

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF TRUST

FOR LIFE TO WORK, WE HAVE TO TRUST. Trust is critical for any functional relationship—but we’re not very good at building and maintaining trust over time.

One employment expert said, “For so many years, we’ve avoided critical topics in the workplace, and it inadvertently created cultures of silence and avoidance. But it’s not something that people are inherently good at doing. Leaders need the skills to effectively facilitate these conversations and the competency to manage conflict in ways that build—not break—trust.”¹

The issue of trust—and mistrust—is powerfully relevant in our culture today. We hear comments about trust all over the news and frequently in personal conversations: “I trust that guy about as far as I can throw him.” Or: “I would trust her with my life.” Or “You can’t trust (the government, Big Tech, vaccines, media, etc.).” You can’t trust that bad actors out in cyberspace

won't steal your identity, so you dutifully go through two-factor authentication to get to your banking information. Relationships founder on the rocks of broken trust all the time. Whole societies can struggle when trust is lost.

Trust is essential to work-based relationships for many reasons, including effective teamwork, smooth functioning of the organization to produce goods and services, better customer relationships, and, ultimately, optimal financial outcomes. However, we also need to remember that trust is a two-way street. Obviously, we desire for our colleagues and clients to trust us, but we also need to trust them. If we don't, we are not likely to delegate any tasks to them, and we will feel a need to "check up" on them to make sure they are getting things done on time and at the quality level we expect. This process will wear us out, because essentially we are taking responsibility for their work as well as our own.

Ultimately, trust is foundational to business transactions. When we enter into discussions with potential customers or clients, we try to assure them that what we are saying is true—that our product does what we say it does, that we can and will deliver the services they desire, and that the products or supplies they are purchasing from us are the quality we have agreed to.

Conversely, when we provide supplies or enter into a contract for a range of services over time, we are trusting that they will pay us (and in a timely manner) for the goods and services agreed to. Historically, a lack of trust between business entities has been one of the sources of tension and conflict between countries and governments.

The reasons why there seems to be an epidemic of distrust are a complicated discussion in and of themselves. But let's first understand what "trust" really is, so we can think, talk, and respond accurately to relevant situations.

TRUST IS NOT EITHER/OR

The issue of trust is not as clear-cut as we think. Making an “all or nothing,” either/or judgment about whether someone is either totally trustworthy or they cannot be trusted at all is rarely valid. In reality, almost everyone can be appropriately trusted to complete *some* tasks successfully. Unfortunately, we tend to communicate in blanket statements (“I don’t know what it is, but I just don’t trust her”) that feed into this type of binary thinking.

The reality is: *trust exists on a continuum*. You may have worked with me for a few years and know I strive to be an honest and ethical person. So you feel comfortable trusting me to pick up some lunch for you, and bring you the change. But you don’t know me well enough to sign over all responsibility for your personal finances to me. It isn’t that you don’t trust me; you just don’t trust me *that* much (yet). This is reality-based—there are different levels and amounts of trust within our various relationships.

TRUST IS SITUATION-SPECIFIC

We trust someone to be able to do a specific task. For example, if you were to trust me to fix your car, your trust would be misplaced because I have virtually no mechanical abilities at all. However, if you believed that I could type your paper for you relatively quickly, assuming I had the time, that would be a good situation in which to trust me.

The reason that it is important to understand that trust is situation-specific is because we then have a pathway to take in order to build or rebuild low levels of trust. If we just say, “He isn’t trustworthy,” there is nothing the other person can do to remedy the situation. Your statement is based on a personal judgment you

have made and, essentially, “the case is closed.” The topic is not up for discussion (or a vote). The primary problem is that this type of approach leaves no path for correcting the situation.

Also, a vague “I don’t trust them” absolves the person making the statement of any personal responsibility. They have an opinion and there is nothing required of the speaker. It is like saying, “He’s a jerk.” A judgment is made and there is nothing I need to do. This typically isn’t helpful in building relationships. When we believe the other person is the source of the problem and that the issue only will be resolved when they change, not much good can happen.

CREATING SITUATIONS OF TRUST

When we understand that trust is situation-specific, then a relationship can move beyond the “all or nothing” impasse (she’s trustworthy/not trustworthy). I can now say, “I trust John to be able to drive me to the airport and get me there on time,” even though I may not trust him to manage my personal finances. So when we are having difficulty in trusting someone for a certain task, it can be helpful to identify situations or tasks for which you *can* trust them and proceed in that area. This is especially relevant when dealing with new colleagues or those who are still learning their job—give them a task that you believe they can do.

THE THREE C’S OF TRUST

Trust has three foundational components: