



Trust but Verify

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The phrase "Trust but verify" was made famous by Ronald Reagan in December 1987 after the signing of the INF Treaty with Mikhail Gorbachev. The Russian leader quipped, "You repeat that at every meeting," to which Reagan replied, "I like it." The origin of the phrase is actually from a Russian proverb, "doveryai no proveryai" ([Trust but verify](#)).

While reading on the social networks last year, I came upon the notion by one trust expert, "If you have to verify, it isn't trust." I got into a similar discussion last week with a local friend, and I wanted to give my opinion on the matter because the conundrum is interesting.

The concept of "trust but verify" being an oxymoron makes sense when you consider that the word "but" is often an eraser word. When used in comparative context, the conjunction "but" renders whatever comes before it as moot. For example, if I tell you, "I liked your book, but it was too technical," the literal meaning you will normally take away is that I did not like your book.

The need to verify implies that complete trust in the other party is lacking. I am troubled by that because it implies that in order to be real trust, it must be blind. The concept of blind trust is covered in "[Smart Trust](#)" by Stephen M.R. Covey. He points out that blind trust is not often the most intelligent strategy to employ in a low trust world. Sure we can point to exceptions, and yet if you ask the clients of Bernie Madoff, you are likely to get high agreement that they would have achieved a better result if they had verified.

One thought-provoking loop on this topic was provided by Covey when he wrote: "Though we've become very good at recognizing the cost of trusting too much, we're not nearly as good at recognizing the cost of not trusting enough." The point here is that when we extend more trust to others, we will normally receive more trust in return. I call that "The first law of trust."

I think changing the phrase from "Trust but verify" to "Trust and confirm" might make the phrase less of a dichotomy and make it more operational. The reason we must confirm

is that, while we want to trust that the other person proves to be trustworthy in the end, there is a finite chance that the person either did not understand or is not capable of performing as expected. When we confirm that our expectations are being met, we reduce the chance of being disappointed in the result. The reason I like the second phrase more than the first one is that we replace the exclusive conjunction "but" with the more inclusive conjunction "and."

The confirmation process is merely part of the due diligence that recognizes the fact that activities do not happen in a vacuum. There may be other parties involved, and often we are acting as the agents for others as we trust someone to perform a task. Confirming that things are done correctly is just being prudent and being true to the trust others have in us. If people know we are responsible in our due diligence, they will be more likely to perform to a high standard.

"Trust and confirm" does not sound like an oxymoron to me. In a world where blind trust is not normally the best strategy, the concept of "trust and confirm" leaves the concept of trust more intact than "trust but verify." It is not just a matter of semantics.

The words we choose make a difference in how people interpret meaning. You will have a better result if you avoid using the phrase "trust but verify." By using "trust and confirm" you will send an unambiguous message that avoids blind trust.

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