

FROM ASSHOLE TO ALLY



*Why Ambitious Professionals Lose Trust
and How to Get It Back*

R. Scott Armstrong

TRUSTCRAFT PRESS

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Part I: The Problem

Introduction

Promoted Into It

How a Nice Kid Became an Ambitious Asshole

I didn't wake up one day and decide to be an ambitious asshole. I got promoted into it.

I was young, working in advertising on AT&T, Miller Brewing, NASCAR, Equal Sweetener, and Brown-Forman, paid enough to feel invincible and rewarded for acting like a shark. I learned fast that confidence wins. If I sound certain, people relax. If people relax, I win meetings. If I win meetings, I get promoted. I was so focused on success that I would speed down agency hallways fast enough that a hilarious creative named Doug Bramah called me "Hustle and Jingle," because he could hear the change rattling in my pocket before he saw me coming.

When you get addicted to being the person with the answer, every conversation becomes a performance. I wasn't listening to understand. I was listening to reload. I waited for openings. I grabbed the wheel. I filled silences. I pushed things toward my preferred outcome and called it leadership. It looked like momentum. It felt like winning.

It was also exhausting for everyone in the room. Including myself. I just couldn't see it yet.

I grew up in a small town called Midland where ambition felt slightly out of sync compared to the other residents in the town and your reputation was built with each interaction. person by person. Everyone knew everyone, which is to say that everyone also knew everyone's business. My family was known for being hard-working, kind, and community-oriented.

My parents were ahead of their time. They didn't just tell us what to think. They asked us questions and actually listened to the answers. Around our dinner table, your ideas mattered. Being curious was normal. Being heard was expected. I enjoyed our family discussions and looked forward to dinner every evening. I didn't know it then, but I was being trained in the most important professional skill I would ever use. Because of that, I was the kid who asked questions, not to show off, but because I wanted to know. I thrived in school, and loved learning.

That kid went away to college and continued to get rewarded for being smart, fast, and competitive. Then he went to work in advertising and got rewarded on a bigger scale. Somewhere in the accumulation of promotions and titles, the small-town instinct to be curious and useful got replaced by a louder, more urgent need: to win.

My move to Y&R Advertising in Chicago changed everything.

I was sent there to lead new business, win Miller Brewing, and turn the business around. VP title. Big office. Bigger expense account. Even bigger stakes. I was 30-something and I thought I'd arrived. What I didn't understand was the cost.

The well-liked existing new business team had been pushed out so I could arrive as the ambitious newbie. From day one, there was resentment in every room. People were polite. They came to meetings. They worked on my pitches. But it never felt like my team. There were no real conversations, no lunch outings, no happy hours to decompress after a long day. In my first six months in the Loop, I was never invited out for team drinks. Not once. And not only was I not part of the fun, we weren't winning pitches.

In Toronto I'd been part of something great, a strong new-business team, winning, social life around it, bosses like Barrett Book and Andrew Bergstrom who softened my edges. Chicago was different. Same ambition. Less cushion. More visibly asshole.

I told myself the team was slow to get on board. Inside, the soundtrack was more insecure: I have to prove they made the right call to bring me here. I have to win.

Then it blew up.

I was waiting on my president's assistant to set up a prospect meeting with Miller Brewing. In my mind, this was the most important item on her list, obviously. When it hadn't happened on my timeline, I lost it. I snapped at her in front of other people, demanding to know why it wasn't done, as if her job existed mainly to clear my path.

The next day, my president, Kary McIlwain, called me into her office. She didn't yell. She didn't give me a long speech. She just said, very calmly, that I was acting like an asshole

and that after yelling at her assistant, nobody wanted to help me.

It landed like a punch. Not because she was cruel. Because she was right.

I'd been promoted, given power, and handed a mandate to succeed. Somewhere along the way I'd unconsciously decided that my urgency, my pressure, and my need to prove myself mattered more than the people around me. I was trying to win meetings. I was losing trust. And I couldn't see it until Kary named it out loud.

I'll be forever grateful that she did. To name what's happening in someone else's behavior, calmly, without cruelty, without flinching, is itself an ally move, and I would not have learned the rest of this craft without her doing it first.

This book is for ambitious professionals who make a living selling advice: consultants, lawyers, accountants, advisors, agency stars, and anyone who gets paid to walk into a room and see what others don't.

If your ideas are strong but trust still wobbles, this book is for you. If you've ever suspected you might be the problem in the room, this is for you. If you keep hearing "you're smart but not quite ready for the next level" without clear direction on what's missing, definitely for you.

This isn't a book about being nicer. Ambition isn't the enemy here. I believe in it, because it's powered me for most of my life. This is about tuning ambition to become

the kind of professional who earns trust, lowers risk, and is useful when the stakes go up. Not less ambitious. More trustworthy. More successful. Way better to work with.

What I've learned (slowly, expensively, and sometimes humiliatingly) is that if I could do one thing differently over my career I would:

**STOP TRYING TO WIN THE ANSWER.
WIN THE QUESTION.**

Learning to be an ally instead of an asshole isn't that hard. The need to do so is just not that obvious until you see it. It's a collection of valuable best practices and experiences I've picked up over the past few decades, some cheats I use to put them into action, and some neuroscience that backs it all up.

It's helped me get back to being a guy who loves to help his clients win. It shouldn't take you decades to figure it out.

Let's go.

CHAPTER 1

It's Not About You

The Math that Changed Everything

Asshole behavior isn't unique to agency life. Think about the last time you dealt with an accountant, a lawyer, a consultant, an executive, or even your doctor and walked away thinking: They're not listening and they just don't understand.

None of this is a personal failing. It's default professional behavior. When researchers Dr. Kari A Phillips, Dr. Naykky Singh Ospina, and Dr. Victor M Montori recorded real doctor visits in a 2018 JGIM study (10), the doctors asked what was wrong in only about a third of them. When they did ask, two-thirds of the doctors interrupted the answer, half of those inside eleven seconds. Eleven seconds. And it's just as bad across the boardroom table.

Most professionals aren't trying to be difficult to work with—being difficult would be almost easier to deal with. They're trying to be helpful and worth promoting. They just do it in a way that's self-defeating. Constantly. Professionals are trained, formally and informally, to sound smart, authoritative, and correct. They use their title and expertise like a tower, and then talk down to everyone from the top. It looks professional to them. It often feels terrible to the person on the receiving end.

That's how you become a professional asshole. Not through malice. Through the slow accumulation of

earning rewards for sounding certain, being fast, and performing confidence instead of earning trust.

If you're a mid-career professional, this might sound familiar. You keep getting called smart and reliable, but you're not the first call for the real problems. You get invited to big meetings, but you don't shape the agenda. You deliver the work, but someone else gets the credit, the access, or the promotion. That's what stalled upside feels like. It looks fine on LinkedIn, but it feels like hitting an invisible ceiling.

That ceiling isn't intelligence. It's self-orientation. And one of the more expensive lessons I've had in spotting it was at Hewlett-Packard.

In the early 2000s, I was the general manager at a community management consultancy. Online community building was one of the hottest areas in marketing, and we were working to win an assignment with HP, specifically to build and manage an enterprise software user community.

On paper, perfect fit. We had ideas, energy, and just enough early success to believe we knew what we were doing.

What we didn't have was any real understanding of what HP was dealing with.

HP was in the middle of yet another massive restructuring and cutting over 24,000 jobs while the financial crisis froze every budget. I remember walking through their huge Cupertino campus. Every other building was closed. In the ones still open, every other floor was dark. You could

almost smell the fear in the hallways, the sideways kind that settles into a place during restructuring.

Executives were ducking. Budgets were plunging. People were trying to keep their jobs.

And we walked in sure we had the answer.

We convinced our super smart client contact, Michael Procopio, to fund a research and consulting phase. Then we did exactly what self-oriented consultants do when they think credibility is everything: We locked ourselves in our office for months. We researched the market, built comprehensive rationales, developed a global implementation plan, and spent his entire budget producing a slick 53-page report.

Then we flew a large team to San Jose, marched into a conference room, and proudly presented the whole thing.

Michael was polite. He thanked us. He paid the invoice. Then he dodged our calls for months. No pilot. Nothing went live. He eventually left HP.

I ran into him years later and finally asked what had happened.

He told me HP was in the middle of massive restructuring. Senior leaders were asking for one-page project outlines, literally green smiley faces for go, yellow faces for needs analysis, red faces for not aligned with current priorities. Our 53-page report missed the mark in scope, risk, budget, and format. Michael told me he was the only stakeholder

who ever read the whole thing. There was nothing he could do with it internally, so it died on the vine.

Then he said something that still stings: "You spent my budget building a report designed to prove you were smart consultants with big ideas, without spending enough time discovering what I needed to move the organization forward."

That hurt. It was also worth more than the entire project fee in what it taught me.

The most useful model I've found for understanding what went wrong comes from David Maister's *The Trusted Advisor* (1). The Trust Equation is brutal in its simplicity:

$$\text{Trust} = \frac{\text{C} + \text{R} + \text{I}}{\text{S-O}}$$

After Maister, Green & Galford · *The Trusted Advisor*

- Credibility: Do I know what I'm talking about?
- Reliability: Do I do what I said I'd do?
- Intimacy: Does the client feel safe with me?
- Self-Orientation: Am I focused on me, or on you?

Everything sits on top of that denominator. On top of how self-oriented I am. Everything I do gets divided by acting like an asshole.

So the move is simple to say and brutal to live: drop the denominator and trust climbs. You can't outsmart a

denominator. A bigger title, a thicker case study library, a more expensive suit, none of it divides the number down. Only caring more about the person across the table than about how clever I look does that.

That is brutal math in the real world. And it was the breakthrough insight that helped me understand how I could do better.

Maister is a real consultant's consultant. His thinking is thorough, academic, and, if I'm honest, a bit hard to get through. After years of using his approach, here's what I've taken from it:

Self-orientation isn't just ego. It's a professional virus that infects everything. Every time I make the work a little too much about proving myself, trust takes a hit. Join a bigger firm. Get a bigger title. Buy a more expensive suit. Build a thicker case study library. Feel the need to win the room and the need to be right. This all "about me" behavior is trust eroding self-orientation that was preventing me from getting to the next level.

I learned that I couldn't fix self-orientation with a quick patch. It had been growing for decades. I had to step back and understand how self-oriented I'd become and then work hard every day to care more about my client on the other side of the table than how clever I was. In order to build more client trust, I had to see and then reduce the self-orientation that had helped me succeed through school and my early career.

Credibility, reliability and intimacy become table stakes the more senior you get. The thing that separates a

successful professional from an ambitious professional stuck in their career is reflective insights about self-orientation

My HP story wasn't a capability failure. We had good ideas. Real expertise. Solid work. But our self-orientation was so high that none of it mattered. We had technically impressive, practically useless deliverables. That's not work that builds trust. It's an expensive risk the client took and paid for.

It took losing more big pitches, and then losing my job, to finally slow me down.

After Chicago, I had landed at Cossette Advertising, and the firing itself was fast. I knew it was coming and sat waiting in my office all day until the call from HR and my president Dom Caruso finally came in. I'd watched it happen to other people, I had even done it to other people and privately assumed they'd earned it. The agency world was brutal that way. You were only as good as your last win. Now it was my turn, and I walked out certain the market would correct the mistake within a month.

The market had other plans.

I ran my job search the way I'd run new business. Hustle and Jingle, unemployed edition. I reached out to the recruiters I knew, the agency presidents I had previously ignored, and everyone else in the business, and booked coffees, meetings, and even some interviews. I treated every coffee like a pitch and every interview like a room to win. I had answers ready before anyone asked a question. I brought certainty, attitude, and lots of "about me".

Nothing landed.

Weeks became months. The pressure at home was heavier than anything I'd carried in the office. Two kids with a third on the way. A crushing mortgage on a partially renovated home. A wife who had left the workforce to become a full-time mom, in a marriage I had underinvested in while operating in full asshole mode.

A year of silence does something useful to a professional who built his identity on winning: it removes the noise he was hiding in. No meetings to run. No pitches to prep. No hallway to hustle down. Just a guy at a kitchen table with a phone that had stopped ringing, slowly realizing that everything he knew how to do was some version of talking.

Finally, after I threw a fit in his office, a recruiter I knew named Michael Gates told me the truth. I was overpriced for my title, overtitled for my experience, and despite my earlier successes, my recent record was a string of expensive pitch losses. The part that hurt most: he described my reputation as hard to work with.

That was when Kary's words stopped sounding like feedback about Chicago and started sounding like a diagnosis. All that success had taught me how to lose. It took a long look at the loser in the mirror to start understanding where I'd gone wrong. For fifteen years I'd walked into every room selling how smart I was. Including the rooms where I was supposed to be getting hired. The interviews were the tell. I kept trying to win them, while the people across the table were looking for someone they could trust.

The job that finally ended the drought was at a little-known agency called the Hive. They had just been through a major restructuring, the team was shattered, and they hated traditional agency suits. But they were desperate too. They could afford two-thirds of the salary I'd been making, which didn't cover my monthly nut but was more than the nothing I had been making after my severance gave out. I needed that job. That sentence took a year to be able to say. It also turned out to be the starting position for everything this book teaches. Humility got me through the door. Curiosity kept me there.

I'd have preferred a shorter route. Apparently that wasn't on offer.

Reducing self-orientation looks small from the outside. From the inside, every move is the opposite of what an ambitious professional has been rewarded for.

The asshole version of me in motion: walks fast, talks fast, fills silences, opens with the deck, reaches for the rip video, and listens like a hunter. Nods while you talk, but you can see the next sentence already loaded ready to score a point. Sends a follow-up that says, "Great meeting!" and attaches a 53-page report that does not help with the client's real question.

The ally version in motion: walks in slower than the room expects. Looks around with a real smile. Asks a question before the agenda to better understand the agenda. Has a marker in hand, and uses it to write down the client's words, not their own. Pauses where the asshole would speak. Says, "Let me test a frame with you, I might be off." Stays quiet when the client gets close to the real thing they

are worrying about. Stays relaxed when the room gets tense. Doesn't fill silence. Sends a follow-up email a few useful sentences long: here's what I heard, in your language; here are a few different ways forward with honest tradeoffs; here's what I think the next decision is. What did I miss?

The asshole version of me is what got promoted early. The ally version is what gets trusted and earns business now.

According to Peter Economy from Inc. Magazine (2), top performers talk about 43 percent of the time and listen for the rest. Average performers talk 60 percent. The ones who lose deals and clients talk 65 percent and climbing. The math is rude and simple: the more asshole you are, the more airtime you take, the less people trust you.

The rest of this book is the fix, and it is easier than you would expect: recognizing and minimizing self-orientation, four trust skills, and how to scale winning the question behaviors in your firm. One cultural signal that matters more than most leaders realize: how your team talks about clients when the clients aren't in the room. Asshole culture describes clients as obstacles and sources of unreasonable demands. Ally culture describes clients as people carrying real pressure, trying to do hard things inside complicated organizations.

The problem is the brutal math of trust. To earn more client trust you need to recognize and then reduce your self-orientation.

The four skills are how you reduce self-orientation in practice:

- Ask, don't answer.
- Listen to learn.
- Trust framing.
- Learn how to navigate the moments of trust where relationships are won or lost.

And the final part of the book tells how to make it happen at scale so you can grow your business:

- Pitching Clients
- One Ally Isn't Enough
- Marketing Trust
- The Ally Long Game

A question for you before you get started on the rest of the book: In your last important client meeting, do you know if you acted more asshole or ally? What were some of the obvious signs of earning more trust?

The Brutal Math of Trust

this one runs everything ↓

$$\text{Trust} = \frac{\text{Credibility} + \text{Reliability} + \text{Intimacy}}{\text{Asshole-ness}}$$

CREDIBILITY *Do I know what I'm talking about?*

- ✓ Real expertise. Real stories. Facts.
- ✗ Theatrical expertise. Jargon. Name-drops.

RELIABILITY *Do I do what I said I'd do?*

- ✓ Small commitments kept, in writing, on time.
- ✗ Big promises. Slipped deadlines. Vague follow-through.

INTIMACY *Does the client feel safe with me?*

- ✓ They tell me the political stuff.
- ✗ They tell me the official version.

ASSHOLE-NESS *Am I focused on me, or on them?*

Halve it and trust doubles.

Double it and trust collapses.

QUICK SELF-AUDIT *before the next meeting*

- ☐ Whose problem am I about to solve, theirs or mine?
- ☐ What am I trying to prove?
- ☐ If I cut my asshole-ness in half, what would I do differently?

THE REST OF THE BOOK

You just got the why. The rest of the book is the how.

Chapter 1 gave you the reframe: trust isn't about being the smartest person in the room. It's about how much of the room you make about yourself. That's the mindset. It won't change a single client conversation until you have the skills to act on it.

So that's what the rest of the book is. Four skills that turn the mindset into behavior. Drilled, not lectured.

Ask, Don't Answer. The one nobody believes until it happens to them: the person who wins the argument often loses the relationship. I lost a pitch this way and kept the client for years. You win the question by asking it, not by having the answer. Chapter 2 shows how.

Listen to Learn. Most professionals listen to reload, not to understand. This is the skill that powers every other one. Chapter 3.

Trust Framing. Anyone can take notes. Allies make the client feel smarter about their own problem. This is the skill clients remember you for. Chapter 4.

Moments of Trust. Every relationship has a handful of moments where trust is won or quietly lost. Most people walk right past them. You won't. Chapter 5.

Stop winning the answer. Start winning the question.

Run a firm or lead a team?

This isn't only a book. It's a working session. Bring Win The Question to your people and we'll drill these skills live, on your real client situations. Visit www.winthequestion.com or send me a message at scott@winthequestion.com for more information.

Bring This to Your Firm

If this book changed how you think about your next client meeting, the rest of the platform was built for the meeting after that. Five ways to bring this work into your firm, from a single session to a year-long advisory engagement.

The Team Session: 120 minutes

A great addition to your next team off-site, it's a working session for your leadership team, practice group, or department. Trust as a math problem that helps you recognize self-orientation in action, the four skills drilled live, and a real client situation worked through the framework. Built for the team that wants to start practicing the skills, not just nodding at them.

The Half-Day Workshop: 4 hours

More framing drills, more moments-of-trust practice, more time to work live client situations together. Built for the team that has already done a session and wants more time on the practice field.

Trust Upgrade: 2 half-days

The full curriculum. Pre-call and post-call rituals, the moments-of-trust playbook, live framing drills, and a 30-day practice plan with team accountability. Designed for the firm that wants its ambitious professionals to start sounding like its best partners.

Keynote: 45 minutes

A talk for conferences, partner offsites, and leadership retreats. The brutal math of trust, the answer-versus-question shift, the moments-of-trust playbook, with the live stories the book can't fully carry. Built for a room of senior professionals who already know they're smart and want to know why that isn't enough.

Advisory Work: quarterly

One ally, one room at a time. For founders, managing partners, and senior leaders who want to build ally culture into their firm's operating system. Quarterly engagements, focused on the specific moments where trust is being lost or won.

For booking, scope, or questions:

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Acknowledgments

This book exists because Kary McIlwain told me I was acting like an asshole, and she meant it. I'll be grateful for the rest of my career.

Luke Sklar showed me what listening looks like before I had a word for what he was doing. He drew the picture on the whiteboard until I could see it, more times than I deserved. The half of this book about helping clients see their own thinking is half-Luke at minimum.

Nolin LeChasseur has been my business partner, the discovery to my go-go-go, and the patient counterweight to my worst instincts for almost 20 years. The principle of alignment in Chapter 7 was earned over years of disagreeing well, in conference rooms, kitchens, and the occasional bar. I'm still learning from him.

The Brainrider team, past and present, taught me that ally culture is more than any one person can carry. All of you made the lessons in Chapter 7 real before I had the words for them.

Some clients made this book possible by being honest with me, even when it cost them something to do it. Michael Procopio at HP told me what was wrong with our 53-page report. Erin Schlader at Brown-Forman looked at the Tuaca Twister and gave me a generous version of the truth. Rankin Carroll (before he was client side) let an 8-foot foam-core board chase him across Avenue Road and laughed about it later. To the dozens I haven't named:

Thank you for trusting me with the work, and for telling me when I got it wrong.

To the clients who taught me what wasn't in the win column, including the ones who stopped returning my calls before I understood why, this book carries your lessons too.

To my parents, who taught me at the dinner table that being curious was normal and being heard was expected. Most of what's good in this book started there.

To my people: Thank you for the patience, honesty, and years of asking the harder question. I'm still working on it all.

And to the reader who got this far. The book wasn't written for everyone. It was written for the ambitious professional who suspects they might be the problem in the room and is willing to do something about it. If that's you, I hope this was useful by Monday morning.

R. Scott Armstrong, Creemore, 2026

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About the Author

R. Scott Armstrong has spent 38 years learning what every ambitious professional eventually figures out the hard way: The work isn't about you.

He grew up in Midland, Ontario, where ambition felt out of sync and reputations got built person by person. He went to college, got rewarded for being smart and fast, then went into advertising and got rewarded harder. Along the way he worked on AT&T, Miller Brewing, NASCAR, Equal Sweetener, Brown-Forman, and Hewlett-Packard. He also ran agency hallways fast enough to earn the nickname "Hustle and Jingle" from a creative director who could hear his pocket change rattling before he came around the corner. He has lost pitches, blown up relationships, gotten fired, and once spent an entire client budget producing a 53-page report nobody read. He still has the Tuaca Twister.

In 2010, he co-founded Brainrider with Nolin LeChasseur, building a B2B marketing services firm from a Toronto startup into a mini-multinational and then back to a small and smart client-focused practice. Along the way he learned, slowly, expensively, and sometimes humiliatingly, that the professionals clients trust are the ones who stop trying to win the answer and win the question.

He now teaches that craft through Win The Question: the platform, the keynote, the workshop, and the advisory practice. *From Asshole to Ally* is the field manual.

He lives at the end of a dirt road in Creemore, Ontario where he trusts his neighbors and rides his motorcycle.

For workshops, keynotes, or advisory engagements:
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About Trustcraft Press

Trustcraft Press publishes field-tested books on the craft of professional trust.

Most business books explain what to think. Trustcraft Press books teach what to do, in the meeting that starts in nine minutes, with the client who isn't telling you what they need, on the project where the work is fine but the relationship is wobbling.

The bar for a Trustcraft Press book: written by a working professional, anchored in real stories with real names, useful by Monday morning, honest about what doesn't work as well as what does. No frameworks without failures. No theory without practice. No learning without the receipts.

Trustcraft Press is an imprint of Win The Question.

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About Win The Question

Win The Question exists because the most expensive lessons in professional life, the ones that teach you to stop performing and start listening, to frame instead of tell, to stay in the question instead of racing to the answer, are also the ones almost nobody is taught directly. Most professionals learn them by failing at them, often for years, sometimes for decades.

Win The Question is the shorter route.

The book is the foundation. The keynote is the introduction. The workshop is the practice field. The advisory work is the personal coaching. Together they make a complete craft for ambitious professionals, consultants, advisors, agency leaders, lawyers, accountants, founders, who want to be the person clients want to work with, not just the smartest person in the room.

Stop trying to win the answer. Win the question.

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(The End)

"YOU'RE TOO DAMN SMART TO SUCCEED."

Smart got you in the room. Trust is how you win.

In professional services, smart is the baseline, not the differentiator. What separates the people clients call first from the ones they tolerate isn't credentials, expertise, or hustle. It's how you show up in the conversations that matter most.

Scott Armstrong learned this the hard way. Twenty years of being the fast, confident, certain version of himself, until losing a global account to a one-office shop that just listened better, blowing a Miller campaign, and getting called out by his own president for acting like an asshole. Then he spent the next decade learning what nobody had taught him: how to be trusted, not just impressive.

The math is brutal. Everything you bring to a client gets divided by how much you make it about you. Pressure-tested in three decades of real client rooms, this is the operating system Scott teaches to teams of ambitious professionals, and the foundation for the Win the Question keynote and workshop.

WHAT SCOTT TEACHES

- Why expertise alone isn't earning you more business
- The shift from winning the answer to winning the question
- How to handle the conversations professionals dread: bad news, scope creep, pricing pushback, hard feedback
- How to catch yourself making it about you before your client does, and what to do about it

Stop winning the answer. Start winning the question.

A true story with hard-earned practical tools for ambitious professional-services teams in agencies, consulting, law, accounting, and other firms whose people are paid for their judgment.

R. Scott Armstrong is co-founder and CEO of Brainrider, a global B2B marketing agency, and founder of Win the Question. He teaches professional-services firms how to earn trust at scale through keynotes, workshops, and team coaching.

ADVANCE PRAISE

"How do we be the smartest people in the room? Trust is something that sticks with you."

Campbell Yelle, Vice-President, Origin Merchant Partners

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