



The Nature of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In my work, I help organizations understand the nature of trust and how to obtain more of it. One observation I've made over the years is that people tend to visualize trust in pretty narrow terms, thinking of it as a feeling of one person toward another. I trust you or I do not trust you.

I start many of my programs by demonstrating that trust is far more complex than we realize, and it is extremely dynamic. If you believe trust is one thing, consider this (incomplete) list of the different types of trust in our lives:

1. Assurance - You always have my back
2. Consistency - You always do what you say
3. Reliance - You do what you believe is in my best interest
4. Dependency - You do things to keep me well and happy
5. Values - We share common core values and trust each other to abide by them
6. Fearless - It is safe to voice an opinion without fear of retribution by you
7. Vulnerability - You are willing to listen and admit mistakes
8. Safety - You will protect me from harm

These are just eight of the obvious categories of trust, and they only include the trust between individuals. There are several other major categories and many sub categories of the ones I have listed. Trust also is evident in every aspect of our lives. It is there in the people we know, the services we obtain, the institutions we interface with, and the products we use. Trust is ubiquitous.

We cannot get out of bed in the morning and go to work without experiencing trust several hundred times, yet we are rarely conscious of the interplay unless something does not work. We walk into the bathroom and turn on the light switch trusting that the lights will go on. We turn the spigot in the shower trusting the water to come out.

As long as things go as expected, then we are not conscious of the possibility for something else to happen. At breakfast we take a vitamin with our orange juice and rarely think about where the OJ came from or who was running pill machine making the

vitamin. As we drive to work, we travel on many overpasses. It is rare that we worry about this infrastructure crumbling beneath us.

We pay most attention to the level of trust between ourselves and other people. This is the most common form of conscious trust. What we experience is a kind of one-way trust, like do I trust her. We often fail to recognize that trust is always bilateral. The other person trusts us at some level just as we trust her at some level, and the levels are rarely the same at any point in time.

Trust is far more dynamic than we realize. For example, our trust in a peer at work may shift slightly several times in one day depending on the moment by moment interplay of dialog and activities. These shifts are usually small, but if they are all in the same direction, a great deal of trust can be either gained or lost in a single day.

Trust between people is cumulative rather than zero-based. We start each interface with roughly the level of trust we had at our last get-together. Each person has an "account" of trust with the other person, and the balance of trust is the sum of all deposits and withdrawals in the account up to that point. I made a demonstration of how trust works between people using a bunch of metal and plastic scraps. I made a six-minute video about it: [Trust Barometer](#).

The point of this article is that trust is far more complex than most people realize, and it is everywhere in our lives. If you tried to imagine the full scope of how trust is working in your life, it would be a fruitless as trying to trace the path of a single corpuscle of blood flowing in your body. The cumulative effect of all the blood running through your veins is what allows you to live, just as the cumulative impact of all the trust in your life allows you to have your current equilibrium with things and people.

Now imagine taking several hundred people and putting them together in a kind of pressure cooker called an organization and you have a rather complex situation. The cumulative level of trust between people in the entire organization is what gives the entity its power to operate.

Leaders provide the environment where this fragile commodity called trust will flourish or be extinguished. I believe more than any other factor, it is the **behaviors of the leaders** that determines the level of trust in an organization. Trust is not dependent on the desires of leaders, their intelligence, or their intentions. All leaders seek high trust. It is their behaviors that govern the reactions in people that lead to higher or lower trust.

I firmly believe that if an organization is struggling with performance issues, regardless of the direct causes, the root cause is the inability of the leaders of that organization to create an environment where trust grows. That is both good news and bad. The bad news is that most leaders do not believe what I just wrote. It is easier to blame others or

circumstances. The good news is that there is a way to educate leaders to understand this concept and actually do better. The only difference between the bad news and the good news is getting leaders to recognize that the leverage is created by their behaviors.

My mission in life is to educate as many leaders as possible about these ideas, and by doing that, make a tiny difference in our world. Come and join me by passing this article on to a leader you know.

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