

3 Tricky Questions About Trust

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In my leadership classes, I often like to pose 3 challenging questions about the nature of trust. As people grapple with the questions, it helps them sort out for themselves a deeper meaning of the words and how they might be applied in their own world. The three questions are:

- What is the relationship between trust and vulnerability?
- Can you trust someone you fear?
- Can you respect someone you do not trust, and can you trust someone you do not respect?

I have spent a lot of time bouncing these questions around in my head. I am not convinced that I have found the correct answers (or even that correct answers exist). I have had to clarify in my own mind the exact meanings of the words trust, vulnerability, fear, and respect.

Before you read this article further, stop here and ponder the three questions for yourself. See if you can come to some answers that might be operational for you.

Thinking about these concepts, makes them become more powerful for us. I urge you to pose the three questions (without giving your own answers) to people in your work group. Then have a quality discussion about the possible answers. You will find it is a refreshing and deep conversation to have.

Here are my answers (subject to change in the future as I grow in understanding):

1. What is the relationship between trust and vulnerability?

Trust implies vulnerability. When you trust another person, there is always a chance that the person will disappoint you. Ironically, it is the extension of your trust that drives a reciprocal enhancement of the other person's trust in you. If you are a leader and you want people in your organization to trust you more, one way to achieve that is to show more trust in them. That is a very challenging concept for many managers and leaders. They sincerely want to gain more trust, but find it hard to extend higher trust to others. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "It is better to trust and be disappointed every once in a while than to not trust and be miserable all the time."

2. Can you trust someone you fear?

Fear and trust are nearly opposites. I believe trust cannot kindle in an organization when there is fear, so one way to gain more trust is to create an environment with less fear. In the vast majority of cases, trust and lack of fear go together. The question I posed is whether trust and fear can *ever* exist at the same time. I think it is possible to trust someone you fear. That thought is derived from how I define trust.

My favorite definition is that if I trust you, I believe you will always do what you believe is in my best interest - even if I don't appreciate it at the time. Based on that logic, I can trust someone even if I am afraid of what she might do as long as I believe she is acting in my best interest.

For example, I may be afraid of my boss because I believe she is going to give me a demotion and suggest I get some training on how to get along with people better. I am afraid of her because of the action she will take, while on some level I am trusting her to do what she believes is right for me.

Let's look at another example. Suppose your supervisor is a bully who yells at people when they do not do things to his standards. You do not appreciate the abuse and are fearful every time you interact with him. You do trust him because he has kept the company afloat during some difficult times and has never missed a payroll, but you do not like his tactics.

3. Can you respect someone you do not trust & can you trust someone you do not respect?

This one gets pretty complicated. In most situations trust and respect go hand in hand. That is easy to explain and understand. But is it possible to conjure up a situation where you can respect someone you do not yet trust? Sure, we do this all the time. We respect people for the things they have achieved or the position they have reached. We respect many people we have not even met. For example, I respect Nelson Mandela, but I have no basis yet to trust him, even though I have a predisposition to trust him based on his reputation.

Another example is a new boss. I respect her for the position and the ability to hold a job that has the power to offer me employment. I probably do not trust her immediately. I will wait to see if my respect forms the foundation on which trust grows based on her actions over time.

If someone has let me down in the past, and I have lost respect for that person, then there is no basis for trust at all. This goes to the second part of the question: Can you trust someone you do not respect?

I find it difficult to think of a single example where I can trust someone that I do not respect. That is because respect is the basis on which trust is built. If I do not respect an individual, I believe it is impossible for me to trust her. Therefore, respect becomes an enabler of trust, and trust is the higher order phenomenon. You first have to respect a person, then go to work on building trust.

People use the words trust, fear, respect, and vulnerability freely every day. It is rare that they stop and think about the relationships between the concepts. Thinking about and discussing these ideas ensures that communication has a common ground for understanding, so take some time in your work group to wrestle with these questions. I welcome dissenting opinions on my thoughts here because I am eager to learn other ways of thinking about trust.



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