DRIVER REFERENCE GUIDE 3 OF 5

RECIPROCITY REFERENCE GUIDE

Whether employees believe that effort and contribution are noticed and returned. 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

3 RECIPROCITY

Whether employees believe that effort and contribution are noticed and returned

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

- *When you last went significantly above what was expected, what happened?*
- *When you contribute something significant here, how do you find out whether it was noticed?*
- *Does this organization ask more of you during difficult periods, and do you trust that it would protect you if things got difficult for you personally?*
- *Has the effort you're expected to put in changed over time, and has anything else changed to match it?*

WHEN THIS DRIVER IS STRONG

- Recognition is specific, timely, and connected to the actual contribution rather than generic or delayed
- Individuals who deliver exceptional results receive expanded autonomy, not merely praise, and the organization responds by trusting them more
- There is a shared sense that effort invested above the minimum is returned in some form, recognition, opportunity, development, or protection when circumstances turn difficult
- People are willing to carry temporary additional weight when the organization is under pressure because they trust the imbalance is temporary and will be acknowledged
- The employment relationship feels mutual, employees invest in the organization’s success because they believe the organization invests in theirs

WHEN THIS DRIVER IS WEAKENING

- Expectations are raised to match whatever was delivered; exceptional performance becomes the new baseline without additional return
- Recognition, when it exists, is generic or ceremonial, delivered in forms that signal compliance with a recognition process rather than genuine acknowledgment
- People calibrate their effort progressively toward the contracted minimum, not as a conscious decision but as a natural response to a perceived imbalance
- Voluntary effort is withdrawn during periods of organizational stress, when it is most needed
- The implicit contract is experienced as one-sided, employees are expected to absorb difficulty when the organization needs it, and they do not expect the same protection in return

RECIPROCITY

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

> *Contracts produce compliance. Reciprocity produces commitment.*

Individuals reducing their contribution to job description requirements. This calibration shift is the primary diagnostic signal of reciprocity erosion. The shift is rarely visible in output metrics because the reduction in discretionary effort does not usually reduce technical deliverables. What it reduces is quality, initiative, cross-team support, and the willingness to absorb uncertainty, the contribution that was above and beyond and is now withheld.

What happens after exceptional contributions. When an individual delivers something significantly above what was expected, the organization's response in the following weeks is the reciprocity signal. Recognition that is specific, timely, and proportionate to what was contributed strengthens the reciprocity relationship. Recognition that is generic, delayed, or absent communicates that the organization either did not notice or does not value the distinction between adequate and exceptional performance.

What happens at performance review time. This is specifically for individuals who have contributed significantly above their formal requirements throughout the year. In organizations where trust in reciprocity is strong, the review confirms what the individual already knew: that their contribution was seen and valued. In organizations where trust in reciprocity is weakening, the review reduces their exceptional year to a rating that is functionally identical to those who contributed significantly less. The experience of that equivalence is one of the most reliable drivers of voluntary departure.

The quality and direction of cross-functional collaboration. In high-reciprocity organizations, teams help each other without keeping score because the implicit social contract extends beyond the formal one. When reciprocity weakens, cross-functional collaboration requires explicit negotiation, favors are tracked, and teams protect their capacity rather than sharing it freely.

RECIPROCITY

WHAT TO DO

Create systems for specific, timely recognition. The most common failure in organizational reciprocity is not the absence of a recognition program. It is the gap between when exceptional contribution was made and when it is formally acknowledged. Recognition that arrives weeks later, or that is bundled into an annual review, does not produce the same reciprocity signal as recognition that arrives immediately and specifically names what was observed and why it mattered.

Connect expanded opportunity to demonstrated contribution. The most durable form of reciprocity is not financial. It is the expansion of scope, responsibility, and autonomy that signals that the organization sees what an individual is capable of and is investing in it. When employees who deliver exceptional results are given larger problems to work on, more resources to deploy, or more latitude in how they approach their work, the reciprocity signal compounds: The organization is not just acknowledging the past contribution but investing in the future one.

Protect contributors from the burden of their own reliability. High performers who consistently deliver are often rewarded with the organization’s most difficult assignments, which is appropriate, and with the expectation that they will absorb unreasonable workload without complaint, which is not appropriate. When reliable people are continuously given more because they are reliable, the organization is extracting the value of their contribution without returning a proportionate investment in their capacity. This pattern is one of the most reliable drivers of departure among the people most organizations can least afford to lose.

Make the employment deal explicit and honest. The clearest reciprocity signal an organization can give is an honest account of what it is offering and what it is asking for in return. Organizations that are explicit about their expectations and their commitments, and that honor those commitments consistently, build more durable trust in reciprocity than those that offer general assurances about being a great place to work. Specificity is credibility.

RECIPROCITY

WHAT TO AVOID

Treating discretionary effort as the new baseline. When an individual delivers significantly above what is expected, and the organization's response is to update its expectations upward without acknowledging the shift, the reciprocity contract is being quietly rewritten in the organization's favor. The individual who observes this pattern draws a rational conclusion: Exceptional contribution is not rewarded but consumed. The most predictable response is to stop making it.

Asymmetric accountability. Organizations where employees are held firmly to their commitments, but the organization's commitments to them are regularly adjusted for commercial convenience, are operating with a structural reciprocity deficit. When employees observe that the organization expects its people to absorb cost and uncertainty on its behalf without experiencing the same flexibility in return, the discretionary contribution that the organization most depends on is progressively withdrawn.

Recognition that is generic rather than specific. Great job this quarter does not function as reciprocity. It functions as a verbal formula that individuals learn to interpret as meaning their contribution was noted and that no further recognition is forthcoming. Recognition that specifically names the contribution, describes why it mattered, and arrives when the contribution is still fresh is the only form of acknowledgment that reliably strengthens the reciprocity relationship.

RECIPROCITY

WORKING PAGE

What sustains the driver. Reciprocity depends on a consistent pattern of returns, not necessarily equal but proportional and visible. Reciprocity erodes when contributions go unnoticed, when exceptional effort is incorporated into baseline expectations, or when the organization asks for more without acknowledging what it has already received.

WHICH FAILURE IS IT?

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

- ☐ Recognition-based (exceptional effort is not acknowledged)
- ☐ Autonomy-based (people lack authority over their own work)
- ☐ Opportunity-based (contribution does not lead to expanded responsibility)

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.

COMPOUNDING TRUST

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