



Trust is Not a Singular Concept

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I have been studying trust for several decades, teach it in corporate and academic settings, and have written four books on it. Trust such a common word that it is used numerous times a day without thinking. Just listen to the advertisements on TV and you will hear the word trust in the majority of them.

Many people have a misconception about the concept of trust. They think of trust as a singular concept when the word is used in daily conversation. They picture it as a kind of bond between them and another person. It takes on a singular connotation: either they trust another person or do not trust them at some level right now.

The way I get groups to think about trust at a deeper level is by asking them point blank what the word means. There is always a kind of pause and awkward silence for a few seconds as people try to define it. Then, someone will offer that trust is the confidence that another person will perform in a certain way. Someone else will chime in that trust is taking a risk that they could be disappointed. A third person will add that trust is about having shared values. Then someone will add that trust is having their back or sticking up for them. Once the ball gets rolling, a group can come up with a couple dozen unique definitions of trust in about 15 minutes.

Now the group is ready to entertain the idea that trust is a multi-faceted concept that exists not only between people but with organizations, products, services, and all kinds of systems. People get the idea that trust is ubiquitous and is all around them in every waking moment of their day. They recognize that before they get to work in the morning, they have experienced trust (usually unconsciously) several hundred times.

They walk into the bathroom and turn on the lights. They trust the whole system to provide light without thinking about where the electricity is coming from unless there is some kind of rare electrical failure.

They turn on the water and just expect potable water to come out without any problem. If it is the left faucet, they trust that the water will become warm, then hot with time.

From the time they first open their eyes until they reach the breakfast table, trust is experienced dozens of times; then things get really complicated.

At breakfast they are confident that the vitamin pill they are taking is safe even though they have no idea who made the pill and what ingredients went into it. They just swallow the pill and expect it to help.

They get into their car and turn the ignition key. Now, inside the engine, there are thousands of explosions each minute that allow the car to move while they peacefully enjoy the classical music on their favorite station and crank up the air conditioning if it is a hot day. They have no worry when they press down on the brakes that the car will stop before hitting the truck that is stopped in front of them. They drive over numerous bridges and overpasses without blinking an eye and do not think of the consequences if the structure would become unsafe.

On and on it goes all day every day that they simply take for granted things will work as designed even though they recognize on occasion things might fail for some obscure reason. The failures are so remote that they put them out of their mind unless something unusual is going on. Now let's focus on how trust between people is built and lost for all of us.

In general, we all focus our conscious energy about trust on the relationships we have with other people. Often we forget about the transactional nature of trust. It is impacted by everything (seen and unseen) that happens between people. Trust is bilateral. I trust you and you trust me at some level, and the levels are not the same. Something happens, and I may trust you more while you trust me less. The whole thing is dynamic and constant. Most of the trust interactions are going on in our subconscious minds. We have a kind of score card in our mind that is like the balance in a bank account.

Many authors, including me, have likened trust to a bank account where we have a balance, and we make deposits and withdrawals. The size of the deposit or withdrawal will vary depending on what is happening, and the transaction may be totally subconscious. We can make a huge withdrawal of trust with another person and be totally oblivious to it.

A few years ago I built a model that helps people visualize this trust account and how it works. I call it my "Trust Barometer" and show it at all my programs. People really get the message about how trust works very easily. Here is a link to a [six minute video](#) about how trust is built and lost. Take a peek at this fun description and see if it helps you picture the nature of trust in your life.

Trust is more complex and ubiquitous in our lives than we realize. Try to be more aware of this aspect of trust, and you can see it working for you more consciously on a daily basis. It is fun, and it certainly is an eye opener.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him** [at www.Leadergrow.com](http://www.Leadergrow.com), bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

