

How Assuming Success by Association Destroys Teams, Trust, and Judgment

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There's a reason the Theranos scandal fooled so many people. It looked promising on the surface. The board was stacked with recognizable names, and the founder went to Stanford, so big-name investors bought in. That led to people turning off their critical thinking and relying on assuming success by association. As Guy Kawasaki, Chief Evangelist at Canva, told me when I interviewed him, "Fundamentally, we're all lazy. Instead of figuring something out, we're looking for proxies." That's how teams lose direction, trust gets misplaced, and judgment breaks down. Why write about Theranos now? Because many of the mistakes made then continue to be made by people who continue to assume. As you might have heard, when we assume... well, you probably know the rest.



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What Are Proxies And How Do They Tie Into Teams Falling Into The Status Quo?

When Guy used the word proxy, I remember thinking at the time, it wasn't a term I heard very often. As he explained, it became clear that when people assume someone is smart or capable just because of who they know or where they went to school, they fall into what Guy called "success by association." It's a shortcut that causes decision-makers to overvalue pedigree and overlook performance. In my research on curiosity, one of the biggest inhibitors I identified is assumption. When people believe they already know the answer, they stop exploring. When teams rely on a person's background instead of their behavior, they stop thinking, and that's when trust breaks down and companies get stuck in status-quo ways.

Why Teams Lose Direction When Proxies Replace Proof

I remember when I interviewed Kawasaki, how he shared what it was like working with Steve Jobs at Apple. He called him brilliant, but not exactly empathetic. Because Jobs was successful, people assumed anything tied to him would succeed. That's where trust can become fragile if leaders start to chase proxies instead of performance. A Stanford degree? Must be smart. Backed by Sequoia? Must be the next big thing. When organizations confuse validation with actual verification, they default to what's easy. It's more comfortable to trust a resume than to ask hard questions. But when curiosity disappears from decision-making, teams follow myths, not metrics. And that leads to blind spots.

How Teams And Trust Break Down From Credential Assumptions

Trust comes from being seen for who you are, not who you know. When teams start to think promotions or opportunities go to the most connected rather than the most capable, they stop believing in fairness. That erodes trust, and over time, it kills curiosity.

I've worked with companies where talented employees raised valid concerns, but those were brushed aside because the source wasn't "senior" enough. When teams feel like their input doesn't matter, they stop offering it. Eventually, the people with the most valuable insights are silent. And without challenge, progress stalls.

How To Build Trust And Stronger Teams By Questioning Proxies

To prevent trust breakdowns, start by questioning your own assumptions. Instead of asking where someone studied, ask how they've solved problems. Instead of saying they're connected, ask how they think under pressure.

Strong teams create space for disagreement. They invite people from different perspectives into the conversation. They ask, "What could go wrong?" not just "Who's behind it?" Curiosity builds trust through transparency.

Guy described how venture capital often becomes herd mentality. "If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me" is a mindset that replaces scrutiny with safety. But that's not trust; it's inertia. In the Theranos case, it led to disaster because no one wanted to be the outlier who asked the wrong question.



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Why Curiosity Is The Antidote To Blind Trust In Teams

Every team needs a balance of optimism and skepticism. Curiosity helps with understanding. When leaders ask better questions, they protect their teams from falling into groupthink. When team members are encouraged to explore different views, trust strengthens.

Kawasaki shared that many entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley over promise because they lack pattern recognition. They haven't been through the process before. But the investors listening to them often don't dig deeper. They trust the proxy, meaning relying more on where someone worked or who's backing them, instead of asking about the real risks.

Teams require more reflection. Rather than focusing on who you know, focus on how you think. Use curiosity to drive that thinking, and that will build trust.

How To Protect Teams And Rebuild Trust With Curiosity

Curiosity is what keeps judgment sharp. It helps leaders see past the surface. It helps teams move from assumptions to understanding. And it builds trust, because when people ask questions, they show that they care enough to think. The bottom line is that teams fall apart from a lack of questioning. If you want to protect performance, rebuild trust, and lead a stronger team, stop relying on proxies. Start asking better questions. That's where trust begins, and that's how smart teams stay successful.