



Degrees of Trust

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Many people use the word trust as if it is a singular concept. You either trust someone or you don't. Of course, most people realize there are degrees of trust: you can trust someone a little or a lot. A common perception is that the word means one thing, as Webster puts it, "Trust - belief in the honesty, reliability, etc. of another." The "etc." in that definition actually covers a lot of ground.

I believe trust is far more complex than can be captured in a single concept. Picture an infinite variety of types of trust and numerous levels of trust for each type. We might consider the different shades of trust to be as plentiful as the different shades of color, and the intensities of trust going from fully saturated to almost transparent. I will share six categories of trust with some specific examples. Recognize this is not an exhaustive treatment of the types of trust, but rather some typical concepts to illustrate the variety and complexity of trust.

Trust Between People

Between any two people who know each other, there is some balance of trust, rather like a bank account balance. The variety of trusting relationships are nearly infinite. Examples are easy to describe, like: parent-child, spouse, boss, peers, people who you have not met but know online, and employees.

In every pair of individuals there exist two threads of trust, one is person A's trust in person B. The other thread is the reverse of that. The levels of trust from one person to the other are never exactly duplicated in reverse. The level of trust fluctuates on a moment-to-moment basis as we go about our daily interactions. It is like there are tiny deposits or withdrawals going on whenever these two people interface in any way (even virtually). Sometimes a special circumstance allows a large deposit. Often small withdrawals can become large ones if not handled correctly. I call this "The ratchet effect," meaning trust is usually built up with many small clicks of the ratchet but can quickly spin back to zero if the pawl becomes disengaged.

Trust in Systems or Agencies

We have some level of faith in a myriad of supportive groups at all times. We often take these things for granted. We trust (or don't trust) governments at all levels to take care of our society. People trusted Bernie Madoff and his organization for more than 30 years. Other examples in this category are easy to name. For example, we have a level of trust with the military, FDA, banking, the Stock Market, the media.

Trust in the media is particularly interesting because a lack of trust in this system has huge impacts in our trust in all the other agencies. Data shows that trust in the media in the United States is at an all-time low of less than 30%, according to the 2011 Edelman Trust Barometer. This means that most people do not believe what they are being told is happening in the world, at least not fully. The data also shows that many people suspend judgment on what they will believe until they have received the same information at least three to five times from different trusted sources.

Trust in products

Our trust in products is also something we take for granted until we experience a product failure that grabs our attention. A student of mine went to a famous pizza establishment last week and ended up in the hospital for several days with food poisoning. Mattel had to recall numerous infant toys when it was discovered the factories in China did not have control over the suppliers of paint, and there was a potential for lead poisoning of children.

When you stop and think of the trust we place in products of all kinds, it is staggering. Consider the following tiny subset of products we rely on: medications, automobiles, airplanes, tools, internet, and elevators. How often do you worry when getting into an elevator that the cable will break?

Trust in Concepts

We all have various levels of trust with certain concepts or ideals and rarely stop to think about them. For example, we might trust in: the power of prayer, positive thinking, Murphy's Law, supply and demand, the value of education, or living by values. These concepts help define our relationship to the world and form our total world view. They were programmed into us by the forces impacting us during our formative years. They govern our sense of what is right and wrong and are the basis of our moral and ethical perspectives on life.

Trust in Organizations

We can describe some highly tangible examples of trust in institutions. For example, your level of trust in your own organization, The Red Cross, your grocery store, your

auto mechanic, a hospital, the insurance company. Any time we interface with any organization, we are relying on or modifying our perception of our trust in that entity. We do not stop and think about it, but our level of confidence is fluctuating based on every interaction, large or small.

For example, if the insurance company finds some fine print in your contract that states you cannot be compensated for your water-damaged house because you could not prove it was specifically caused by "the **weight** of ice and snow," you begin to wonder why bother to have insurance in the first place. In other words, you no longer trust that what you think you purchased is actually what you purchased.

I know a man who went into a hospital for a routine knee operation and had his leg amputated above the knee by mistake. Imagine the trust betrayal he felt when he awoke from the anesthesia.

Trust in Infrastructure

Many of the items in this paper are things we take for granted. Trust in infrastructure is probably the thing we take for granted the most. We turn on the light switch and expect there to be electricity. We turn on the faucet and expect potable water to come out. We expect not to have any deep potholes in the road (although some of us get disappointed on that one). Public transportation is expected to be there on time barring some kind of natural disaster. We expect the school bus to come by to pick up our kids. When we drive over a bridge, we rarely worry that it will collapse and kill us.

All of the infrastructure items are things we just assume will be there whenever we want to use them, and we don't spend energy worrying about them unless there is some kind of emergency situation.

The list could go on forever, and the possibilities for positive or negative trust are infinite. For every situation, there is a unique aspect to the trust that exists between individuals. In addition to different types of trust, there are different degrees or levels of trust, and the variety of these is also infinite. Let me share just one example of this to clarify.

Trust in one's boss is one of the more complex and interesting trust relationships in our lives. We think of it as a single thing, like how much do I really trust my boss right now? Actually, I believe there are several dimensions that make up the level of trust with one's boss. Attempting to show this graphically I tried to form a three dimensional picture of trust but quickly realized there were more than three dimensions that govern how much we trust our boss at any point in time. Here are five examples to illustrate. Actually, there are probably 20 or so similar dimensions we could describe.

Does your boss really care about you?

Saying she cares about you is not the same thing as acting that way when the chips are down. You know instinctively without being told if your boss is saying wonderful things but really does not care about you as a person. Human beings have very sensitive noses for phony concern. Since we are all that way, it strikes me as odd that so many bosses feign caring about people. Don't they realize that people instantly pick up on the subterfuge on the inaudible channel?

Does your boss know what he is doing?

If your boss is not competent to manage things in an appropriate way, you will find it difficult to trust him without at least checking up on him frequently. Some clueless bosses surround themselves with competent assistants. That works in terms of getting things done well, but it does not enable you to trust the boss.

Is your boss consistent?

Does your boss habitually do what she says she will do? If so, you have built up a reliance on her to deliver on promises. That bodes well for your ability to put your trust in her. If your boss is duplicitous, you never know which face she will be wearing today or what to expect in a certain kind of interface. That ambiguity destroys trust.

Does your boss have integrity?

Do you know that your boss will not try to skate by with half-truths or spin in an effort to make people happy? Many leaders mistake popularity for character. A boss who tries to have everyone happy all the time is a weak boss because he or she will make decisions that are not the best ones for the organization. Do not get the wrong idea. I am not advocating that every boss seek to make it difficult for people. I am advocating that the boss have the integrity to do the right thing at all times, even if it means being unpopular for some percentage of the time.

Does your boss seek to optimize the culture?

Is your boss so consumed with pinching every penny and putting the maximum pressure on people that he has lost the true key to motivation? If he tries to "motivate" people by simply providing incentives while simultaneously grinding everyone down to a bloody stump, people are not going to be motivated, and they are not going to trust him.

These are just five easy tests to determine your level of trust in your boss at any point in time. There are several other trust criteria we could name. The point here is that trust in one's boss is a very complex equation. The degree to which you trust your boss will be a combination of the five things above plus several other factors. It will vary from day

to day or even hour to hour, and trust in your boss is only one slice of how you deal with trust issues in your life. Recognize this and be aware of the incredible variety of trust interactions we have daily. We all want people to trust us, and yet we sometimes forget how complex trust is and how it depends on numerous behavioral actions to endure.

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