

Chapter 2

Trust in Persons

“Trust is a matter of choice and therefore a kind of behavior rather than a state of mind.”¹

INTRODUCTION

What is Trust?

This question has been receiving increasing attention by scholars in organizational science and related fields. Agreement on the importance of trust in human conduct appears to be widespread; disagreement on a suitable definition of the construct also appears widespread. For example, trust has been viewed as a personality characteristic, an attitude, a rational decision, a preconscious expectation, and a willingness to be vulnerable. Bigley and Pearce (1998) propose a problem-centered framework for viewing trust that makes use of elements of many definitions and viewpoints. Whatever its theoretical and conceptual framework there is agreement that trust exists in various forms and that these forms are observable and measurable in their effects on human behavior both at the individual level and at more complex levels of social interaction.

Gabarro (1978) has provided an excellent definition of trust to focus our discussion in this book. “The level of openness that exists between two people, the degree to which one person feels assured that another will not take malevolent or arbitrary actions, and the extent to which one person can expect predictability in others’ behavior in terms of what is normally expected of a person acting in good faith.”² Whenever instinct, knowledge or both give us a sense of being able to be ourselves with others, that provides a basis for trust (Gibb, 1978).

Seligman (2000) says that a distinction critical to any preliminary understanding of trust is the distinction between trust and confidence (or control). Control or confidence is what you have when you know what to expect in a situation; trust is what you need to maintain interaction if you do not have control. Confidence is predicted on the knowledge of what will be. Trust is what you need when you do not and cannot have confidence or predict behavior and outcomes. Trust is what you need when you interact with strangers.

CREATING TRUST

Trust is created. It is a dynamic aspect of human relationships that must be initiated, maintained, sometimes restored, and continuously authenticated (Flores & Solomon, 1998). Trust is created through dialogue and conversation and through gestures, looks, smiles, handshakes and touches. According to Flores and Solomon, trust is a set of social practices defined by our choices to trust or not to trust. They suggest that there are different forms of trust, specifically, simple trust, blind trust, and authentic trust. Simple trust is naive, unquestioned, and unchallenged, e.g., the faith of a child. Blind trust is trust taken for granted; it can be foolish and sometimes tragic. Authentic or basic trust is that in which the risks and vulnerabilities are understood and distrust is held in balance. Authentic trust, as opposed to simple trust, does not exclude distrust, but accepts it and overcomes it. Authentic trust can be betrayed, but there is no denial or self-deception as in blind trust, or naivete, as in simple trust.

Trust and distrust are not exclusive or opposites or the absence of one another. Both are processes that are created. Trust or distrust should not be taken for granted, but are part of the dynamics of a relationship that takes place in a cultural context. Therefore, trust and distrust are influenced by the context in which the relationship occurs (Flores & Solomon, 1998).

THE BEGINNING OF TRUST

Trust is learned. The underlying assumptions are laid down in infancy and tied to the early socialization experiences of the individual (Seligman, 1997, Luhmann, 1979). The first of Erikson's (1963) eight ages of man is the development of basic trust. He notes that trust implies not only that a person has learned to rely on the sameness and continuity of outer providers—an extension of an infant's relation to its parent, especially its mother—but also that a person learns to trust himself (Hardin, 1991). During the first year of life the individual develops an "attitude" toward oneself and "toward the outer world" which can be called the "trusting attitude" (Kinsella, 1973). The word "trust" is closely related

to the word "truth." The trusting attitude, then, is one in which we take social life and specific aspects of it for granted (Holzner, 1973). Infant trust does not need to be won, but is there unless and until it is destroyed. Trust is much easier to maintain than it is to get started and is never hard to destroy (Baier, 1986).

Trust and distrust are based on experience (Hertzberg, 1988). While degrees of trust vary among individuals, trust is clearly a personality characteristic or attitude that is modified in the course of social relationships (Godwin, 1976; Scott, 1980). Trust is not an all or nothing phenomenon. There are degrees of trust which vary with every contact (Govier, 1997). The readiness to trust another person varies from individual to individual and from situation to situation. Some people enter a new situation with an almost naive trust, others may evidence an almost pathological distrust in the same situation. However, most people distinguish between situations of safety and risk (Worchel & Austin, 1986). Henslin (1972) says that the specific variables that lead to trust and distrust change with each situation, but the fundamental principles of evaluating others are the same. He describes how a cab driver must evaluate the trustworthiness of each new rider. He points out that each new rider presents him or herself differently but the driver evaluates the rider on the basis of his perception of the fit or misfit among the parts he has learned to associate with previous trustworthy or untrustworthy riders. The cabbie's evaluation leads to a reaction of trust or distrust. Trust, according to Rogers (1961), is a process which should increase as individuals find themselves, free themselves from defensiveness, and become more open to a wider range of environmental and social demands, and their own needs.

The development of a propensity to trust involves extensive investment, especially by others, such as parents (Barber, 1983). If there has been little investment during the early years, far greater investment may be required in later years to compensate (Hardin, 1993). We may, therefore, have different capacities for trust. Some researchers say that a high or low capacity for trust is a by-product of our experiences (Hardin, 1993), while others (Coleman, 1988, Luhmann, 1979) speak of trust or the capacity for trust as a form of human capital or regard it as a commodity (Dasgupta, 1988). The capacity for trust comes about through the deliberate investment by key persons in the development of the child. The extent of the family's social capital or the nature of the relationships between the child and its parents, and the child's ability to use the social capital of its parents, influences the development of trust.

Worchel (1979) points out that the process of learning how to trust is evident in psychotherapy. In the first few sessions, a client—unsure of how much he or she can trust the therapist—usually reveals little more than the presenting complaint. Each subsequent visit is followed by the disclosure of more intimate details, as the client experiences uncritical acceptance by the therapist. Self-disclosure needs to be reciprocal: it indicates a basic trust in the other person, which, in turn, obligates the other to reciprocate. It has been shown in laboratory experiments that people

disclose more to another person who discloses more about himself (Worchel, 1979; Worchel & Austin, 1986).

The Dynamics of Trust

Trust is the result of mutual expectations and influence between two people. Hardin (1991) points to three aspects that are key to how trust works: (1) the persons involved need to have some degree of openness about tasks, problems or related issues; (2) the persons need to have expectations of each other that involve some degree of obligation; and (3) the persons have to feel that there is a safe comfort zone regarding risk. The key to understanding trust is that it is reciprocal, predictable, and its risks are, for the most part, known and controllable (Carnevale, 1995). Trust is, in part, inherently a rational or intentional commitment or judgment that one person's expectations are grounded in his belief in the other person's fairness or self-interest (Hardin, 1991).

Mutual trust is most likely to occur when people are positively oriented toward each other's welfare. However, mutual trust can occur, even under circumstances when the people involved are overly concerned with each other's welfare, if the characteristics of the situation are such to lead them to expect their trust will be fulfilled (Deutsch, 1964).

Trust seems to evolve in several steps or phases (Gabarro, 1978). First there is the stage of *impression-making or sizing up*. This requires a degree of openness and frankness. Second, there is the *tacit testing* stage, a sharing of past experiences and "what ifs" regarding the present. Third, after a degree of comfort about mutual expectations is achieved, an *interpersonal contract* can be agreed upon. This can range from a verbal agreement with a handshake to a formal written agreement. Gabarro points out that the way the persons involved work through these stages is what determines an effective relationship. Indeed, as contact and experience with the two people evolves, trust has a circular self-heightening quality, that is, different levels of trust (low vs. high) also evolve. The level of trust is additive, the more successful and frequent their working relationship, the less likely will two people need to reexperience all of the stages (or at least their intensity). How trust evolves and the level experienced is also time-bound. There may be time pressures that do not permit a sufficient degree of trust to emerge, or one or both parties may perceive or feel something about the interaction that they want to "check out", and feel a need to get together again. Time pressures can make one or both of the persons uneasy about power and control when there is insufficient time or information to assess the degree of risk. As Riker (1974) notes, power and trust are alternatives, but not exclusive alternatives. How persons go about assessing risk will provide some insight as to how they will go about the process of trusting.

Trust, and its development, is multidimensional and includes interpersonal, cultural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Sztompka, 1999; Corazzini, 1977). The practice of trust is contextual (Rousseau et al., 1998) or as Earle and Cvetkovich (1995) have put it, trust is a matter of the culture of shared worlds, we trust persons who share our cultural values.³

Learning to Distrust

While we learn to trust, we also learn to distrust. Trust and distrust coexist in most relationships. Managing any relationship requires that we both create trust and manage distrust (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). Distrust is taught often at the same time as trust. A friend of mine relates the following story about her father's attempts to teach her sister to swim:

My sister would stand on the edge of the pool looking at my father in the water with his hands outstretched calling, "Jump, I'll catch you." My sister jumped several times and was caught and my father supported her while she kicked and stroked. But my father, who had a devilish side to him, occasionally did not catch my sister. Upon hitting the water, my sister panicked and cried. It was not long afterward that my sister refused to go into the pool. She never learned to swim.

A man attending a pet grief self-help group was especially heartbroken after he had had to put his 11 year old cat to sleep. He recalled that as a young boy he had several cats as pets but every winter they would disappear. He always wondered why until one day while reminiscing with his father he brought up the mystery. The father said, "Well, you are 40 now so I guess I can tell you that I took the cats and released them in the countryside. It was too much trouble and expense to have cats in the house during the winter." At age 48 the man was still angry at his now deceased father for his betrayal of trust.

Other lessons of distrust are more subtle. My sister and I were told that the Tooth Fairy would leave a dollar under our pillow the evening we lost one of our baby teeth. This occurred as promised until one night there was no dollar bill for a lost tooth because my parents discovered they did not have a dollar bill. My sister and I were certain that there was no longer a Tooth Fairy or at least one who was reliable.

Every one has similar stories about how trust and distrust are taught and learned simultaneously. We learn that you cannot always count on trust. Sometimes, we expect trust and encounter distrust and vice versa. We learn to change situations and people that give us mixed expectations. Our experiences with ambiguity about trust teach us to be suspicious about trusting.⁴ Sometimes these lessons are dramatic, cruel, and destructive. A child might be told he is loved and when in the presence of others be treated positively, only to be abused when



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