Trust: What is it Exactly?

What does it mean to be “trusted”? How can you tell if you trust someone? More importantly, what should you do, or how should you act, if you want people to trust you or if you want to build trust or improve the level of trust in a relationship? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at trust in a new way.

As it is usually used, “trust” is such a general—and sometimes emotionally-charged-concept that it tells us very little about its real meaning. We tend to treat the idea of trust as a desired behavior, when it is actually best viewed as a desired outcome. Once we begin to view trust as an outcome, it is easier to see that trust is made up of a series of specific behaviors which, taken together, not only define trust but also make the concept available.

Trust is usually treated as a “bundle” concept.

When we say that we want someone to trust us, or we don’t trust someone, we are really making a summary statement about our perception of that person based on “lumping together,” or our view of their performance over several dimensions into a single “package.” To really understand trust, we have to define it in terms of its component dimensions; if we previously viewed trust as a “bundle” concept, we now need to open the package and see what’s inside.

Trust: “unbundling” the concept

We are often quick to make decisions about whom we trust. Studies show that in face-to-face interactions, we often make these decisions in the first 4 minutes. In telephone interactions, we make these decisions even more quickly, often in seconds.

There has been much research into how we decide whom to trust and whom to not trust. One view expresses this trust decision as a function of three variables:1

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Trust = f\left(\frac{\text{Credibility} \times \text{Empathy}}{\text{Risk}}\right)
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This means that to create a climate of trust and comfort, to build a strong foundation for relationship, we must mentally answer three questions:

- Do I perceive that this person is credible?
- Do I perceive that they understand and are sensitive to my feelings and thoughts without me having to explicitly state them? (Empathy)
- To what extent do I perceive that I am at risk in this situation?

We have found it to be enormously helpful to grasp the idea that without empathy, credibility alone is seldom enough to establish trust. The default in the modern world is to drive credibility, often at the expense of empathy.

Credibility is defined as the quality, capability, or power to inspire belief. This having been said, however, it is useful to further unbundle the package of credibility.

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1 Trust formula developed by John Phillips, Synectics Corporation, Cambridge MA.
Competence

When you ask me if I trust you, you may really be asking whether or not I think you are competent. Do I think you can do what you say you can do? In fact, the dimension of competence may be the single most critical factor managers use to evaluate the credibility of their direct reports in making decisions based on the subordinate’s recommendation.

Most of us will recognize the situation in a meeting at which a co-worker promises to produce a report or some other result or tells us that he or she “will have the equipment up and running by 3:00 p.m. on Thursday.” We can close our notebooks and end the meeting because we know he or she can do it. Other co-workers may say the same thing, but when we look around the table, we see people “roll their eyes” and look at each other because, based on our experience with the person speaking, we don’t believe that he or she can do what they promised.

What kinds of competence do we expect of each other in organizations?

Clearly, technical competence is an important element of being viewed as competent in one’s job. And technical competence doesn’t always mean “hands-on” or “bench” competence; it may also include the ability to understand concepts being communicated to us by highly specialized subordinates, and it certainly may include knowledge of the industry, business, the competition, and customer needs. It may mean being able to see the “big picture” and to communicate it to others.

For people in leadership positions in organizations, technical competence must be matched by leadership and managerial competence: the ability to lead others, to influence others, to obtain needed resources, to be “in the know,” to manage the “politics” and get things done in the system, to create a vision and provide direction, to be organized and effective at setting and managing priorities, and so on.

So, when you ask, “Do you trust me?” one question you are asking is, “Do you think I am competent?” or “Do you believe I do what I represent myself as being capable of doing?”

Consistency

When you ask me if I trust you, you may really be asking two additional questions. First you are asking if I believe that you are reliable—that you will deliver what you promise. Second, you are asking if I trust your constancy.

The question about your reliability is fairly easily resolved. Whereas the dimension of competence refers to whether you can do what you say you can do, reliability refers to whether you actually will do what you say you will do.

So, if you promise me that you will call me on Monday morning and your schedule fills up so that you can’t call me until Tuesday morning, it may be “no big deal” except that you have just chipped away at your credibility with me. And if you promise to one of your direct reports that you will have a particular document out of your in-basket by the end of the week and then don’t get it done, it may be of little practical consequence except that, again, you have chipped away at my impression of your reliability.

Consider the elements of constancy and predictability, which are subtler than the element of reliability. In the constancy arena we are looking more directly at what it is that I can trust about you to be enduring and
stable. If you are the kind of person who comes to work in a different mood every day, then I will be at a loss to know how to approach you to discuss my agenda and priorities. Can I trust that your behavior is driven by some set of relatively stable core values, or will your actions seem arbitrary?

In other words, will you “walk the talk?” If you espouse a doctrine of fairness, will you live by that ideal for all of us, or will it appear that your reserve favors for “favorites”?

For an organization, constancy may mean that our organization values are a constant. For example, if we claim to be “customer focused,” when we are faced with difficult decisions and trade-offs, we do indeed make customer-driven decisions. Similarly, if we hold ourselves out to be an organization that values treating our employees with dignity and respect, we will treat them that way even when tough decisions have to be made.

So, again, when you ask, “Do you trust me?” what you are really asking me is whether I think you are competent and consistent.

**Courage**

“What do you trust me?” may mean, “Do I think that you have courage?” The classic definition of courage is the ability to productively deal with danger in the presence of fear and pain, (i.e., “grace under fire”). There are many opportunities, beyond entrepreneurial risk taking, to observe courage in business. For example, people who have courage in business are willing to try new, creative and innovative ways of doing things. Courage means taking action even when we don’t know for certain the outcome we are likely to produce. Courage also means taking actions that may be unpopular or not politic.

Courageous leaders also allow themselves to be challenged by their peers and direct reports, and they “own” their own decisions versus blaming people above them for decisions and actions taken. Leaders with courage are willing to ask for feedback about their own performance problems that arise from time-to-time in their work groups; they don’t avoid getting people tough feedback.

Perhaps the most direct way we have of observing your courage is to notice whether or not you are willing to say in the meeting what you just said in the hallway. Too many people find their courage after the meeting; that is when they say what they are really thinking.

So when you asking me if I trust you, you are really asking me if I think that you are competent and consistent, and whether or not I think you have courage.

**Character**

Ask me again, “Do you trust me?” and you may challenge me to think about your character. Fortune Magazine (February 21, 1994, p. 42) noted that when it comes to leadership, “Ninety-five percent of American managers today say the right thing, five percent do it.”

With that quote, the Fortune editors have captured the essence of one of the most basic elements of character—namely, integrity. Do you talk and live in the same credo? In other words, do you have an underlying code of values and do you live your values?

Do you, for example, treat people ethically and honestly in all of your personal and business dealings with them? Or, are people constantly finding hidden agendas and ulterior motives that drive your behavior?
Can I trust you to tell me the truth as you know it? And can you keep a confidence? Do you avoid acting in an arrogant manner as if superior to others? Can you be yourself and can I be comfortable with you, or is the specter of your title and position in the company always in the room with us? These are some of the ways we observe character in the people with whom we work.

We also expect people with character to be committed to improving themselves—to be constantly striving to be the best they can be. When people with character receive feedback, they take action for further growth and development based on the feedback.

Now you can see that to ask a person if they trust you may need to be asked in a more focused way; whether or not people trust you depends on how they view your competence, consistency, courage, and character.

Composure

Another element of trust concerns the degree to which you serve as a role model for how to behave under the day-to-day pressures and crises that occur at work.

During organizational changes, for example, your direct reports and peers may observe your responses and take their cues for how to react from your behavior and attitude under pressure. How well you manage your own resistance to change, how well you “bounce back” from a temporary setback, how you respond to imposed deadlines, how you respond to mistakes that are made—these are all aspects of your behavior that people observe to assess your composure. If you shout at people and pound the desk, if you get irritable or short-tempered with people when the pressure is on, you won’t get high marks for composure.

Caring and the Spirit of Empathy

For caring to be useful, it must flow from empathy. Empathy is the ability to share someone else’s feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in their situation. The Merriam-Webster definition of the word is somewhat daunting: Empathy: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

Being mindful of other people, their situation and needs is a critical element of showing trust at home and at work. We need to demonstrate awareness of our actual and potential impact on others. I need to believe that you will have my best interests at heart in all of our interactions. I want to know that I will be enhanced by interactions with you—or at least not diminished. For example, do you listen—I mean, really listen—to opinions and ideas even if you don’t completely agree with them? Do you make time and take time to talk to your people? Do you consider the impact of your actions and non-actions on others, the organization and the community?

We can also get a sense of how much to trust you by the amount of gossiping you engage in and the amount of blaming you do of other people, teams and departments. It’s hard to trust people who make disparaging and destructive comments about other people and groups, because we don’t know if we can trust what they will say about us to others when we are not present.

How do you communicate to people that you care about their success? Will you, as my manager, help me create growth opportunities for myself, and opportunities
for me to contribute to the growth of the team and the organization?

Whether I work for you, or with you, I need to know that you will be honest with me about my performance and about difficult situations that arise. I need to know that we will deal with conflict openly and without “destroying” each other or “putting each other down.” If I make a mistake, I will watch to see if you can correct me directly and openly and still preserve my dignity. Do you remember not to criticize me in front of others?

Do you treat people with dignity and respect regardless of their position in the organization? Do you value diversity? Do you avoid discrimination against people? Do you respect my time at work and do you recognize that I have a life outside of work, too?

As you can see, when you ask, “Do you trust me?” you are asking for a great deal more than a simple “yes” or “no” answer; you are asking me to think about how well you do your job, whether or not you follow through on your promises, whether or not you demonstrate courage and character in my dealings with you, and whether or not I can trust that you will look for “win-win” outcomes in our relationship.

Asking someone if they trust you may involve a complex response. It should also be clear that there is a good deal of overlap across the factors. For example, a manager who yells at his or her people when he or she is under pressure will probably be seen as lacking composure. At the same time, such behavior may also be taken as an indication of a low level of caring or empathy.

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\text{Trust} = f\left( \frac{(Credibility) \times (Empathy)}{(Risk)} \right)
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Returning to our formula, notice if, as risk escalates in business situations and in life, your own tendency is to attempt to further establish your credibility. Many Asian cultures consider this an American obsession. We watch collaboration between intact teams and work groups begin to break down and we watch failing attempts to fix the situation by decreeing credibility.

This will not work. When things start to break down, as risk starts to escalate, we must create a climate of empathy to balance the risk and establish the levels of trust required for challenges to be met and for opportunities to be successfully embraced.

The answer to the question, “Do you trust me?” is really a summary assessment of your behaviors across the key elements of trust: competence, consistency, courage, character, composure, and caring/empathy. In any given situation the degree of risk that I perceive can dramatically impact my willingness to be trusting. Empathy will mitigate perceived risk, reduce the levels of fear, and re-create levels of trust.

Trust must be constantly managed, and managing trust is a core function of leadership. In the immortal words of Peter Drucker, “The only things that evolve by themselves in an organization are disorder, friction, and malperformance.”
Six Dimensions of Trust

Competence

- Can you do what you say you can do, technically and as a leader?

Consistency

- Will you actually do what you say you will do?
- Will you “walk the talk” with constancy, predictability?

Courage

- Do you have courage to try new ideas, to take action when the outcome is somewhat uncertain?

Character

- Do you have integrity?
- Do you talk and live the same credo?
- Do you live by your values?
- Are you truthful?
- Can you keep a confidence?

Composure

- How well do you manage your own resistance to change?
- How do you respond to mistakes that are made?
- How well do you “bounce back” from temporary setbacks?

Caring/Empathy

- Do you have my best interest at heart in all your intentions?
- Do you treat me with dignity and respect?
- Are you honest with me and willing to give me straight feedback about my performance?