

Building Higher Trust 102 What Trust Isn't

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



The idea for this article came suddenly; It is all about what trust isn't. There are countless definitions and examples of what trust is. You could spend a lifetime reading books and articles that try to define the concept. I thought it would be fun to attempt to define the opposite of trust.

The opposite of faith and confidence

Trust is linked to our feelings for another person where we feel high confidence. We believe the other person will always act in our best interest. What is the opposite of that? We could say low confidence, but that is really a state of confusion. I am inclined to say that the opposite of trust in this definition is indifference. We simply do not care if the other person acts in our best interest.

Definition by Charles Feltman in [The Thin Book of Trust](#)

Feltman said that Trust is “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions.” The opposite of that is to guard what you value and not let it be vulnerable. It has the connotation of hoarding what you care about because it is not safe to be vulnerable. If you hide what you consider valuable so you won't risk loss of it, that shows the opposite of trust. That is only one aspect of trust, but it's a good example to use.

Linking trust to safety

A leader's responsibility is to create psychological safety within the organization. That is a feeling you have that you can speak the truth without fear of reprisal. The opposite of safety is fear. People are fearful of speaking up because they believe they may be ridiculed or even fired. If people clam up and do not share what they are thinking it may cause dangerous ethical problems. Leaders need to be informed when something they are advocating is borderline in terms of ethics.

Having a culture where people feel free to share their opinions also leads to more creativity and analytical thinking.

Trust is never absolute

We may feel like we totally trust something to happen, but in real life, trust is never absolute. Trust is never totally present or totally absent in our interfaces.

The trust fall

You can imagine how the famous trust fall experiment would work if trust was absent. In a trust fall, you have one person who is elevated lean backward until he falls over. The experiment works because the victim trusts that another person is there to catch him. The opposite of a trust fall is to refuse to lean backward at all.

Another result could be that the person falling back just falls to the floor and breaks his neck. In this case, the person falling expected to be caught by the other person, but his trust was violated.

The trust fall is a metaphor that has parallels in real life. Many times we are taking a risk with what we say or do. We expect the other person will be there to catch us before we hit the floor.

Trust in financial transactions

There are many situations with money where we show trust that another person is not going to abscond with the cash. The opposite of this aspect is to never let the cash out of your possession. That action would make commerce very difficult. You would always need exact change to make any purchase.

There are financial transactions that end up being shared on social networks. You trusted that the information would be kept confidential, but that trust was violated.

Another example

Stephen M.R. Covey described 13 Trust behaviors in his book [*The Speed of Trust*](#). For each behavior, he identified the opposite and what he called the counterfeit behavior. For example, behavior 13 was "Extend Trust." He identified the opposite as withholding trust. The counterfeit was extending fake trust. It is acting like you trust someone but "snooping" or hovering over them.

Many managers today practice the counterfeit of extending trust, and that has led to the practice of quiet quitting.

Conclusion

I end with the thought that it is much easier to define what trust is than to identify what it is not. We experience trust numerous times every day and often do not even realize it.

Think about that next time you step on the brake pedal in your car. You just have faith that the car will react properly and stop. You do not need to think about it. You trust the brakes. If you didn't trust the brakes, your car would be in the shop.

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