrity Traitors

Watching *Celebrity Traitors* last night left me with an unexpected insight: The behaviours we see in high-drama reality TV suspicion, alliance-building, subtle betrayals are **the same patterns that show up in organisations** every day. They're just wearing better clothes and using fewer dramatic pauses.

And it got me thinking: why does betrayal hit us so hard, both on screen and off? Why does it sting more when someone we *trusted* turns out to be playing a different game entirely?



In leadership development and coaching, I hear versions of this all the time:

"I thought we were aligned." "I really didn't see it coming." "I feel stupid for trusting them." This isn't about poor judgement or politics it's about the psychology of **trust**. And understanding how we build it (and rebuild it) is one of the most powerful skills a leader can develop.

The Brain Doesn't Fear the Enemy It Fears the Traitor

Here's the interesting bit from a neuroscience perspective: **our brains register betrayal as more threatening than open opposition.**

Enemies are predictable. They sit outside the circle. You know where you stand.

But **when someone on the inside breaks your trust**, your brain scrambles. It disrupts your social prediction model, which is your brain's way of tracking who is safe and reliable.

In fact, studies in social neuroscience (Lieberman, 2013; Singer et al., 2004) show that social pain like betrayal or rejection activates the same brain regions as physical pain. It literally *hurts*.

Betrayal activates the amygdala (threat detection), triggers cortisol release (stress), and impairs the prefrontal cortex (executive function). In other words, betrayal doesn't just break your heart it can hijack your cognition.

No wonder leaders and teams struggle to bounce back.

Trust is a Pattern, Not a Promise

We often think of trust as an either/or: you have it or you don't. But psychologically, **trust is built through consistent signals over time** not grand gestures.

I often use the *Marble Jar* metaphor (popularised by Brené Brown) with clients. Picture a jar. Every small act of integrity, reliability, kindness, or follow-through adds a marble. Every missed opportunity, broken commitment, or quiet betrayal removes one.

You don't build trust with a flashy keynote or an inspiring values statement. You build it when:

- You show up when you say you will
- You remember the detail someone shared about their dad's hospital stay
- You credit your team publicly for the win
- You follow up after a hard conversation not because you *have* to, but because it matters

These are the moments when people think, "I can rely on you." And that's what fills the jar.

Why Betrayal Is So Emotionally Costly at Work

In organisational contexts, betrayal is rarely theatrical. It's often subtle:

- Withholding information "to protect the team"
- Publicly agreeing, privately undermining

- Taking credit without acknowledgement
- Ghosting difficult feedback

And the emotional cost is high because it violates our basic need for **psychological safety** a term coined by Amy Edmondson (1999), referring to a climate where people feel safe to take interpersonal risks.

Psychological safety is only possible when trust is high. And once trust is breached, people don't just lose confidence in *one* person they begin questioning the whole system.

The result? Defensive behaviour, withdrawal, compliance over creativity.

Trust isn't fluffy. It's a **core driver of cognitive performance, collaboration, and resilience**.

The Real Way to Rebuild Trust

Here's where many leaders go wrong: they assume rebuilding trust requires a grand apology or a perfectly worded email.

In reality? It's about **positive behavioural repetition**.

Psychological studies on trust repair (e.g. Kim et al., 2004; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995) show that consistency is key. Not saying the right thing once, but doing the right thing again and again even when no one's watching.

Trust isn't rebuilt with words. It's rebuilt with predictability.

And that means:

- Being where you say you'll be
- Following through, even on the small things
- Naming the tension instead of dancing around it
- Being humble enough to say, "I got that wrong. Here's how I'll make it right."

These acts reintroduce **certainty** into the relationship. And that's what a hurt brain is desperately looking for.

How Leaders Build (or Drain) the Marble Jar

In coaching, I often ask leaders to think about their own "marble behaviour". Are you filling the jar or cracking it? Filling looks like:

- Public praise, private feedback
- Transparent decisions
- Making space for dissent
- Admitting limitations

Draining looks like:

- Saying “My door’s always open” and never being there
- Using information as power
- Dodging tough conversations
- Taking without giving credit

The most effective leaders aren’t the most charismatic. They’re the most **trustworthy** because trust is the soil where everything else grows.

And When You’re the One Who’s Hurt?

Let’s not pretend that trust breaks only ever happen *to* us. Sometimes, we’re the one who slips. Who says the wrong thing. Who avoids the hard moment. Who’s the traitor. It happens.

The mature move isn’t denial it’s **repair**. Name it. Own it. Stay in relationship.

Remember: trust is fragile, but not finite. If someone is still engaging, you still have space to rebuild.

Final Thought: Build a Culture of Marble Jar Moments

Reality TV might exaggerate human behaviour, but it holds up a mirror. We all want to be part of something safe, something solid, something honest.

As a leader, you don’t need to be flawless. But you do need to be **intentional**.

Build trust **one marble at a time** with presence, with consistency, with courage.

For Further Reading and Thinking

- Lieberman, M. D. (2013) – *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*
- Edmondson, A. (1999) – *Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams*

- **Lewicki, R. & Bunker, B. (1995)** – *Trust in Relationships: A Model of Development and Decline*
- **Kim, P. H. et al. (2004)** – *When More Blame Is Better Than Less: The Implications of Internal vs. External Attributions for Repairing Trust After a Transgression*

Over to you

What's one marble-worthy action you've seen—or taken—this week? Let's crowdsource a list of trust-building micro-behaviours. Share. Reflect. Tag a leader who leads with trust. Let's keep the jar full.

Key Takeaways

- Betrayal feels more painful than open conflict because it triggers the brain's threat response and undermines our sense of safety.
- Trust is built gradually through consistent, small acts of integrity, reliability, and care—not through big promises.
- Subtle behaviours like withholding information or avoiding hard conversations can quietly damage trust within teams.
- Rebuilding trust requires steady, predictable follow-through rather than words or apologies alone.
- Leaders create or destroy trust through their daily actions, shaping the culture one “marble-worthy” moment at a time.