

## Building Higher Trust 48 Blind Trust

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPTD



Blind Trust is an interesting aspect of trust that has some people in disagreement. In this brief article, I will describe the different ways people think of trust and offer my interpretation of the most helpful answer.

Imagine that you are bringing a new employee into your group. You will be interfacing with this person extensively in the future. Do you start off with an assumption of the person being trustworthy before you have any experience with him?

Some people advocate that you should trust others until there is some reason to believe otherwise. That is, you extend blind trust until something goes wrong.

The other approach is to suspend judgment on whether a person can be trusted until you have a chance to test his integrity in a number of ways.

Ronald Reagan had a famous saying about Russia in the Cold War. He advocated that we “Trust but verify.” The curious thing with this philosophy is whether you are really trusting at all when you feel the need to verify. It seems that the whole premise is flawed.

Actually, Reagan borrowed the phrase from an old Russian proverb, “doveryai no proveryai” ([Trust but verify](#)).

### Smart Trust

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 the book “[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 with 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.

## **Open Hiring**

The Greystone Foundation recently opened a new Center for Open Hiring in my hometown of Rochester, New York to assist underserved populations. When people are in need of a job, they put their name on a list, and when their name comes up they are immediately hired.

There are no background checks and no difficult interviews. The concept has been working well at Greystone Bakery in Yonkers since 1982. They have consistently excellent results with this philosophy, which many people believe is blind trust.

## **Bagel Vendor**

A bagel vendor in New York City noticed that it took people a long time to wait through the line to get change. The vendor put out a basket with small bills and change and a sign that read “In a hurry, make your own change. I trust you.”

I ask people in my leadership courses if the idea was brilliant or stupid. Usually, the majority of students think the idea was stupid, but they were wrong. There were three reasons why the idea really was brilliant.

1. The throughput of his stand went up dramatically because the lines were shorter. His income rose by more than 100%.
2. People tended to not take the full amount of change they deserved. They were self-conscious about rummaging around in the basket for money.
3. People in the adjacent buildings came pouring out to experience this trustworthy vendor.

## Summary

The concept of blind trust is an interesting conundrum. Covey offers this advice. First, you should assume that most people are basically good, but recognize that is not a universal truth. Then you observe their behavior to confirm that they really are good. Start by extending more trust and recognize that there are risks involved.

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