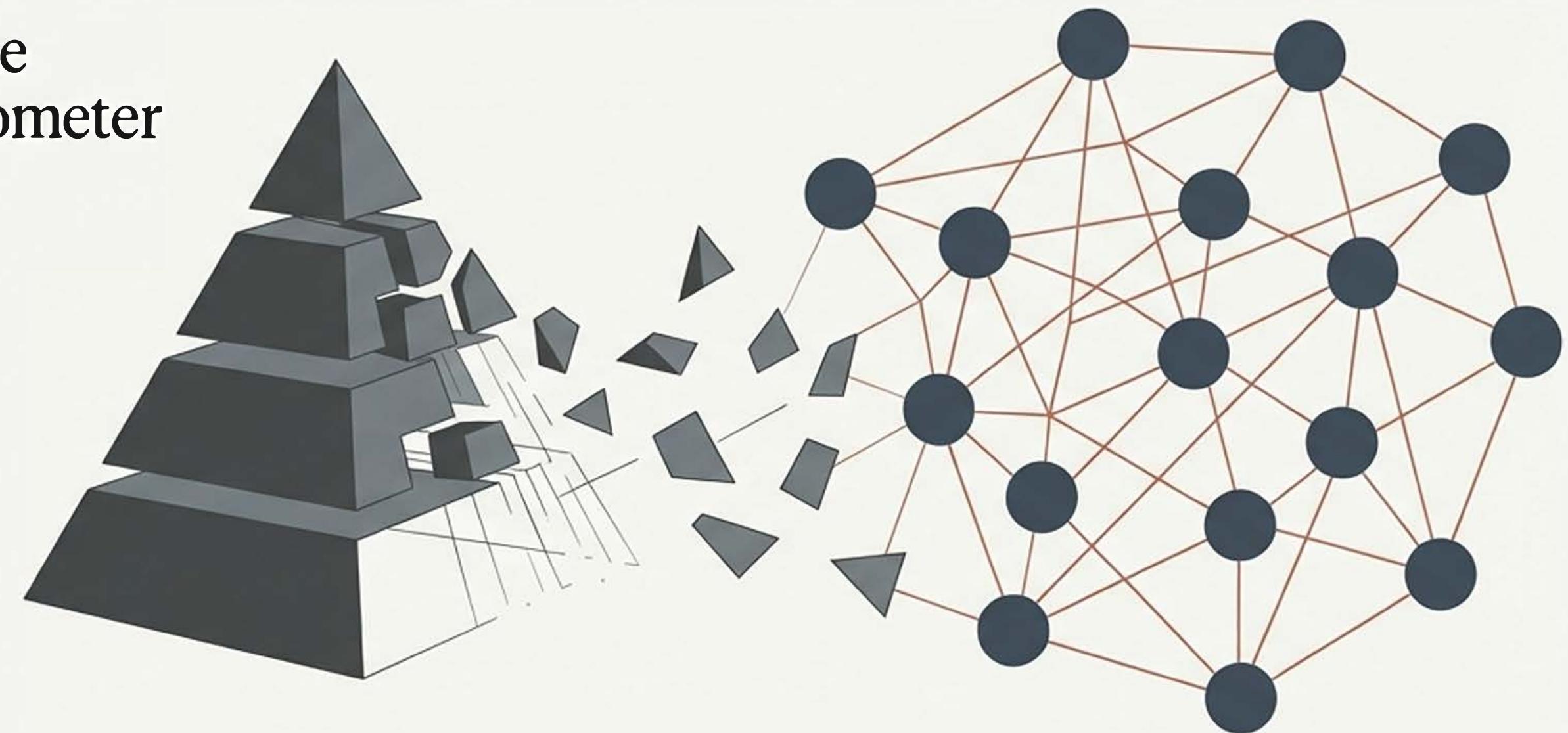


The Peer Advantage: Why the Future of Leadership is Horizontal

Strategic Insights from the
2026 Edelman Trust Barometer
& The Rise of the Trust
Broker



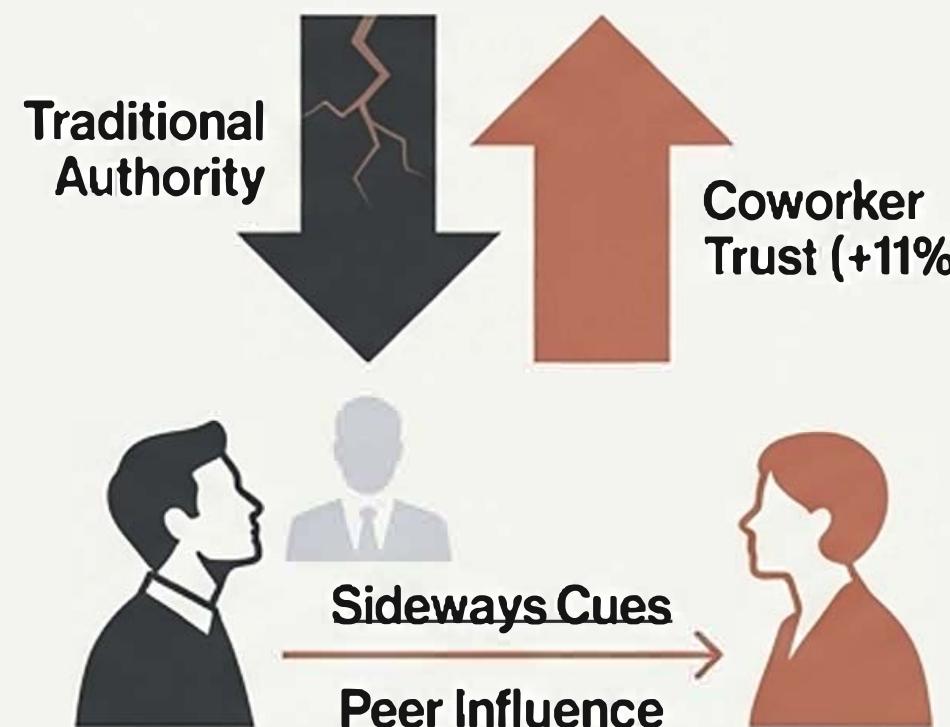
Source: The Trust Shift: Why Peer Influence is the New Leadership Superpower by Leo Bottary (CEOWORLD Magazine)

Executive Summary: The Pivot to Horizontal Accountability

01

The Context

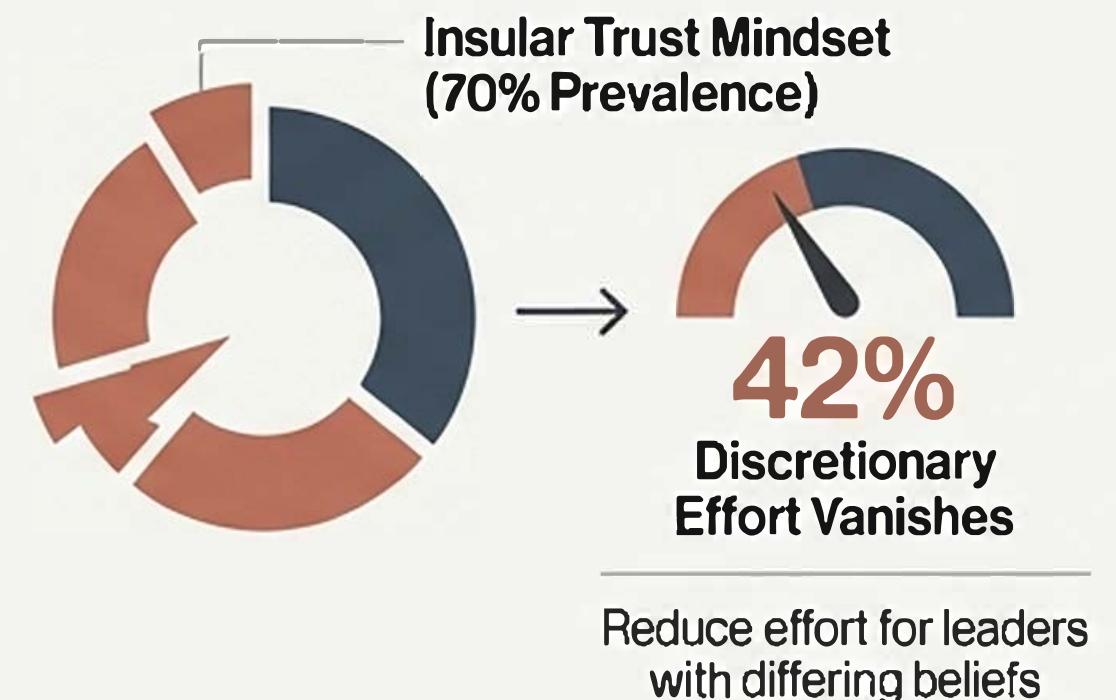
Trust in traditional authority is eroding, while trust in coworkers has surged (+11%). Employees now look sideways to peers, not up to leaders, for cues on behavior and belief.



02

The Threat

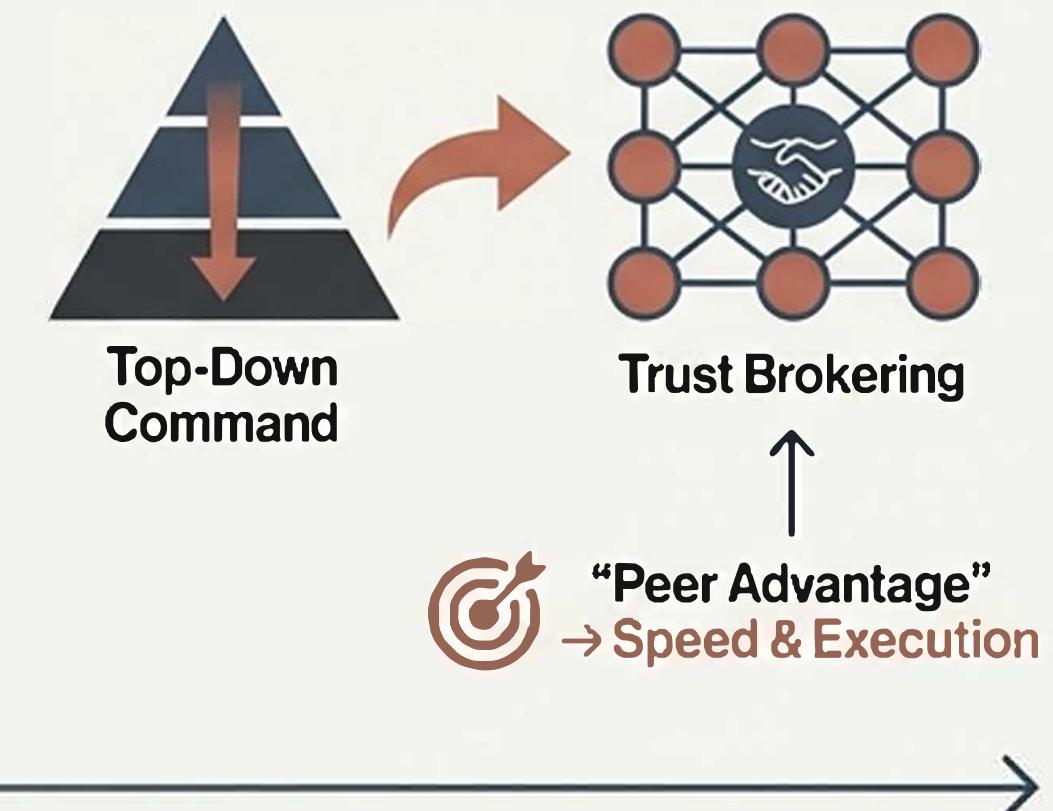
A rising “Insular Trust Mindset” (70% global prevalence) threatens to fragment the workforce. When trust fails, discretionary effort vanishes—specifically, **42%** of employees reduce effort for leaders with differing beliefs.



03

The Action

Leaders must pivot from top-down command to “Trust Brokering.” By operationalizing peer influence, organizations can turn accidental norms into a deliberate “**Peer Advantage**” that drives speed and execution.

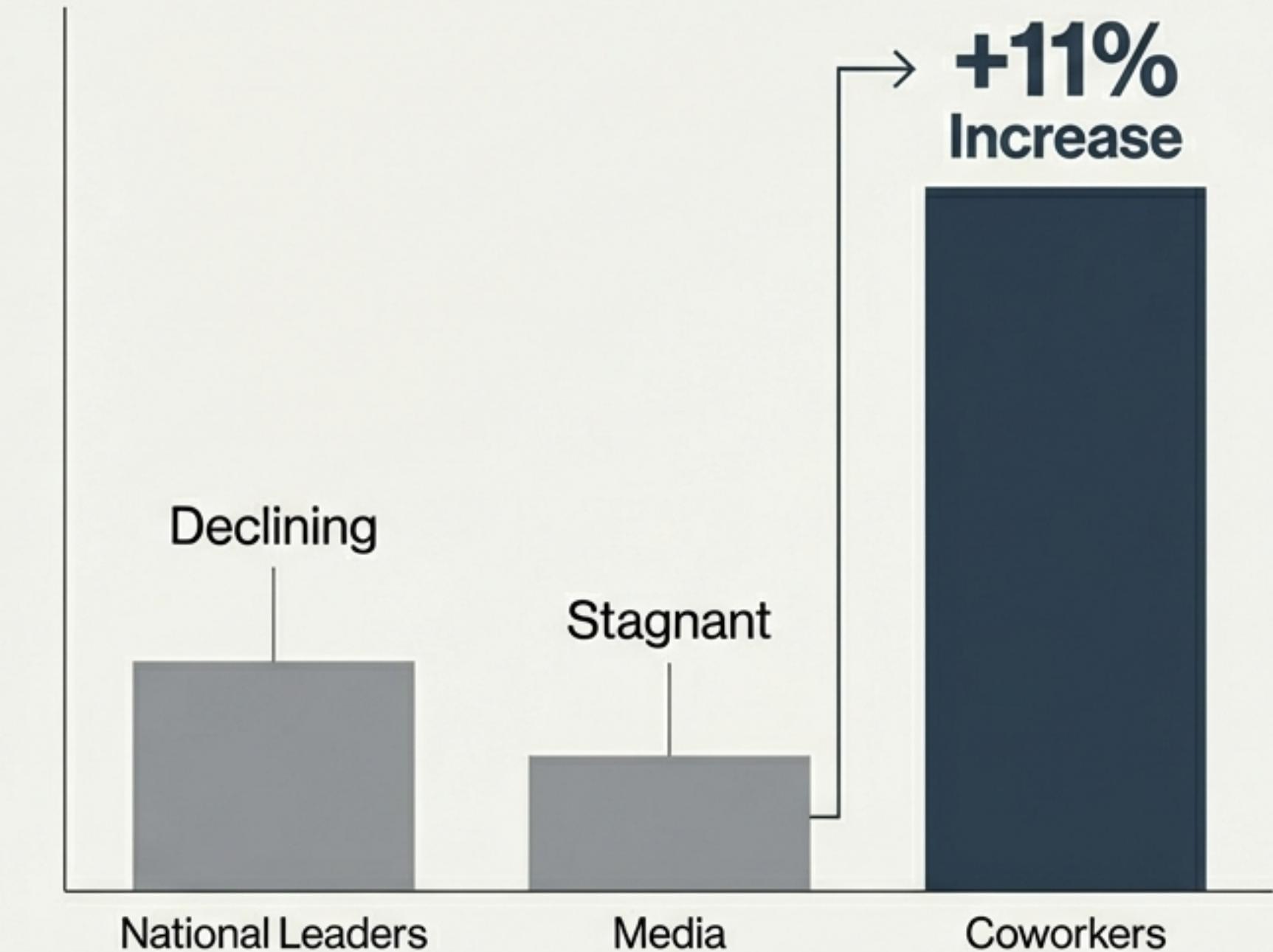


Trust is no longer flowing down; it is flowing sideways.

Following major societal disruptions, employees have retreated to their “local circle” to determine what to believe, how to behave, and whom to trust.

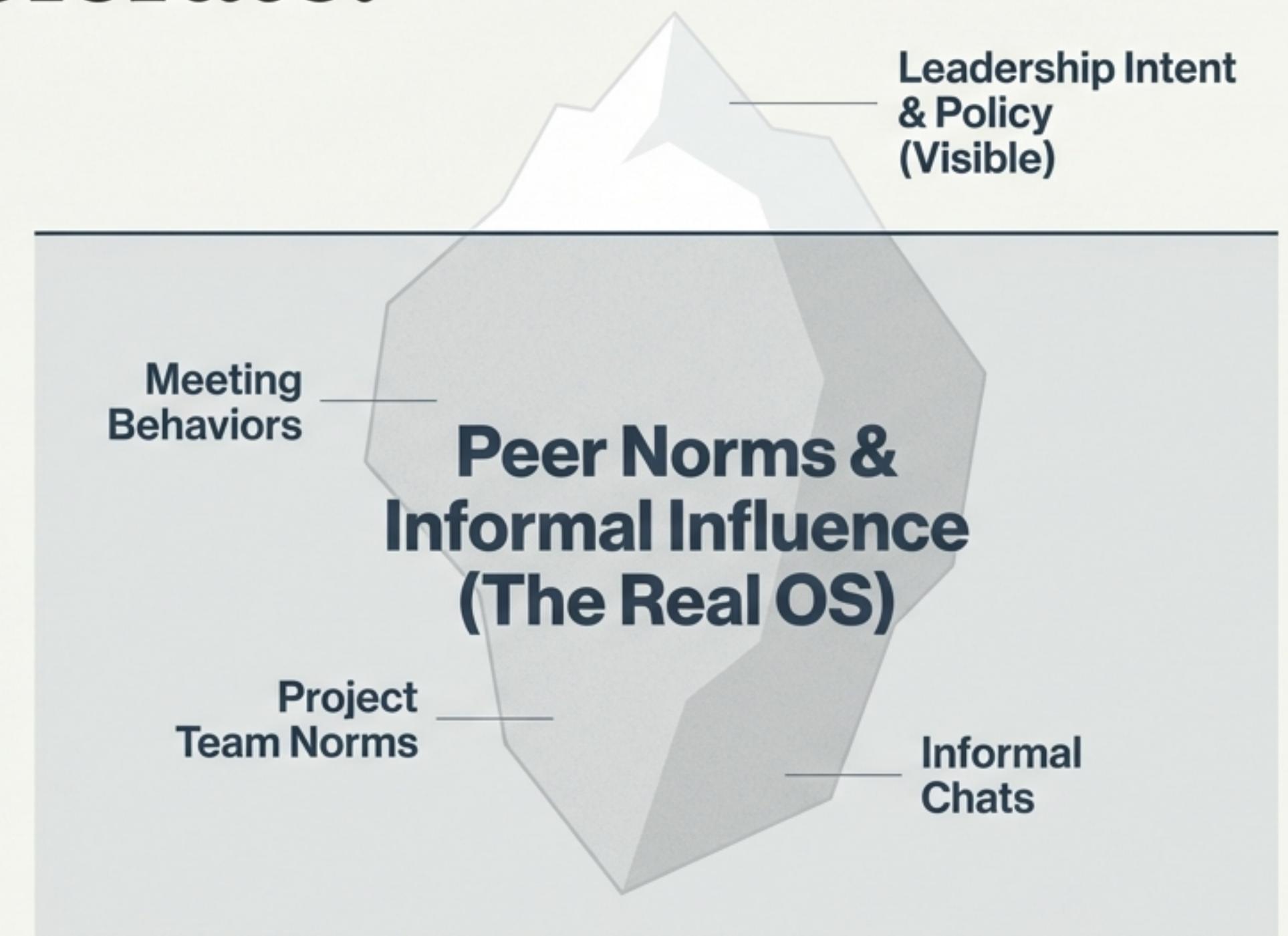
“
Coworkers are now more trusted than national leaders or major news organizations.”

2026 Edelman Trust Barometer Findings



Your culture is not what you preach. It is what peers tolerate.

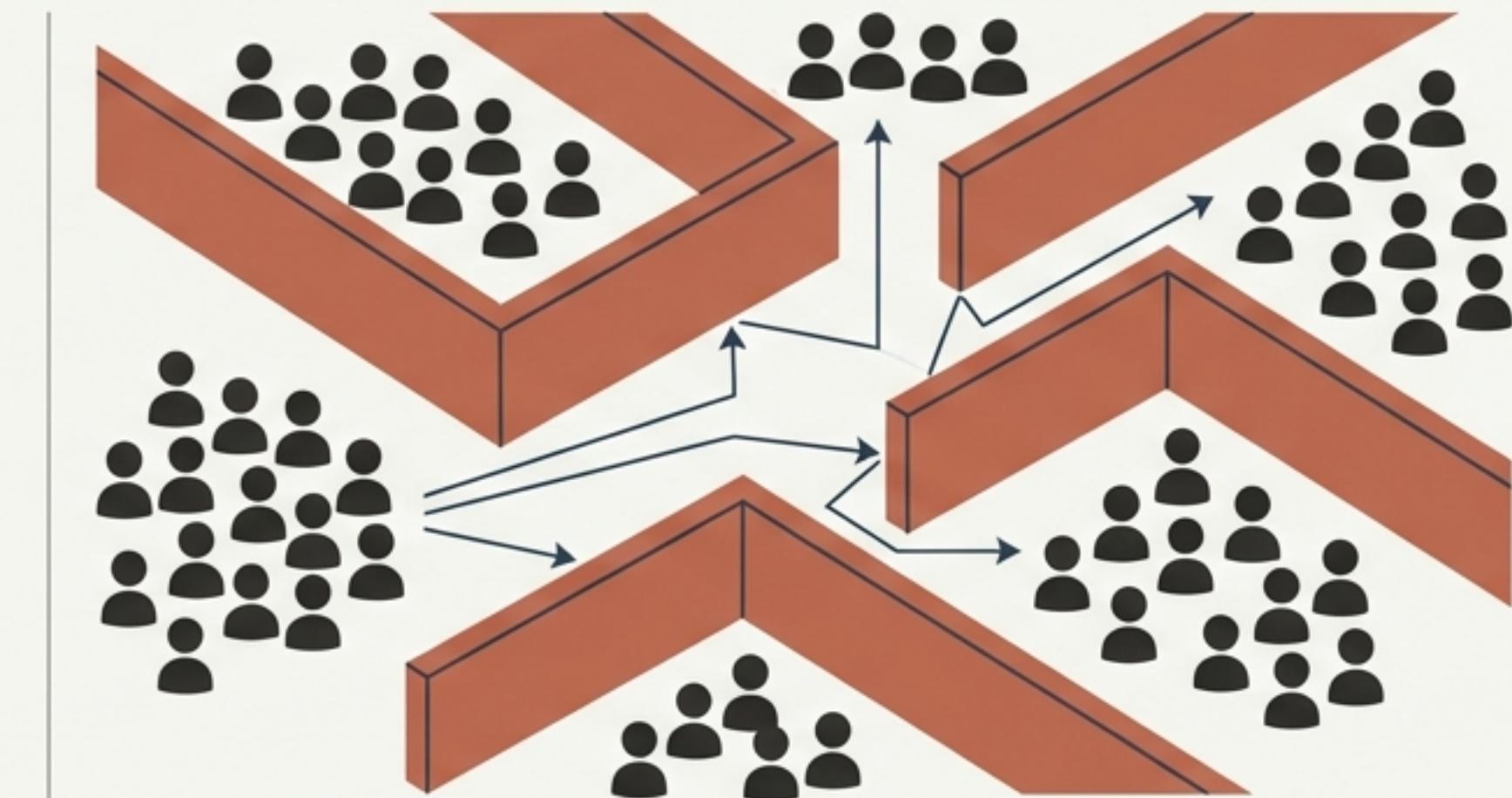
Trust is the currency of performance. People take cues from those they trust when deciding how much effort to give, how candid to be, and whether to support or quietly resist change.



The “Insular Trust Mindset” is the new barrier to execution.

70%

of people globally hold an “insular trust mindset”.



Definition:

A reluctance to trust those with different values, backgrounds, or beliefs.

Insularity creates structural silos where collaboration is contingent on “sameness,” destroying the diversity of thought required for innovation.

When trust erodes, discretionary effort vanishes.

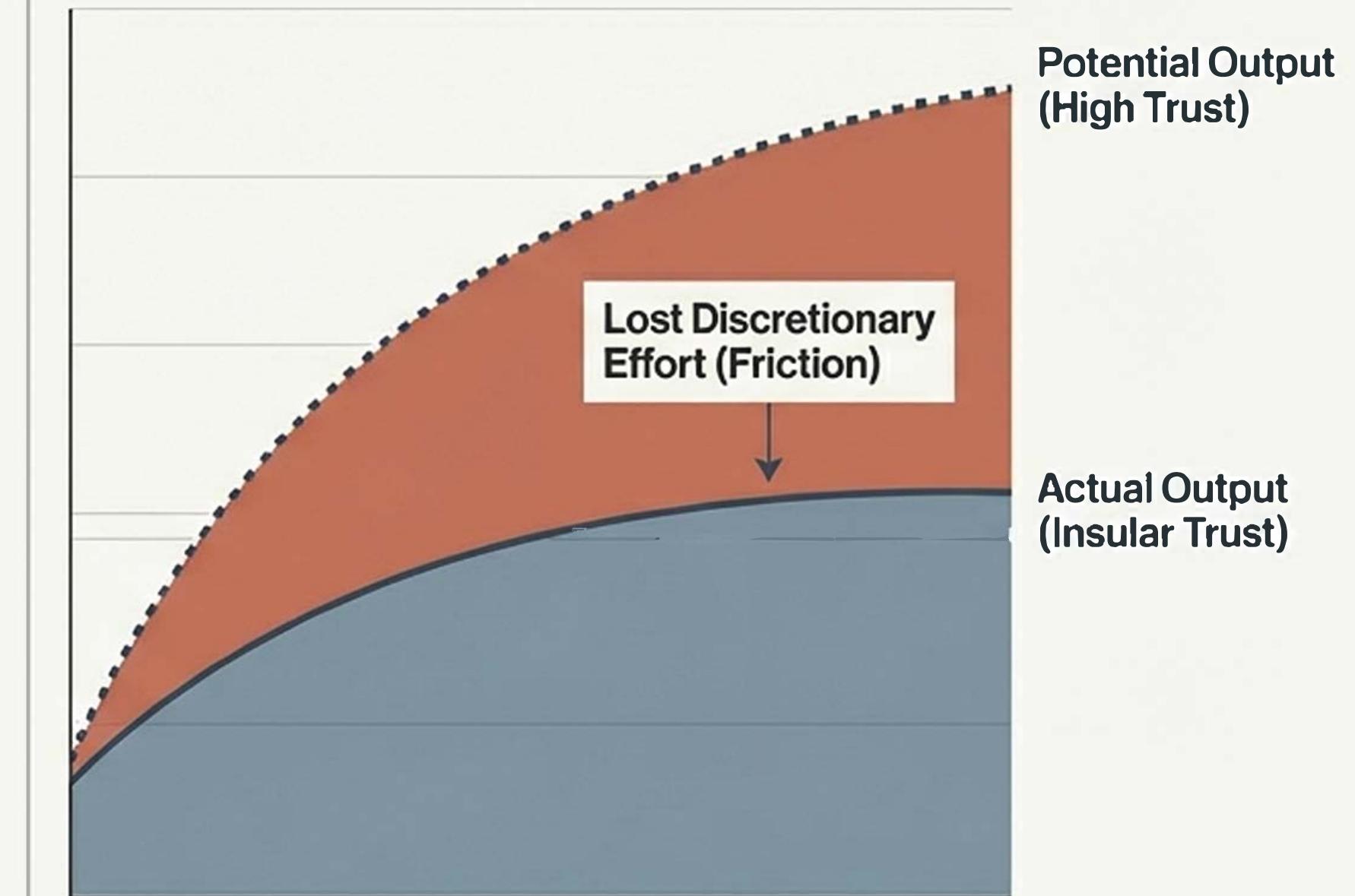
42%

of employees report they would put less effort into helping a team leader succeed if that leader held different political beliefs.

The Silent Withdrawal

- Teams still meet.
- Projects still move forward.
- But trust erodes beneath the surface.

The Productivity Gap



Amidst the fragmentation, Employers are the new ‘Trust Brokers’.



Ironically, as trust fragments in society, the workplace is one of the last remaining spaces where people can bridge divides. Leaders cannot delegate this; they must act as Trust Brokers.

Brokering is not about enforcing consensus. It is about enabling collaboration.

What Trust Brokering IS NOT

- Avoiding disagreement
- Enforcing sameness
- Policing personal beliefs

What Trust Brokering IS

Creating conditions where people work productively across differences by anchoring them in shared goals, standards, and collective responsibility.



Trust is built through deliberate systems, not good intentions.

The Three Pillars (Employee Validated)



1. Shared Identity

Promoting a focus on purpose and contribution. Moving focus from “who we are” to “what we do”.



2. Interdependence

Designing teams that require diverse people to succeed together. Making collaboration unavoidable.



3. Structured Dialogue

Providing training for constructive dialogue and disagreement.

Trust creates meaningful experiences that make collaboration the path of least resistance.

Every organization has peer influence. Only the best manage it.

Accidental (The Default)

- Norms emerge without discussion.
- Meetings reward silence or conformity.
- Accountability is strictly a manager's job.
- Mental Model: Me vs. Them

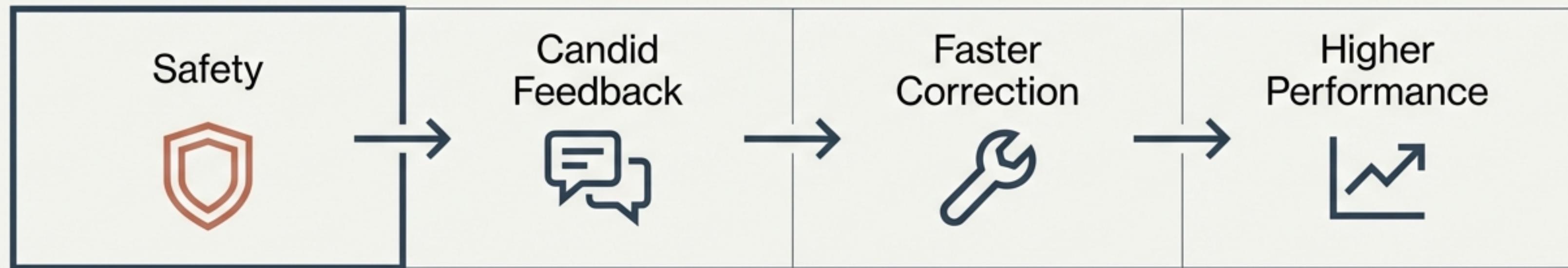


Intentional (High Performance)

- Peer expectations are visible.
- Teams define what 'good' looks like together.
- Accountability is shared horizontally.
- Mental Model: We own this.

Safety is the prerequisite for speed.

Psychological safety is the ability to express ideas, questions, or concerns without fear of embarrassment or retribution.

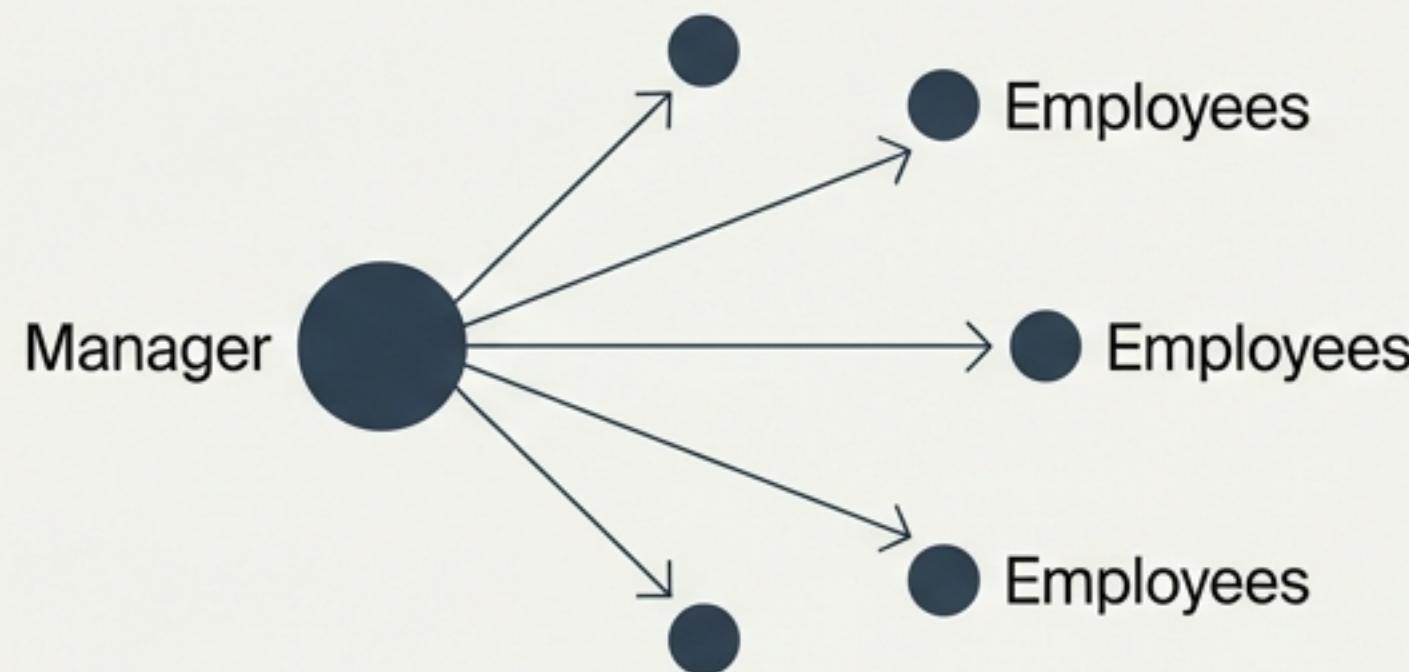


Without safety, peers self-censor. When peers self-censor, assumptions go unchallenged. Result: Learning slows and risks go undetected.

Moving accountability from Vertical to Horizontal.

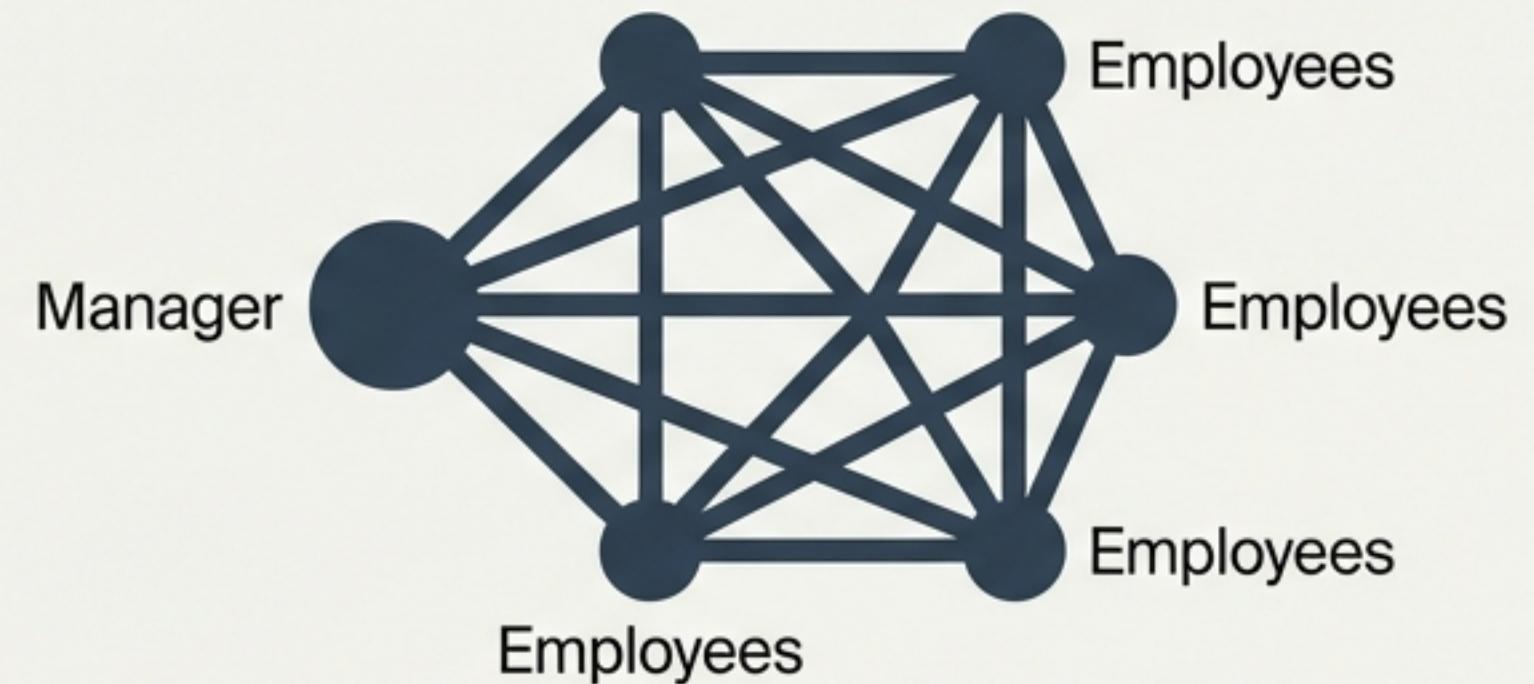
Hub and Spoke

Vertical Accountability (Slow)



Network

Horizontal Accountability (Fast)



In high-performing cultures, peers hold peers to standards. This spreads behavior faster than any top-down training program.

From one-off workshops to everyday habits.



Make Dialogue a Habit

Move beyond isolated cultural statements; integrate structured dialogue into daily work.



Reinforce Horizontally

Shift accountability structures so peers are responsible for each other's success.



Routine Reflection

Teams must routinely reflect on **how** they work together, not just **what** they deliver.

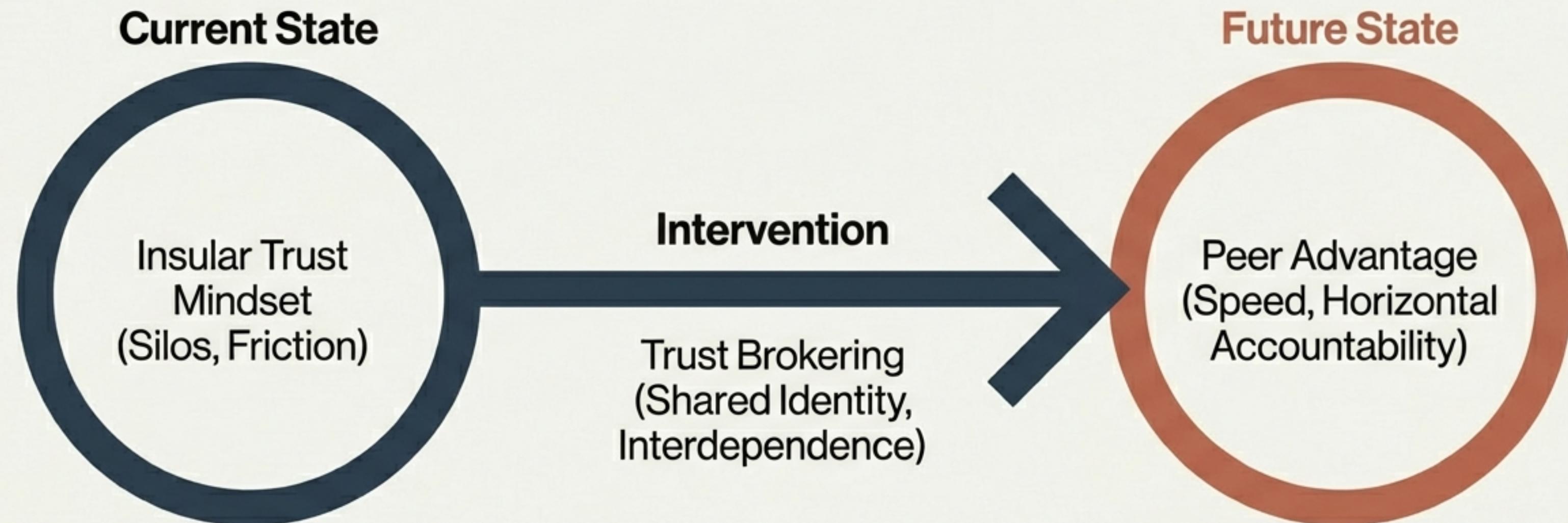
**Result: Collaboration becomes embedded
in the organization's identity.**

Are you willing to let peers lead together?

“Authority persuades less.
Peers persuade more.”

The future of performance will not be driven by leaders alone.
The organizations that win will be those that understand the
workplace is the last space to bridge divides.

Transform Peer Influence into Peer Advantage.



The future of performance depends on the systems that allow peers to lead together.