

A BEYOND EXPECTATIONS EXPLAINER

The Relational Maturation Model

A map of how trust, emotional safety, vulnerability and relational bandwidth actually mature inside real teams — and how leaders can read the stage they are in.

Self-Protection → Tension → Courage → Trust

Checking

SAFETY TESTING

Conflict

HONESTY ACTIVATION

Co-operation

TRUST-BUILDING

Constructive

MATURE RELATIONSHIP

THE PREMISE

Beyond task stages — the emotional maturation of a team

This model builds on the familiar Tuckman stages but goes further. Where Tuckman describes group *task* dynamics — forming, storming, norming, performing — the Relational Maturation Model describes the internal *emotional* maturation of relationships.

It reflects how trust, emotional safety, vulnerability and relational bandwidth develop over time, offering leaders a deeper and more accurate map of how real teams grow: a journey from self-protection, through tension and courage, toward genuine trust.

THE FAMILIAR MAP

Tuckman

Charts the **task dynamics** of a group — forming, storming, norming, performing. Useful, but describes what a team is *doing*, not what it is feeling underneath.

THIS MODEL

Relational Maturation

Charts the **emotional journey to trust** — how safety, vulnerability and relational bandwidth mature. It describes what a team is *becoming* beneath the task.

THE FOUR STAGES OF RELATIONAL MATURATION

Stage 1

Checking

The Safety Testing Stage

SELF-PROTECTION

Stage 2

Conflict

The Honesty Activation Stage

TENSION

Stage 3

Co-operation

The Trust-Building Stage

COURAGE

Stage 4

Constructive

The Mature Relationship Stage

TRUST

Self-Protection → Tension → Courage → Trust

01

THE SAFETY TESTING STAGE

Checking

SELF-PROTECTION

Is it safe
to be here?

When a new team or relationship forms, everything begins with emotional risk assessment. People are not yet a team — they are individuals testing the environment and each other. This stage is dominated by self-protection, and everyone is quietly asking the same question.

“Is it safe to be myself here?”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Participation is polite, cautious and inconsistent

Individuals watch closely to learn what behaviours are rewarded or punished

Opinions are softened or restrained

Conversations stay on safe, surface-level topics

Feedback is avoided

People are scanning for belonging, power dynamics and emotional cues

EMOTIONAL FITNESS LINK

Readiness

People are determining whether this is a space where openness is possible.

DYNAMIC ENERGY INDEX

Level 2-3

Typically oscillates between Fear and Caution.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

A team in Checking is not failing — it is forming its psychological foundations.

02 THE HONESTY ACTIVATION STAGE

Conflict

TENSION

People stop pretending.

This stage is marked by discomfort, disruption and emotional intensity. It is the moment people stop performing and start revealing their real needs, preferences and frustrations. Contrary to popular belief, conflict is a sign of increased honesty, not decreased performance — it means people care enough to stop pretending. But it can feel destabilising.

“Conflict is the birthplace of real trust — not the end of it.”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Tension, frustration and irritability

Confusion about roles and boundaries

Defensiveness, point-scoring, withdrawal or over-assertion

Competing priorities or protectiveness of turf

Formation of cliques, alliances or “quiet resentments”

People challenge ideas, processes and sometimes each other

Increased emotional reactions

EMOTIONAL FITNESS LINK

Regulation

This stage tests your ability to stay centred when triggered.

DYNAMIC ENERGY INDEX

Level 3–4

Oscillation through Pride, Anger and Defensiveness.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Most teams fall apart here because they misinterpret conflict as failure. Handled well, this stage becomes the birthplace of real trust.

03

THE TRUST-BUILDING STAGE

Courage replaces
comfort.

Co-operation

COURAGE

Co-operation emerges when the pain of conflict becomes unproductive and people realise something must shift. Courage begins to replace comfort. This is the moment the team collectively decides that it wants to work well together — and is willing to change to make it happen.

“We want to work well together — and we’re willing to change to make it happen.”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Restoring strained relationships

More honest conversations, but held with care

Increased empathy and curiosity

Willingness to experiment with new behaviours

Clarifying expectations and establishing working norms

More openness about feelings, workload and limits

Genuine listening becomes possible — a sense of “us” begins to form

EMOTIONAL FITNESS LINK

Grounding + Relational Capacity

People learn to manage themselves and stay connected simultaneously.

DYNAMIC ENERGY INDEX

Toward Level 5

Movement into Courage and Neutrality.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

This is where psychological safety begins to take shape — through consistent micro-behaviours, not slogans.

04 THE MATURE RELATIONSHIP STAGE

Constructive

TRUST

Emotionally
self-sustaining.

Here, the team becomes emotionally self-sustaining. This is more than high performance — it is high trust, high courage and high accountability. People can now address both technical and emotional issues without destabilising the system. This is where great teams — and great interpersonal relationships — live.

“Constructive teams don’t fear truth — they harness it.”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Honest, constructive feedback given and received

Differences of opinion seen as value, not threat

Shared ownership of problems and solutions

High creativity, resourcefulness and innovation

Confident decision-making and strong emotional bandwidth

A clear, shared identity

The team’s impact extends outward — to children, community, residents and culture

EMOTIONAL FITNESS LINK

Integrated Fitness

Readiness, Regulation, Grounding and Relational capacity, woven into habit.

DYNAMIC ENERGY INDEX

Level 6-7

Operating consistently in Trust, Openness, Collaboration and Meaning.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Constructive teams don’t fear truth — they harness it.

Four stages, one direction: from self-protection to trust.

01 Checking

Safety testing — individuals assess whether it is safe to be themselves.

SELF-PROTECTION

02 Conflict

Honesty activation — people stop performing and reveal real needs.

TENSION

03 Co-operation

Trust-building — courage replaces comfort and “us” begins to form.

COURAGE

04 Constructive

Mature relationship — high trust, high courage, high accountability.

TRUST

Elevate Energy. **Transform Culture.** Drive Impact.

The Relational Maturation Model is part of Beyond Expectations' Organisational Energy Intelligence framework.

DEI refers to the Dynamic Energy Index, Beyond Expectations' ten-level model of organisational energy.

BEYOND
EXPECTATIONS.

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