

Building Higher Trust 85 Trust is Not a Singular Concept

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Trust is not a singular concept in nature. I have studied trust for several decades, teach it in several settings, and written four books on it. Trust is such a common word that we use it numerous times a day without thinking. Just listen to the advertisements on TV and you will hear the word trust in the majority of them.

Trust is much broader than we think

Many people have a misconception about the concept of trust. They think of trust as a singular concept when using the word in daily conversation. They picture it as a kind of bond between them and another person. It takes on a singular connotation. Either they trust another person or do not trust him or her at some level right now.

Trying to define the word

The way I get groups to think about trust more deeply is by asking what the word means. There is always a pause and awkward silence for a few seconds as people try to define it. Then, someone will offer that trust is the confidence that another person will perform in a certain way. Someone else will chime in that trust is taking a risk that they could be disappointed. A third person will add that trust is about having shared values. Then someone will add that trust is having their back or sticking up for them. Once the ball gets rolling, a group can come up with a couple dozen definitions of trust quickly.

Trust is ubiquitous

Now the group is ready to entertain the idea that trust is a multi-faceted concept. It exists not only between people, but with organizations, products, services, and all kinds of systems. People get the idea that trust is ubiquitous and is all around them in every

moment of their day. They recognize that before they get to work in the morning, they have experienced trust several hundred times.

We trust systems to work

They walk into the bathroom and turn on the lights. They trust the whole system to provide light. They don't think about where the electricity is coming from unless there is some kind of rare failure.

They turn on the water and just expect potable water to come out without any problem. If it is the left faucet, they trust that the water will become warm, then hot with time. By the time they reach the breakfast table, trust is experienced dozens of times; then things get really complicated.

Medications require trust

At breakfast, they are confident that the vitamin pill they are taking is safe. They have no idea who made the pill and what ingredients went into it. They just swallow the pill and expect it to help.

In the car

They get into their car and turn the ignition key. Now, inside the engine, there are thousands of explosions each minute that allow the car to move. They peacefully enjoy the classical music on their favorite station and crank up the air conditioning.

They have no worry when they press down on the brakes that the car will stop. They drive over numerous bridges and overpasses without blinking an eye. They do not think of the consequences if the structure would become unsafe.

Just a few examples to illustrate

On it goes all day every day that they simply take for granted things will work as designed. They recognize on occasion things might fail for some obscure reason. The failures are so remote that they put them out of their mind unless something unusual is going on. Now let's focus on how trust between people is built and lost for all of us.

In general, we all focus our conscious energy on trust in the relationships we have with other people. Often we forget about the transactional nature of trust. It is impacted by everything (seen and unseen) that happens between people.

Trust is always bilateral

Trust is bilateral. I trust you and you trust me at some level, and the levels are not the same. Something happens, and I may trust you more while you trust me less. The

whole thing is dynamic and constant. Most of the trust interactions are going on in our subconscious minds. We have a kind of score card in our mind that is like the balance in a bank account.

A bank account

Many authors, including me, have likened trust to a bank account. We have a balance, and we make deposits and withdrawals. The size of the deposit or withdrawal will vary depending on what is happening. The transaction may be totally subconscious. We can make a huge withdrawal of trust with another person and be totally oblivious to it.

A few years ago I built a model that helps people visualize this trust account and how it works. I call it my “Trust Barometer” and show it at all my programs. People really get the message about how trust works very easily. Here is a link to a [Trust Barometer Video](#) (6 minutes) about how trust is built and lost. Take a peek at this fun description and see if it helps you picture the nature of trust in your life.

Conclusion

Trust is more complex and ubiquitous in our lives than we realize. Try to be more aware of this aspect of trust. You can see it working for you more consciously on a daily basis. It is fun, and it certainly is an eye-opener.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations