DRIVER REFERENCE GUIDE 2 OF 5

FAIRNESS REFERENCE GUIDE

Whether employees believe the organization's rules are applied consistently and predictably. What to look for when diagnosing the driver, what to do when it needs attention, and what to avoid. Built for use in the field during the intervention period, not for reading once.

Timen Baart · From *Compounding Trust* (Rethink Press, 2026) · compoundingtrust.com

THE DRIVER

2 FAIRNESS

Whether employees believe the organization's rules are applied consistently and predictably

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

- *Can you think of a decision in the last six months that you found it hard to make sense of, or where you weren’t sure the same rules applied to everyone?*
- *Have you seen the same rules applied differently to different people in comparable situations?*
- *When a decision affected you recently, did you understand the reasoning behind it, even if you didn't agree with it?*
- *If you felt something was unfair here, would you feel comfortable raising that, and would you expect to be taken seriously?*

WHEN THIS DRIVER IS STRONG

- Individuals accept unfavorable outcomes without enduring resentment, because they trust the process that produced them
- Disagreements are raised through formal channels and treated seriously; political maneuvering is not the primary route to influence
- People extend benefit of the doubt to ambiguous decisions, assuming reasonable intent before poor intent
- High performers do not feel that exceptional contribution goes unnoticed while mediocre performance goes unchallenged
- Standards applied to one person or team are visibly applied to others in comparable situations

WHEN THIS DRIVER IS WEAKENING

- Quiet resentment follows personnel decisions, promotions, or restructurings, particularly when the reasoning is unclear or inconsistently applied
- Individuals begin comparing their treatment with that of peers, not as a passing observation but as a recurring preoccupation
- Discretionary effort declines following outcomes perceived as unfair, not because the individual plans to leave but because the implicit contract has been revised downward
- Rules are seen as selectively applied, enforced for some, overlooked for others, depending on proximity to leadership
- People stop raising concerns through official channels because they expect the process to produce predetermined outcomes

FAIRNESS

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The informal comparison conversation. This is the most diagnostic signal of fairness erosion. When individuals regularly benchmark their treatment against colleagues' treatment, especially across seniority levels or teams, trust in fairness has weakened enough that the formal system is no longer trusted to be consistent. These conversations are often invisible to leaders, which is one reason fairness failures persist.

How exceptional performance is rewarded. When employees who consistently perform exceptionally are treated identically to those delivering moderate results, the organization is communicating that the employment contract is not reciprocal. This has dual consequences: It erodes trust in fairness in those who deliver more, and it erodes trust in competence held by those who observe that the organization cannot distinguish between levels of contribution.

The period following a significant personnel decision. Promotions, project assignments, and compensation changes are the moments when trust in fairness is most visibly tested. In organizations with strong fairness, these decisions produce brief discussion and then acceptance. In organizations with weakening fairness, the same decisions produce sustained, quiet resentment and informal coalition-building among those who feel disadvantaged.

Workload distribution patterns. In most organizations high performers accumulate disproportionate workload, not because it has been deliberately assigned to them but because they are the ones least likely to push back. This pattern is perceived as unfair by those carrying it and demoralizing to those observing, both parties drawing the conclusion that the organization rewards compliance with additional burden.

FAIRNESS

WHAT TO DO

Publish criteria for the decisions that matter most to individuals. For the typical knowledge–work organization, the highest-stakes decisions are advancement, compensation, project assignment, and performance assessment. Making the criteria for each of these decisions explicit, available, and consistently applied is the highest-leverage fairness intervention available. The criteria do not need to be perfect, but they do need to be visible and consistently honored.

Apply a consistency audit to recent significant decisions. Take the last five promotion decisions, the last five significant project assignments, or the last performance cycle's distribution of ratings. Ask whether the outcomes can be explained against a consistent set of principles that would be recognized as fair by those who received different outcomes. Where they cannot, the gap between the decision and the explanation is where fairness repair is needed.

Distribute workload by principle rather than by ease of assignment. When a project requires the best available person rather than the most available person, make that principle explicit and build processes that distribute high-value work more equitably across the population that is capable of delivering it. High performers who observe that their capability is recognized through expanded opportunity rather than accumulated burden experience a very different fairness signal.

Address perceived inequities visibly and promptly. When the diagnostic exposes a fairness concern that turns out to be grounded in a genuine inconsistency, the speed and visibility of the response matters as much as the content. An organization that acknowledges a fairness failure and corrects it promptly demonstrates that the failure was due to an error, not a policy. An organization that corrects it silently or slowly communicates that it was aware of the failure but chose not to address it.

FAIRNESS

WHAT TO AVOID

Making the reasoning for decisions available only to those who specifically request it. Trust in fairness is not built through a complaints process. It is built through proactive transparency about the criteria and reasoning behind significant decisions, before employees have had to infer or inquire. Organizations that require individuals to ask for an explanation of decisions affecting them are placing the burden of fairness on the people with less power in the relationship.

Permitting inconsistency in the application of stated principles. The most damaging fairness failure is not the absence of stated principles. It is the existence of stated principles that are visibly applied to some people and not to others. A performance management process that holds junior employees to different standards than senior employees, or that applies its criteria rigorously to poor performers and generously to high performers, communicates that the organization’s rules are not actually rules. That communication is extremely difficult to recover from.

Treating the perception of unfairness as a misunderstanding. When employees report that a decision felt unfair, the other party’s instinct to explain why the decision was defensible, treating the perception of unfairness as something to be corrected rather than a signal to be investigated, is usually counterproductive. Before explaining, investigate to extract all available information about the decision’s context. The signal is worth taking seriously before a corrective communication is attempted.

FAIRNESS

WORKING PAGE

What sustains the driver. Fairness depends on visible, consistent application of the organization's own rules, and on transparent reasoning when exceptions are made. Fairness erodes most rapidly when people cannot explain decisions to affected colleagues in terms those colleagues would recognize as legitimate, even if disappointing.

WHICH FAILURE IS IT?

From Step 2 of the intervention structure in Chapter 10. Identifying the specific failure determines which intervention will address it.

- ☐ Criteria-based (the rules are unclear)
- ☐ Application-based (the rules exist but are not applied consistently)
- ☐ Communication-based (the decisions are defensible but unexplained)

The specific signals the diagnostic surfaced for this driver:

The one behavioral change people will be able to see:

How and when it will be communicated, before it is implemented:

Re-run the diagnostic question with the same people after sixty to ninety days. Date:

From Chapters 10 and 12 of *Compounding Trust* by Timen Baart (Rethink Press, 2026). The other driver guides and the first trust review worksheet are at compoundingtrust.com/resources.

TRUST IS A DIRECTION, NOT A SCORE

Compounding Trust explains why trust inside organizations is not simply a cultural sentiment. It is a structural condition that determines whether people contribute fully, share information early, make decisions confidently, and invest their ambition in a shared direction.

The Compounding Trust Model identifies five structural drivers:

COMPETENCE · FAIRNESS · RECIPROCITY · IDENTITY · TRANSPARENCY

Together, they determine whether trust strengthens or erodes over time. The practical leadership question is not whether an organization has trust, but whether trust is moving in the right direction, and which structural driver is causing that movement.

CONTINUE THE WORK

Compounding Trust provides the model, diagnostic frameworks, and intervention principles. Additional practical resources are available at compoundingtrust.com/resources.

TrustXP is the measurement platform built on the Compounding Trust Model. It gives leadership teams continuous, driver-specific visibility into the direction of trust, helping them identify emerging gaps before those gaps appear in performance data.

Read and apply the framework	compoundingtrust.com
Make trust observable	trustxp.com