Bruce Deel with Sara Grace

# Trust First: A True Story About the Power of Giving People Second Chances

Made by Blinkist

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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

**What's in it for me? Become inspired by one of the world's most innovative social projects.**

How can social workers, activists, and pastors really contribute to the lives of people in communities in crisis?

That fundamental question has been addressed by countless academic texts and well-meaning policy documents. But there are far fewer accounts by people who've actually worked in the field and are prepared to share their real experiences, warts and all.

That's where the blinks to *Trust First* come in. Pastor Bruce Deel developed his successful NGO, City of Refuge, through years of trial and error. In the process, he conquered his "messiah complex" and learned to change his own mindset instead of trying to change his community.

By confronting his narrow-minded views on poverty and redemption, Deel was able to embrace radical approaches to social justice and extend unconditional trust and acceptance to the people he worked with. Over 20 years later, City of Refuge has helped thousands of people transform their lives by providing essentials like stable housing, good healthcare, and educational programs.

In these blinks, you'll discover

- why a gunfight provided the impetus for the creation of City of Refuge;
- how Deel transformed a rat-infested warehouse into one of the world's most inspiring NGOs; and
- why the "War on Drugs" has made life worse for poor communities.

**Intervening in a gunfight made Deel realize that giving people trust is even more important than food.**

One day in 1997, Pastor Bruce Deel arrived bright-eyed and optimistic at a liquor store parking lot in the Westside neighborhood of Atlanta, bearing pots of delicious hot chilli to serve to the people living there. He'd just started a six-month visiting pastorship and had no idea what the community was actually like – except that many people lived below the poverty line. It was certainly a far cry from the affluent suburbs where he usually worked.

He and a volunteer started ladling portions of food into people's bowls. Everything seemed to be going smoothly when, suddenly, Deel heard a commotion. Looking up, he saw that a woman had pulled a gun on a man who was shouting abuse at her.

Deel battled his shock and fear and gingerly stepped between them. Meeting the woman's gaze, he placed his hand on hers and softly asked, "You don't want this, do you?" Slowly, she lowered the gun and walked off. The situation had been defused.

Deel felt completely shaken. He'd expected to have problems like running out of cheese, not needing to intervene in gunfights. Suddenly, his contribution felt very measly indeed. What good were a few bowls of chilli in a community dealing with such levels of violence and deprivation? And what could he, a naive white guy from Virginia, do to help a largely African American community with experiences so different from his own?

Then he remembered the woman with the gun. Simply by trusting her, and assuming the best of her intentions, he'd been able to contribute to the situation.

Allowing her the space to follow her own best instincts had helped her relax, lower her gun, and walk away. Trust had enabled her to show that she actually *didn't* want to pull the trigger.

A couple of days later, Deel returned to the area, this time with baked potatoes and lemonade. He was surprised to see that no one was there – the streets were deserted. He asked a passerby where everybody was and learned that they'd assumed the pastor would never return after the violent incident the week before. So many other would-be do-gooders before him had been scared off after experiencing the reality of the neighborhood.

Deel looked the man in the eye and uttered words that would prove to be prophetic: "We return." Sure enough, over 20 years later he's still there. From that altercation in the parking lot, City of Refuge was born.

**Working on the Westside forced Pastor Deel to completely change his ideas about poverty.**

Before coming to the Westside, Deel had assumed that if people were experiencing social problems like poverty and alcoholism, it was partly of their own making. After all, no one was forcing alcoholics to drink – or poor people to spend more money on junk food than education.

Working with his Westside congregants completely shifted his perspective. He realized that these people suffered from chronic *opportunity injustice*: the odds had been stacked against them from birth. The detrimental choices they made hadn't caused the situation – rather, their decisions were *compelled* by their skewed circumstances.

For one thing, they'd grown up in a neighborhood with a long history of

poverty and institutional neglect. In the 1960s and 70s, there was a huge urban shift as white families fled inner-city neighborhoods for the suburbs. Middle-class African American families then purchased homes in formerly white neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the homes they left in formerly black areas on the Westside were often bought by investors and leased out to transitional tenants, or even abandoned. The neighborhood fell into disrepair, and the strong social fabric became frayed.

Today, 40 percent of families on the Westside live under the federal poverty line. Children often witness high levels of violence and are denied access to good public education and health facilities. In the 1980s, the area was hit by crack cocaine, heroin, and then the "War on Drugs." That crackdown only made things worse, sending people to jail with long prison sentences rather than

funding rehabilitation and supporting families.

Pastor Deel realized that in comparison to the people he was working with, the world had handed him opportunities on a silver platter from the moment he was born. He hadn't grown up wealthy, but he'd received a good education and had always had enough to eat. Most important of all, he'd been surrounded by people who had high expectations for his life. He realized that he'd been able to make good choices not because he had a superior moral compass, but because that was the easiest course of action available to him. If he were faced with the same circumstances as his congregants, he would probably have made choices similar to theirs.

These realizations fundamentally changed how he approached his work on the Westside. It wasn't enough to lecture on morality and good choices from the

pulpit. Deel realized that to really make a difference, he would have to tackle opportunity injustice head-on – he'd have to change the material conditions of people's lives.

**Deel and his family left the leafy suburbs behind to commit fully to their dream.**

Deel and his wife, Rhonda, were committed to serving the Westside community. Unfortunately, they had no idea how. Their own lives were miles away from those of their congregants.

They realized that if they were serious about getting to know the people they worked with, it wouldn't be enough to just drop in now and then and hand out some food. They needed to live in the community.

To do so, they'd have to leave a beautiful, peaceful suburban home for an area with high levels of crime. They'd have to exchange a large yard for an asphalt parking lot, leaving nowhere for their children to play. It felt like a big sacrifice, but they knew they had no choice if they really wanted to make an impact with their work.

So they moved into an empty floor of the church, slowly making the grimy, dark space into their home. While the transition was tough, they knew right away that they had made the right decision.

Moving to the Westside signaled to people that the Beel family was totally committed. This affected their relationship not only to the community they were serving, but also to potential volunteers. Suddenly, they were inundated with offers of help from people keen to work in their outreach projects. Deel created a nonprofit and started fundraising in order to extend the church's activities.

The organization started hosting elaborate dinners in the church, inviting people in for delicious food and cheesecakes donated by a local bakery. These dinners didn't just feed people; they also enabled a vital integration with

homeless community members, students, and seniors all sitting together.

Noticing how few activities were available for kids, Deel also started an after-school program – providing educational pastimes, outings, and summer camps for a hundred children.

That was followed by the creation of a homeless shelter with very low barriers to entry: if someone could stand upright and promise not to assault anyone, then they were welcome. Soon 65 men had nightly access to a warm meal and a comfy bed.

It became clear that young mothers were also in desperate need of support as they tried to care for their children while battling poverty, trauma, and addiction. Deel and his family began providing transitional housing in the church, sharing every aspect of family life together.

They started out as visitors, but by living side-by-side with the people they were serving, Deel and his family became a vital part of the community.

**An upsetting encounter led Deel to take on the greatest challenge of his career.**

We've all been faced with situations that stretch us almost beyond our own endurance and force us to take stock of our lives.

For Deel, that happened when he had an upsetting confrontation with a homeless man named Michael. Michael was a regular lodger in the men's shelter, and his behavior had always been exemplary. One night, however, he pulled down his pants and demanded that a staff member apply ointment to wounds on his genitals. When the staffer refused, Michael exploded in rage. After he was removed from the shelter, he started stalking Deel and his staff members. He got into a violent confrontation with, and tried to punch, a staff member. He even threatened to come back and kill Deel's wife and daughters.

Deel was so alarmed by the threats that he called the police, who arrested Michael. In jail, he was evaluated by a psychiatrist who found that he was suffering from serious mental illness. Eventually, he was sentenced to prison.

While Deel was relieved for his and his family's safety, he also felt guilty and shaken by the incident. In his mind, he'd caused Michael to be swallowed up by the prison system and hadn't been able to really offer him the care he needed. Deel realized his ministry was essentially offering crisis management: short-term solutions that gave desperate people some support and temporary relief. But to really make a lasting difference to those with chronic difficulties – people like Michael – he would have to go further.

Until then, the church had been referring people with mental health, alcohol, or housing problems to other services in

the city. But these services were underfunded and fragmented. They were also hard to access, as they were located in different parts of the city. And often, people needed to fill out stacks of bewildering forms before they could receive any support. In order to help people battle these intersecting challenges, Deel realized they would need a “one-stop shop” where people could access housing, job programs, and expert mental health care under one roof.

Creating such a project would require an enormous property and much more funding than they’d had so far. It would also require that Bruce and Rhonda Deel uproot their lives all over again, and start to build a new community from the ground up. Luckily, they were up for the challenge.

**Hurricane Katrina provided a challenge that allowed City of Refuge to prove themselves.**

Deel desperately tried to get to sleep. He was lying between two former gang members turned security guards in a drafty warehouse, in the roughest part of town besieged by rats the size of cats. As he lay there, he wondered what on *earth* he had done to land in this situation.

Deel wasn't lying in just any warehouse. This was the property for his grand dream – the one-stop shop where people living on the margins of society could access the best possible services all in one place.

After months of finagling, he'd finally convinced a local property owner to donate him the land, valued at $1.6 million. That was a great start, but an overwhelming amount of work still needed to be done. For one thing, the

premises were covered in trash. The warehouse where he slept at night was full of leaks and required constant vigilance to fend off thieves – and the aforementioned rats.

To transform it into a beautiful refuge, Deel would need serious amounts of money. But when he propositioned donors with his plan, they thought he was crazy. At that stage, the nonprofit had been a mom-and-pop operation, getting by as best it could on patchy donations. While they'd created some valuable projects for school children, vulnerable mothers, and the homeless, these had all been small-scale. Deel's plans to create a one-stop shop seemed crazily ambitious to donors, who counseled him to focus on doing one thing well rather than trying to achieve everything.

Just when he thought he'd never be able to convince them, a tragedy occurred

that allowed City of Refuge to prove themselves. In September 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused millions of people from Louisiana and Mississippi to flee for their lives. Positioned a few hundred miles away, Atlanta became a major hub for people seeking shelter.

City of Refuge started getting requests from the government to help provide temporary housing to evacuees and social workers. Within a few days, they'd set up a resource center that would eventually serve 3,500 people, providing shelter and hot food through the worst of the crisis. They created a distribution center, too, which assisted hundreds of families with furniture and other essential items.

Suddenly, everybody knew about City of Refuge. Deel and his team had demonstrated that they had the wherewithal to quickly react to a crisis, mobilizing resources and coordinating

hundreds of volunteers to support thousands of people. Suddenly, Deel's plans for creating an ambitious all-service NGO didn't sound so crazy after all.

**Over the years, City of Refuge grew into a full-fledged professional organization.**

In the early years, Deel and his colleagues had been lurching from crisis to crisis, putting out fires. They never had enough money or staff, so they just did what they could with the limited resources available to them.

But with their newfound credibility came an outpouring of support. Donations began flooding in – and so did offers of collaboration.

The most significant of these came from the mayor's office, who asked if City of Refuge wanted to join forces to solve the housing crisis. The city would provide $1.5 million in funding to transform part of City of Refuge's large site into 40 apartments, which would serve as transitional housing for homeless mothers and children.

This was the kind of break that Deel's team had been waiting for, and it marked a huge turning point for City of Refuge. Within a year, the housing, a state-of-the-art dining facility for 500 people, and a childcare center had been completed. In 2008, City of Refuge opened "Eden Village" to house 40 mothers and 82 children.

Not even a year later, the city contacted them again to ask if they'd be willing to create more housing, this time for single women. Deel didn't hesitate. The team pulled together, obtaining a building permit and completing construction on the second housing block – Eden Village 2 – in only three months. Now there was accommodation for 80 more women on the premises.

Over the next few years, Deel and his team would achieve more than many people can hope to achieve in a lifetime. Apart from providing transitional

housing, they created a full-service clinic. They also branched into education, creating a private school and vocational training programs for ex-offenders, veterans, and the formerly homeless.

As if that wasn't enough to keep them busy, City of Refuge decided to create a special refuge for victims of sex trafficking after Deel met a woman who had escaped the clutches of a trafficking ring. He realized there was no place for her to go; within a year the project had raised $1 million to create their own refuge. They launched a trauma-informed care program, which has since supported 700 women.

City of Refuge had truly become the one-stop shop that Deel had always dreamed of.

**Success is best measured and celebrated in small steps, not grand transformations.**

Today, City of Refuge can rattle off extremely impressive statistics about how many lives they've helped transform. But success, Deel has realized, can't only be measured in grand transformations.

He didn't always think like that. When he first started working on the Westside, he'd had very set ideas about what it meant to provide support to communities and how successful interventions in people's lives could be measured. In his mind, a program could be seen as successful if it resulted in people permanently giving up destructive habits – and embracing new, independent lives of sobriety and productivity. Essentially, he thought outreach projects needed to have a neat end point.

Years on the job gave him the wisdom to realize that transformation wasn't about grand narratives of success and failure, winners and losers. Rather, it was about celebrating the growth that can happen in small steps. He learned that the most important thing was to focus on the present – supporting people to make good decisions in the moment, and treating each day as a blank slate.

For example, he and his coworkers celebrated every time a heroin addict in one of their programs managed to stay sober another day. Or the moment when a woman who was severely traumatized managed to make eye contact over a meal. Or when a chronic alcoholic chose to drink a little bit less, so they were merely wobbly instead of catatonic.

Essentially, they adopted a harm-reduction model and sought to support individuals in the specific ways *they* needed, instead of imposing

expectations and judgements from above.

Today, some of the people Deel works with might not appear successful to the outside observer. Like Vanessa, a formerly homeless woman with chronic health problems. Or Rufus, a former addict who is unable to work, drive, or live independently. Both have had multiple relapses and can sometimes be challenging to work with. They'll remain dependent on City of Refuge for the rest of their lives.

But Deel knows that these people have all shown enormous growth. They've both dealt with decades of trauma and actively wrestled with powerful drug addictions. While they've had countless relapses, they've also chosen to rejoin the program countless times. They're no longer homeless and have reestablished relationships with their families. Most

important of all, they experience lives of dignity and satisfaction.

These kinds of transformations can't be neatly summed up in a statistic. These individuals' care has no end point, and sometimes the demands are draining and complex. But theirs are stories of courage and growth, achieved step by onerous step.

**Trust is infectious.**

When Deel decided to embrace the principle of *trust first* after he intervened in that fateful altercation in the liquor store parking lot, he probably hadn't realized that the person he would have to learn to trust most of all was himself.

Time and again, he had to wrestle with the gap between his intuition and the reality of a situation. His intuition told him that a policy of unconditional trust was the answer to doing effective work in Westside, but the trust he extended was abused time and again. His intuition told him that they needed an enormous one-stop relief project; in reality, he ended up with a rat-infested warehouse and no funding.

Simply plunging in and trusting that things would work out, though, allowed City of Refuge to achieve astonishing growth. This would never have been

possible if Deel had waited until he knew for sure how the project would pan out.

Ultimately, Deel's intuition – that trust is paramount – proved to be correct. By believing everyone is fundamentally trustworthy, he and his team were able to see beyond labels like "drug addict" and "offender." That gave them the opportunity to get to know people as individuals and learn more about what they really needed.

Extending unconditional trust also turned out to be the best roadmap for abandoning ineffective punitive models in the context of community work. City of Refuge prides itself on making barriers to admission as low as possible. They don't believe that being an alcoholic means that you don't deserve housing – or that there should be a limit on second chances. Experience has borne this approach out; it makes City of Refuge's

work more effective in helping people to transform their lives, not less.

The best thing about trust is that it's infectious. Trusting Deel required the community he worked with to open themselves up to the possibility of yet another disappointment at the hands of an authority figure. But seeing how Deel stayed the course allowed many of them to take a great leap of faith and do it anyway.

Deel's unwavering trust also inspired many others to join his project. When he and his team embarked on their one-stop shop, nobody wanted to touch the project with a barge pole. But over the years, their unflappable commitment has inspired thousands of volunteers and donors to join the City of Refuge.

*“Trusting that someone can change their life doesn’t mean you know they will – it means you believe in their ability to try.”*

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

**People born into poverty in the United States suffer from chronic opportunity injustice. They lack access to stable housing, nutritious food, and quality education. Worst of all, a lifetime of trauma and abuse has meant they've been denied knowledge of their own fundamental worthiness and potential. Recognizing this allowed Deel to realize that any work he did in the community had to both take tangible steps to correct opportunity injustice *and* exchange moralistic judgments for unconditional trust. This approach allowed Deel's City of Refuge to create ambitious, respectful social projects serving the real needs of the communities they work with.**

Actionable advice:

**When thinking about what to give someone, reflect on what you'd like to receive.**

When Pastor Deel started distributing food, he gave people stale bologna sandwiches donated by a local grocery store. But he soon realized that feeding people inferior food undermined the whole point of his project – it implicitly insulted the very people he was trying to serve. From then on, he made a point of only sharing the kind of food he would enjoy eating himself. Homemade pancakes with fresh coffee replaced stale sandwiches. If you really want to be generous, don't give anyone anything you wouldn't be happy to get yourself.

## Got feedback?

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## What to read next: *The Truth About Trust,* by David DeSteno

By now you've learned all about how a policy of unconditional trust created the conditions for social transformation on Atlanta's Westside. But what does it really mean for humans to trust, and how have we learned this evolutionary response? If you want to dig deeper, then the blinks to *The Truth About Trust* will be very illuminating.

You'll learn how our bodies and minds feed us information about when to trust others – even as very young children we're able to discern which adults are trustworthy and which will betray us. You'll also discover how fundamental trust is for creating strong romantic relationships, and you'll learn why the more money we have, the less trusting we become. If you're ready to continue your exploration into this vital human

behavior, then our blinks to *The Truth About Trust* are required reading!

**Nice work! You're all done with this one.**

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