

Trust Doesn't Scale

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

My son knows that I am highly interested in anything having to do with trust, so he recently shared a quote that was generated by Taylor Swift, the country music singer. Taylor said, "Trust doesn't scale because it isn't reducible to math."

That quote was really thought-provoking for me. I believe her point was that trust involves emotion and risk, and those things are part of the human condition similar to the concept of love. As I thought about it more, I think her observation about trust breaks down. There are several reasons why trust does scale.

1. **You can add it or add to it** – If I trust one person to do something, I can increase the level of trust into other areas and have higher total trust with that person. The word "total" here implies a kind of addition. Likewise including another person into the equation means that I can add more trust.
2. **You can subtract trust** – I often make the analogy that trust is like a bank account. The balance is the important number, and we can make withdrawals to the account just as easily as we can make deposits. In fact, the whole account can be wiped out in a single action. In English it sounds like this, "I have trusted George for 10 years; he has never given me any reason to doubt him, but after he said that yesterday I will never trust him again."
3. **You can multiply trust** - If I take one person who has trust in a cause, I have that singular endorsement, but if I bring a dozen people who also trust that same cause, I will have more than the sum of 12 individual forces. There is a kind of synergy when we multiply the trust of several people.
4. **Dividing trust takes a little imagination** – What if I have high level of trust with a person but that person fails to deliver as promised. Now my level of trust is significantly reduced, like it was divided in half or some other percentage.

I suppose I could go on taking the mathematical analogy to an extreme and describe the square root or cosine of trust. I suspect the pushback would be deafening.

Many people believe trust is a “soft” skill and that programs to improve organizational trust frequently include campfires and singing Kumbaya. In reality trust is a hard and tangible commodity that is rather easy to measure. Richard Edelman measures trust in extensive surveys in dozens of countries every year and publishes a “Trust Barometer” to share the work of his team.

The fact that I can say trust in Business in the USA for 2013 was slightly under 60% while trust in the Government was somewhat under 40% indicates that trust does scale and can be measured. This is especially true if we use data on trust to spot trends by asking the same questions year after year.

In my own business, I use the “Leadergrow Trust Survey” to measure the level of trust on many dimensions and at various levels in any organization. This research allows me to customize leadership development programs for groups so they are laser-focused on the specific needs of the organization or the leaders involved.

I really do believe trust is scalable and hope this little piece has caused you to think about trust in a different way from before. Apologies to Taylor Swift: I like your music, but do not agree with your quote that trust doesn’t scale.

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