

LEARNLIFE · Cultivating Trust

A Practice and Listening Companion

Twelve rituals and a listening instrument for sustaining a high-trust learning ecosystem across ages and contexts

Introduction: The Question This Companion Answers

What are the conditions under which trust becomes the default orientation of a learning community - visible in decisions about space, time, language, assessment and care? Trust of this kind is not a feeling. It is not a slogan painted on a wall. It is a resource that shapes a community's capacity for cooperative work and sustained improvement, and it grows only when it is cultivated deliberately and listened for carefully.

This companion exists to support practitioners in that cultivation and that listening. It is built from the combined work of Bryk and Schneider (2002), the Learnlife Eight Prime Conditions for a Love of Lifelong Learning, and more than eight years of practice across diverse learning communities spanning multiple continents and age ranges. It brings together, in a single volume, the twelve Trust Rituals that quietly sustain the ecosystem and the Listening for Trust pulse instrument that allows a community to hear how trust is travelling.

You cannot install trust. You can only cultivate the conditions under which it grows - and then listen carefully enough to notice when it is thriving, drifting or under strain.

Who this companion is for

This companion is designed to be useful across the full span of learners and their wider community. It is written for the guides, mentors, facilitators and community leaders who hold the space around them.

Rather than separate the material into discrete age groups, the companion uses a continuum. Each ritual and each pulse item carries continuum-adaptation language that moves from the younger end of the learning journey to the adult end. The substance of trust does not change across that span. What changes is the form in which it is offered, the vocabulary used and the relational register in which the practice is held.

Culturally nuanced, context-agnostic

The companion is written to hold its integrity across very different contexts. It does not assume English literacy, printed materials, digital devices or a dedicated physical space. It does not assume a Western construct of the individual. Where cultural register matters - and it almost always does - the companion offers adaptation notes rather than prescribed scripts.

How the companion is organised

Part One sets out the foundations: the four dimensions of relational trust drawn from Bryk and Schneider, the mapping to the Eight Prime Conditions, and the non-negotiable conviction that trust precedes structure.

Part Two presents the twelve Trust Rituals, each on a consistent template including continuum and contextual adaptation.

Part Three offers the Listening for Trust pulse instrument, reframed as a listening practice rather than a survey audit.

Part Four connects signal to action, explaining how ritual and pulse speak to each other.

This companion is offered as an invitation, not a prescription. It is not a replication guide. It is a scaffold on which each community may grow its own authentic expression of trust.

Part One: Foundations

Trust in a learning community is not warmth, friendliness or positive culture measured by satisfaction surveys. Drawing on Bryk and Schneider's foundational work, relational trust is the resource that shapes a community's capacity for cooperative work and sustained improvement. It grows when four specific dimensions are present and visible, and it withers when any one of them is absent. The rituals and the pulse instrument in this companion are organised around these four dimensions.

The four dimensions of relational trust

Dimension	What it means in practice
Respect	The recognition of the dignity of every person in the community. In a learning context, respect is expressed by taking learners' ideas, time and agency seriously - not as an indulgence, but as an acknowledgement of their humanity. Respect is visible in how a guide listens, how decisions are made, and how disagreement is held.
Competence	The reliable fulfilment of role-based obligations. Learners and their families need to experience that guides are genuinely capable of supporting learning; guides need to experience that learners are engaging with integrity; leaders need to demonstrate that they know how to run a community well. Competence is not perfection - it is reliability.
Personal regard	The willingness to extend oneself beyond the minimum role obligation. It is the moment a guide stays five minutes longer to finish a difficult conversation, the moment an older learner includes a younger one, the moment a family is welcomed with care rather than processed. Personal regard is what converts an institution into a community.
Integrity	Consistency between word and action. Integrity is the experience that what the community says it values is what the community does. When integrity is present, predictability becomes safety. When it is absent, the language of trust becomes hollow and corrodes everything.

Why trust must precede structure

One of the most persistent errors in education reform is to attempt to install trust-based practices on top of distrust-based structures. A school adds restorative justice while maintaining surveillance-based discipline. A hub co-creates agreements while the underlying timetable, space and assessment remain compliance-driven. The new practices do not take root, and everyone concludes that trust-based approaches do not work. The truth is that they were never given the ground in which to grow.

The rituals in this companion are therefore not techniques to be layered onto an unchanged institutional context. They are expressions of a conviction that must already be held by those leading the community. The conviction is that learners of every age are worthy of being trusted, capable of integrity when the conditions support it, and diminished by structures that begin from distrust.

Mapping to the Eight Prime Conditions

The twelve rituals in Part Two are not arbitrary. Each ritual cultivates one or more of the Eight Prime Conditions for a Love of Lifelong Learning, and each ritual strengthens one or more of the four relational-trust dimensions. The mapping below is a reference for practitioners who want to see how the conditions, dimensions and rituals fit together.

Prime condition	Rituals that cultivate it
Being Genuinely Known	Rituals 5, 6, 10
Psychological Safety	Rituals 2, 5, 6, 9
Clarity of Purpose	Rituals 11, 12
Genuine Agency	Rituals 3, 7, 11
Deep Relational Trust	All twelve rituals; central to 1, 3, 8
Learner-Led Community	Rituals 4, 7, 10, 11
Rigour with Meaning	Rituals 1, 12
Becoming, not Performing	Rituals 6, 11

What this companion is not

This companion is a light scaffolding for something that must grow organically in each community. The rituals are invitations, not scripts. If they are used well, they should strengthen the relational culture of a community over time. If they are used

as performance measures or compliance instruments, they will stop working - because trust cannot be measured into existence.

Part Two: The Twelve Trust Rituals

Each ritual is presented in a consistent format to make it usable in practice. Rituals are intentionally short - most take between five and fifteen minutes - and are designed to be sustainable as a regular rhythm rather than an occasional event.

RITUAL 1 · MOMENTS OF INTEGRITY

Making small acts of trustworthy behaviour publicly visible, so that the community learns to recognise and name integrity when it sees it.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Integrity · Respect
Prime condition nurtured	Rigour with Meaning · Deep Relational Trust
Core practice	In a short circle, invite community members to name tiny integrity actions they have witnessed in the preceding weeks. The naming is short, specific and unsentimental: who did what, and what it made possible. No one is put on the spot; contributions are voluntary.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end of the continuum, the naming is concrete and simple: returning a pencil, telling the truth about a small accident, waiting for a friend. In middle phases it moves toward the social: keeping a promise to a peer, owning a mistake before being asked. At the adult end, particularly with entrepreneurs, it becomes about professional integrity: honouring an agreement with a supplier, correcting a pricing error that would have gone unnoticed, declining an opportunity that compromised a value.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In communities where public praise is culturally sensitive - for example, where individual recognition can create embarrassment or destabilise collective harmony - reframe the ritual as a collective observation of practices rather than recognition of

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
	individuals. Use third-person framings: "the kind of thing that happened this week was..." rather than "he or she did."
Facilitation note	Hold the ritual short. Five minutes is plenty. Do not allow it to become a performance of virtue. If someone wishes to name their own integrity act, gently redirect - this is a ritual of mutual noticing, not self-report.
Signs it is taking root	Community members begin to anticipate the ritual and carry its frame into the week - noticing integrity as they go. The language of "integrity" starts to appear in casual conversation.
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes formulaic, or it drifts into a recognition of loud, visible acts rather than quiet ones. When this happens, pause the ritual for a cycle and restore it with a conversation about what integrity means in this community.

RITUAL 2 · RESPECT RESET

A gentle seasonal renewal of the community's norms around respect, undertaken without singling anyone out and without the accumulated weight of grievance.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Respect
Prime condition nurtured	Psychological Safety · Deep Relational Trust
Core practice	Once per cycle, hold a circle with two open prompts: one thing people do here that makes me feel respected, and one thing that would strengthen respect in our community. Contributions are voluntary, anonymous if preferred, and offered without debate.
Continuum adaptation	Younger learners need concrete, observable examples and a facilitator who holds the frame firmly. Middle-phase learners can hold the circle themselves with light facilitation. Adult entrepreneurs benefit from a version oriented toward professional respect -

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
	how peers treat each other's ideas, time and work - and can often run the ritual without a facilitator at all.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In cultures where direct statements about interpersonal behaviour are uncomfortable, shift from first-person statements to shared stories: "I remember a time when I felt respected here was..." This is especially important in communities where direct critique of peers would violate social norms.
Facilitation note	The ritual is not a problem-solving session. If specific issues surface, honour them and route them to a follow-up conversation rather than attempting to resolve them in the circle.
Signs it is taking root	The community begins to recalibrate naturally as drift appears, without waiting for the next formal reset. Respect becomes a language the community shares.
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes a venue for unresolved complaints or, at the opposite extreme, a round of polite affirmations that surface nothing. Both are signals that the frame needs refreshing.

RITUAL 3 · THE TRUST SYMBOL CELEBRATION

Honouring a visible, identity-defining symbol of the community's trust contract, so that the symbol does not fade into the background.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Respect · Integrity
Prime condition nurtured	Deep Relational Trust · Learner-Led Community
Core practice	Twice per cycle, spend five minutes acknowledging the community's signature trust symbol. This might be lockless lockers, an open-tool policy, a cash box left unguarded, the freedom to enter the staff space, or an unsupervised project room. Every community develops its own. The ritual names what the symbol represents and thanks the community for sustaining it.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end of the continuum the ritual is held by a guide, with learners participating through a short response (a nod, a hand offered, a spoken line). In the middle phases, learners co-facilitate. At the adult end, the symbol and the ritual are entirely held by the community of learners themselves - for example, a shared materials cupboard or tool store that operates on trust.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	Every community needs its own symbol - borrowed symbols do not hold. In an emerging-economy context, where resources are scarce, the symbol may carry higher practical risk; in that case the symbol must be negotiated carefully and the ritual held with particular gravity.
Facilitation note	Be honest. If the symbol is under strain - if the tool box has been disrupted, if trust has been tested - say so. The ritual is not a pretence of perfection; it is a reaffirmation of commitment.
Signs it is taking root	The symbol begins to appear in the community's stories about itself: "We are the kind of community that leaves the resource cupboard unlocked" It becomes identity.
Common drift to watch for	Ritual becomes ceremonial and disconnected from the reality of the symbol. When this happens, pause the ritual and hold an honest community conversation about whether the symbol is still alive.

RITUAL 4 · PASS IT FORWARD

Cultivating quiet, anonymous acts of care as a normal feature of community life.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Personal regard
Prime condition nurtured	Deep Relational Trust · Learner-Led Community
Core practice	Every six to eight weeks, invite community members to commit to one small, anonymous act of kindness for someone else in the community in the coming week. The act is never announced and never claimed.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the acts are concrete: leaving a flower on a desk, sharing a snack, drawing a picture for a friend. In middle phases they become relational: an anonymous note of encouragement, an invitation to join a group, a defence of someone absent. At the adult end, particularly in the entrepreneurial context, they become professional: a referral made without expectation of return, a quiet introduction, an unacknowledged help.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In collectivist cultures the individualistic framing of "anonymous kindness" can feel strange. In such contexts, reframe as a collective practice: "this week, let us be the kind of community that..." rather than "each of you, pick one kindness to do."
Facilitation note	Do not ask people to report back. The ritual's power depends on the act remaining unclaimed. If community members ask whether to share what they did, gently redirect to the practice of doing without needing to be seen.
Signs it is taking root	Small unnamed acts of care appear in the community without the ritual prompting them. The ritual ceases to be a prompt and becomes an affirmation of a rhythm already present.
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes performative - acts of kindness carried out for the story that will be told about them. When this happens, restore anonymity and reduce frequency.

RITUAL 5 · RELATIONSHIP CHECK-IN PAIRS

Ensuring that every community member has a real and recent conversation about how they are actually doing.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Personal regard · Respect
Prime condition nurtured	Being Genuinely Known · Psychological Safety
Core practice	Twice a month, learners pair up (or pair with a guide where appropriate) and ask each other two questions:

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
	how is your week going, really, and is anything making things harder than usual. The pair listens without fixing.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the pairs are brief, concrete and often held by a guide alongside. In the middle phases, learners hold the pairs themselves using a simple prompt card if useful. At the adult end, the pairs are peer-to-peer and may extend to ten or fifteen minutes - adult learners often need longer to arrive at what is actually happening for them.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In cultures where personal disclosure to a near-peer is uncomfortable, use three framings: a professional frame ("how is your work going"), a community frame ("how is our community feeling to you"), and a personal frame ("how are you"). Allow people to choose the frame that feels comfortable.
Facilitation note	The ritual is not therapy and not assessment. The listener does not give advice, does not report up, and does not take notes. If something serious surfaces, the listener's only responsibility is to offer to accompany the speaker to someone who can help.
Signs it is taking root	Community members report, over time, feeling more known. They begin to raise issues earlier, before they calcify.
Common drift to watch for	Pairs drift toward small talk, or the conversation becomes a monologue from one side. Both are signals to refresh the prompts and briefly re-explain the purpose.

RITUAL 6 · LOW-STAKES VULNERABILITY MOMENTS

Normalising small, manageable vulnerability as a regular feature of community life, so that it becomes a resource rather than a risk.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Personal regard · Integrity
Prime condition nurtured	Psychological Safety · Becoming, not Performing
Core practice	Once a month, community members are invited to share a very small, light piece of personal truth in a short circle - something they tried that was harder than expected, something they learned from a recent mistake, a small challenge they are navigating. The sharing is voluntary, brief and explicitly low-stakes.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the sharing is concrete and often playful - "I was scared of the big slide but I tried it." In middle phases it moves to the social and emotional. At the adult end, particularly in the entrepreneurial context, it becomes about professional vulnerability - a pitch that did not land, a customer conversation that went sideways, a financial stretch that tested confidence.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In cultures where personal disclosure in a group is culturally difficult, the ritual can be reframed as a sharing of learning rather than a sharing of feeling. The prompt becomes: "what is one thing you have learned recently that surprised you."
Facilitation note	Hold the frame firmly. This is not a venue for deep disclosure. If a contribution begins to go into emotionally heavy territory, gently thank the person and offer a private conversation afterwards. Never allow the ritual to drift toward group therapy.
Signs it is taking root	Community members begin to speak naturally about their learning edges, and small vulnerabilities are met with care rather than judgement. The community develops a shared language for "not knowing yet."
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes either too performative (polished vulnerability) or too heavy (emotional disclosure the

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
	community is not equipped to hold). In both cases, restore the frame with a brief reminder of the ritual's purpose.

RITUAL 7 · SHARED SPACE RESET

Strengthening co-ownership of physical space through brief, collective acts of care.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Respect · Personal regard
Prime condition nurtured	Genuine Agency · Learner-Led Community
Core practice	Once a week/fortnight/month, teams take ten minutes to reset a shared space - a studio, a workshop, a meeting room, a market stall. The reset is collaborative, brief, and framed as an act of care for the next users of the space.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the reset is a simple, guided tidy. In middle phases learners decide what needs resetting and how. At the adult end, the reset may extend to shared equipment, tool stores or market-day preparation, and becomes a moment of shared professional pride.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In contexts where physical space is shared with other users or where resources are scarce, the ritual takes on additional weight: the reset is a visible statement that this community does not extract from shared resources but contributes to them. Adapt the ritual to honour whatever cultural codes exist around hospitality and the preparation of space for others.
Facilitation note	Do the reset alongside, not above. If the guide or facilitator watches rather than participates, the ritual loses its meaning.
Signs it is taking root	Space becomes visibly cared for between resets. Community members begin to reset things without being asked. The condition of the space starts to match the community's self-understanding.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Common drift to watch for	The reset becomes a compulsory cleaning task, or it becomes uneven - a few community members do all the work. When this happens, pause and reframe.

RITUAL 8 · TRUST TEMPERATURE CHECK

A very short, regular pulse of how trust feels in the community, used as an early-warning system rather than an assessment.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	All four dimensions
Prime condition nurtured	Deep Relational Trust
Core practice	Every five to six weeks, take three minutes for a simple two-question check, with anonymous response: I feel trusted in this community this week (1-5), and I trust others in this community this week (1-5). Scores are aggregated, shared back with the community at a headline level, and used as a signal.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the ritual uses faces, colours or simple pointing rather than numbers. In the middle phases learners are comfortable with a 1-5 scale. At the adult end, the two questions can be expanded to four, including integrity and competence dimensions of trust in the community's shared work.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In low-literacy contexts, use coloured cards or stones dropped into marked containers rather than written responses. The important principle is that the response is anonymous, quick and collective.
Facilitation note	Respond visibly to the data. If scores dip, name the dip in the community and ask what is happening. If scores hold, name that too. The ritual dies the moment the community concludes its responses disappear into a void.
Signs it is taking root	Scores begin to speak to the community's lived experience of itself. Dips predict real events and allow pre-emptive care.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes a mechanical survey, or the data is collected without being acted upon. Both are fatal. If either happens, suspend the ritual until the community can hold it with integrity.

RITUAL 9 · THE TWO-MINUTE CONFLICT RESET

A simple, low-intensity script for addressing small conflicts before they embed and corrode trust.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Integrity · Respect
Prime condition nurtured	Psychological Safety
Core practice	When a small conflict arises, use a four-beat script: acknowledge what happened, own your part in it, reset the relationship, move on. The whole exchange takes two to three minutes and is held privately between the two people involved.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the script is held by a guide alongside the learners, who model each beat. In the middle phases learners use it themselves with a prompt card. At the adult end it becomes a shared professional norm - a way for adult entrepreneurs to handle the small frictions of shared work without escalation.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In cultures where direct conflict resolution between individuals is uncomfortable, use a mediator or a community elder for the four-beat process, or reframe it as a restorative conversation held with a third person present.
Facilitation note	Not every conflict should be reset in two minutes. If the conflict is serious, the ritual is the wrong tool. Know which conflicts are small and which need longer, more careful repair.
Signs it is taking root	Small conflicts stop accumulating. Community members develop confidence in their capacity to repair - and that confidence itself reduces the frequency of conflict.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes a performative reset that papers over unresolved substance. When this happens, pause and hold a proper restorative conversation.

RITUAL 10 · CROSS-GENERATION CARE MOMENTS

Reducing hierarchy and strengthening community identity through brief acts of care across age or experience boundaries.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Personal regard
Prime condition nurtured	Being Genuinely Known · Learner-Led Community
Core practice	Once a month, community members of different ages or experience levels pair up for a short, shared task - an older learner helping a younger one, or an experienced adult entrepreneur sharing a practice with a newer one. The task is brief (ten minutes) and practical.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end, the older partner may only be a year or two older - a ten-year-old helping a seven-year-old with a shared task. In middle phases, older learners often take genuine pride in the mentoring role. At the adult end, this becomes peer mentoring: experienced entrepreneurs offering brief practical help to newer ones.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	In cultures where age hierarchy is strongly honoured, respect the hierarchy rather than trying to flatten it - but create space for care to flow upward as well as downward. The older learner can express respect for the younger one's fresh thinking; the younger one can offer care for the older one's weight of responsibility.
Facilitation note	The ritual is not tutoring. It is care. Keep the task light enough that the relationship is the substance, not the outcome.
Signs it is taking root	Hierarchies soften without collapsing. Younger and newer community members begin to feel known by those more experienced. Older and more experienced

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
	members begin to see their role as community-shaping.
Common drift to watch for	The ritual becomes a compulsory mentoring programme or drifts into remediation - both miss the point.

RITUAL 11 · WE ARE THE KIND OF COMMUNITY THAT...

Reinforcing shared social identity through a simple, collective articulation of values.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Respect · Integrity
Prime condition nurtured	Clarity of Purpose · Genuine Agency · Learner-Led Community
Core practice	Every six to eight weeks, the community holds a short circle in which members complete the sentence "we are the kind of community that..." with values-based observations about how the community actually behaves. Contributions are collected, shared back and held lightly.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the sentences are concrete and behavioural: we are the kind of community that helps each other. In the middle phases they become more aspirational and values-based. At the adult end they are often strikingly reflective: we are the kind of community that tells the truth about our actions, or we are the kind of community that holds each other to our own promises.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	The ritual translates particularly well across cultural contexts because the frame "we are the kind of community that" invites each community to articulate identity in its own language and values. Do not import phrases from other hubs; let each community find its own.
Facilitation note	Capture the phrases, but do not laminate them. They are a living articulation of identity, not a brand. Let them evolve.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Signs it is taking root	The phrases begin to appear in conversations, decisions and moments of difficulty. Community members use them to hold each other accountable with care.
Common drift to watch for	The phrases become slogans, detached from the lived reality of the community. When this happens, pause the ritual and hold a conversation about whether the phrases are still true.

RITUAL 12 · TRANSPARENCY MINI-LESSONS

Small, practical reminders of the norms of honest communication - making transparency a discipline rather than a sentiment.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Relational dimension	Integrity · Competence
Prime condition nurtured	Rigour with Meaning · Deep Relational Trust
Core practice	Once a month, a short, eight-minute session offers one practical transparency norm: say it early, ask if unsure, name what you are assuming, tell the truth kindly, own the change. The norm is practised briefly and named as a community discipline.
Continuum adaptation	At the younger end the norms are concrete and role-played ("if you break something, what do you say"). In middle phases they are discussed and practised in realistic scenarios. At the adult end, particularly in the entrepreneurial context, they become professional disciplines: transparency with customers, with suppliers, with business partners and with one's own accounts.
Cultural and contextual adaptation	Transparency is culturally patterned. What counts as "telling the truth kindly" varies considerably across cultural contexts. Allow each community to find its own expression of the norm, and be cautious about importing norms from other hubs.
Facilitation note	Hold the session short and practical. Transparency does not grow through lectures. It grows through practised language and modelled examples.

Practice dimension	What it looks like in the community
Signs it is taking root	Community members begin to say difficult things earlier and more kindly. Misunderstandings that used to corrode trust are caught and resolved before they do.
Common drift to watch for	The ritual drifts toward moralising or becomes a venue for singling out members who are perceived as not transparent enough. Both are destructive. If either happens, restore the frame and, if necessary, pause the ritual.

The annual cycle of rituals

Not every ritual needs to happen every week. The following rhythm is a suggestion, not a prescription. Each community should adapt the rhythm to its own calendar and energy.

Rhythm	Rituals
Every week (or nearly)	Moments of Integrity - held very briefly as part of community opening or closing.
Every two weeks	Relationship Check-In Pairs. This is the backbone of the companion; do not let it slip.
Every month	Low-Stakes Vulnerability Moments; Shared Space Reset; Cross-Generation Care Moments; Transparency Mini-Lessons.
Every five to six weeks	Trust Temperature Check; Pass It Forward; We Are the Kind of Community That...
Twice per cycle	Trust Symbol Celebration.
Once per cycle	Respect Reset; the full Listening for Trust pulse instrument (Part Three).
As needed	The Two-Minute Conflict Reset - not scheduled, but always available and practised.

Part Three: Listening for Trust

The second half of this companion is a listening instrument - twenty-four items across the four Bryk and Schneider dimensions - that allows a community to hear how trust is travelling. It is called a listening instrument rather than a survey because the orientation matters. A survey is something done to a community; a listening is something done with a community. If the instrument becomes an audit or a performance measure, it will stop telling the truth. If it is held as a practice of listening, it will reveal a great deal.

How to use the instrument

The full instrument has twenty-four items and takes about ten minutes. A Quick Pulse version of six items (items 1, 7, 13, 16, 19 and 24) takes three minutes. The full instrument works well once per half year at a consistent point in the cycle. The Quick Pulse can be used every five to six weeks as part of Ritual 8, the Trust Temperature Check.

Every item is written in three forms: a core stem, a younger-end wording for early learners, and an older or adult-learner wording. Guides select the wording that best fits the community and, where appropriate, read the items aloud. Responses are anonymous. Using the same instrument at consistent points allows the community to notice movement over time.

Results should be shared back with the community at a headline level within two weeks. The instrument's integrity depends on the community hearing what it said to itself.

Response scale

The core scale is a five-point Likert from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with an additional "not sure / prefer not to say" option. For younger learners, the scale is replaced with a visual five-face scale from sad to happy. For low-literacy adult contexts, a five-stone or five-colour scale can be used, with the stones or colours dropped anonymously into a container.

Section A: Respect (items 1-6)

Respect is the dimension that most often fails silently. A community may feel warm and positive while small, recurring failures of respect quietly corrode trust. The items in this section listen for those small failures.

Item 1	
Core stem	I feel respected by others in this community.*
Dimension	Respect

Item 1	
Younger-end wording	Do people here treat me kindly and listen to me?
Older / adult-learner wording	I experience respect from peers and leaders in this community as a consistent feature of daily interaction.
Context note	Read aloud in low-literacy contexts. In cultures where direct self-report is uncomfortable, complement with observation by a trusted facilitator.

Item 2	
Core stem	My ideas are taken seriously here.
Dimension	Respect
Younger-end wording	When I say something, do people really listen?
Older / adult-learner wording	My contributions to the shared work of this community are genuinely considered, including when they challenge the prevailing view.
Context note	Particularly important in hierarchical cultural contexts, where the absence of respect for subordinate voice may be invisible to leaders.

Item 3	
Core stem	I can disagree here without fearing it will damage my place in the community.
Dimension	Respect
Younger-end wording	If I don't agree, is it still okay?
Older / adult-learner wording	I can express professional or substantive disagreement without experiencing social cost in this community.
Context note	In conflict-avoidant cultures this item tends to score high whether or not disagreement is actually safe. Triangulate with behavioural observation.

Item 4	
Core stem	People here treat each other as partners, not as subordinates.

Item 4	
Dimension	Respect
Younger-end wording	Do grown-ups and children treat each other like friends who work together?
Older / adult-learner wording	The experience of partnership - rather than hierarchy - is visible in how decisions are made and how work is shared in this community.
Context note	Adapt the word "partners" to the culturally appropriate term for reciprocal, egalitarian relationship.

Item 5	
Core stem	I feel my presence matters to this community.
Dimension	Respect / Personal regard
Younger-end wording	Does anyone notice when I'm here?
Older / adult-learner wording	My presence and participation are recognised as a meaningful part of this community's life.
Context note	This item correlates strongly with attendance and retention across contexts.

Item 6	
Core stem	The physical space communicates respect for me.
Dimension	Respect
Younger-end wording	Does our space feel like a good place to be?
Older / adult-learner wording	The physical environment of this community signals that those who use it are trusted and valued.
Context note	Where resources are scarce, adapt to the spirit of the space rather than its material condition. A simple, clean, well-kept room can communicate more respect than an expensive neglected one.

Section B: Competence (items 7-12)

Competence is the dimension communities most often overlook, because it feels uncomfortable to ask about. Yet when community members experience that their guides or leaders are unreliable, trust struggles to grow anywhere else.

Item 7	
Core stem	The people who lead this community know what they are doing.*
Dimension	Competence
Younger-end wording	Do the grown-ups here know how to help me learn?
Older / adult-learner wording	The leaders of this community are genuinely capable of supporting the work we are doing together.
Context note	Particularly important in early-stage hubs where leaders are still learning their craft; honest responses here build competence rather than threatening it.

Item 8	
Core stem	I can rely on people here to do what they say they will do.
Dimension	Competence / Integrity
Younger-end wording	When people say they'll do something, do they actually do it?
Older / adult-learner wording	Commitments made in this community are reliably honoured; I do not have to build workarounds to compensate for unreliability.
Context note	One of the most universally translatable items in the instrument.

Item 9	
Core stem	When something goes wrong, this community handles it well.
Dimension	Competence
Younger-end wording	If something bad happens, do the grown-ups help?
Older / adult-learner wording	When difficulties arise in our shared work, this community responds with capability and care rather than panic or blame.
Context note	Tends to score lower than other competence items because it captures the moments of greatest stress; that is a feature, not a bug.

Item 10	
Core stem	I am learning things here that matter to my life.
Dimension	Competence / Purpose
Younger-end wording	Am I learning things that will really help me?
Older / adult-learner wording	The work we do in this community genuinely develops capability I can use in the wider world.
Context note	Particularly important for adult learners in entrepreneurial contexts, where the cost of participating is high.

Item 11	
Core stem	People here are honest about what they do not know.
Dimension	Competence / Integrity
Younger-end wording	Do the grown-ups say when they don't know something?
Older / adult-learner wording	Leaders in this community model the honesty of not-yet-knowing, rather than performing a false completeness.
Context note	A high-trust indicator across all contexts. Its absence is usually a sign of authority anxiety.

Item 12	
Core stem	I trust this community to keep growing in its own capability.
Dimension	Competence
Younger-end wording	Do I think this place will keep getting better?
Older / adult-learner wording	I have confidence that this community is genuinely learning as an organisation, not just asking others to learn.
Context note	An important item for long-term trust - it captures whether the community walks its own talk.

Section C: Personal Regard (items 13-18)

Personal regard is the dimension that most distinguishes a community from an institution. The items in this section listen for the extent to which community members experience being extended toward, rather than merely processed.

Item 13	
Core stem	Someone in this community genuinely knows me.*
Dimension	Personal regard
Younger-end wording	Is there a grown-up here who really knows me?
Older / adult-learner wording	At least one person in this community holds a real and informed sense of who I am and what I am navigating.
Context note	The single most predictive item for learner wellbeing. If this item is low, prioritise Ritual 5 (Relationship Check-In Pairs).

Item 14	
Core stem	People in this community care about me as a person, not only as a learner or worker.
Dimension	Personal regard
Younger-end wording	Do people here care about me, not just my schoolwork?
Older / adult-learner wording	This community sees and cares for me as a full person, not only in my role within it.
Context note	In entrepreneurial contexts, adapt to include the economic dimension - people care about my flourishing, not only my productivity.

Item 15	
Core stem	People here extend themselves for each other when it matters.
Dimension	Personal regard
Younger-end wording	Do people here help each other when things are hard?
Older / adult-learner wording	When circumstances require it, members of this community go beyond their formal role to support each other.

Item 15	
Context note	Look for positive outliers in this item - they often identify community members holding up the relational infrastructure.

Item 16	
Core stem	I feel safe to bring difficulty into this community.*
Dimension	Personal regard / Psychological safety
Younger-end wording	If I'm having a hard time, can I tell someone here?
Older / adult-learner wording	When I am struggling, I experience this community as a resource rather than a risk.
Context note	Part of the Quick Pulse. A critical early indicator of trust strain.

Item 17	
Core stem	This community celebrates its people in small, real ways.
Dimension	Personal regard
Younger-end wording	Do people here notice when something good happens to us?
Older / adult-learner wording	Moments of meaningful recognition are present in this community - not performative, but real.
Context note	In cultures where overt praise is uncomfortable, adapt to the community's own expressions of recognition.

Item 18	
Core stem	I would recommend this community to someone I care about.
Dimension	Personal regard
Younger-end wording	If my friend or cousin wanted to come here, would I say yes?
Older / adult-learner wording	I would, without reservation, recommend this community to those I care about.

Item 18	
Context note	A high-confidence summary item. Its trend over time matters more than any single score.

Section D: Integrity (items 19-24)

Integrity is the dimension that ties everything together. Without it, the other three dimensions cannot hold. The items in this section listen for the experience of consistency between what the community says and what it does.

Item 19	
Core stem	What this community says it values is what this community actually does.*
Dimension	Integrity
Younger-end wording	When grown-ups say what's important, do they do it?
Older / adult-learner wording	I experience genuine alignment between this community's stated values and its lived practice.
Context note	The most important item in the instrument. If this scores low, pause and listen carefully before proceeding with any other action.

Item 20	
Core stem	Decisions here are made fairly and explained honestly.
Dimension	Integrity
Younger-end wording	When the grown-ups decide things, do they tell us why?
Older / adult-learner wording	The decision-making processes in this community are transparent, fair and accompanied by honest explanation.
Context note	In hierarchical cultures, the word "fair" may need contextual adaptation.

Item 21	
Core stem	People here tell difficult truths kindly rather than hiding them.
Dimension	Integrity

Item 21	
Younger-end wording	If something's wrong, do people here tell the truth about it?
Older / adult-learner wording	In this community, hard conversations happen openly and with care, rather than being avoided or deferred.
Context note	A strong indicator of a high-trust culture. If this item is low, the community has become conflict-avoidant.

Item 22	
Core stem	Mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning, not occasions for punishment.
Dimension	Integrity / Psychological safety
Younger-end wording	If I make a mistake, do people help me learn from it?
Older / adult-learner wording	This community holds mistakes - including my own - as opportunities for growth, without fear of unfair consequence.
Context note	A foundational item for psychological safety. Its absence usually signals surveillance-based structures.

Item 23	
Core stem	I believe this community keeps its commitments to me.
Dimension	Integrity
Younger-end wording	When people here make me a promise, do they keep it?
Older / adult-learner wording	I experience this community as reliable in honouring the commitments it makes to me and to others.
Context note	Closely related to item 8; track the two together.

Item 24	
Core stem	I trust this community with my whole self.*
Dimension	All four dimensions
Younger-end wording	Do I feel safe being me here?

Item 24	
Older / adult-learner wording	I can bring the fullness of who I am into this community, and experience it as a place where that fullness is welcome.
Context note	The most demanding item in the instrument. Tracks the cumulative experience of all four dimensions.

Open reflection prompts

Alongside the quantitative items, the instrument invites four short qualitative responses. These are where the community most often says what the numbers cannot. They should be read with care by a small group of community members, and returned anonymously to the whole community at a headline level.

1. One moment this cycle when I felt genuinely trusted was...
2. One thing that makes this community feel safe to me is...
3. One thing that would strengthen trust in our community is...
4. If there is anything making trust harder right now that you want to name, this is your space to do so.

Part Four: From Signal to Action

The twelve rituals and the twenty-four-item listening instrument are designed to speak to each other. The rituals cultivate trust; the instrument listens for it. When the instrument surfaces a concern, the rituals offer a response. When the rituals appear to be working, the instrument confirms it - or, as importantly, reveals where the apparent working is only on the surface.

Reading the patterns

The most useful patterns are rarely in the absolute scores. They are in the movement and the mismatch. Movement means a dimension that is trending in a particular direction over successive cycles - upward movement in integrity, say, or downward movement in personal regard. Mismatch means a dimension that scores high in one form but low in another - community members report that the community takes their ideas seriously (item 2) but also that they cannot disagree without cost (item 3). Mismatches are often where the richest insight lies.

Which ritual responds to which signal

If the instrument signals...	...respond with these rituals
Low Respect (section A)	Deepen Rituals 2 (Respect Reset) and 11 (We Are the Kind of Community That). Consider a community conversation about the meaning of respect in this place.
Low Competence (section B)	Deepen Rituals 1 (Moments of Integrity, focused on role-based reliability) and 12 (Transparency Mini-Lessons). This is also a signal that leadership development is needed, not only ritual.
Low Personal Regard (section C)	Deepen Rituals 5 (Relationship Check-In Pairs), 6 (Low-Stakes Vulnerability Moments) and 10 (Cross-Generation Care Moments). This is the most time-sensitive signal; act quickly.
Low Integrity (section D)	Deepen Rituals 1 (Moments of Integrity), 3 (Trust Symbol Celebration) and 12 (Transparency Mini-Lessons). Also hold a leadership conversation about whether the community's stated values are visible in its structural decisions.

When the instrument tells you to pause

Sometimes the instrument will reveal that the community is not ready for the next step the leadership had in mind - that trust is thinner than assumed, or that a

particular group within the community is carrying a strain the majority is not aware of. In those moments, the right response is to pause, acknowledge what has been heard, and stay with the community until the ground is firm again. Nothing else you attempt to build will hold if this step is skipped.

Appendix: Sources

This companion makes reference to:

Bryk, A. S. and Schneider, B. (2002). Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement. Russell Sage Foundation.