

Leadership Barometer 183 The Nature of Trust **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



In my work, I help organizations understand the nature of trust and how to obtain more of it. I have noticed that people tend to visualize trust in pretty narrow terms. They believe it is a feeling of one person toward another. I trust you or I do not trust you.

Different kinds of trust

I start many of my programs by demonstrating that trust is far more complex than we realize. It is extremely dynamic. If you believe trust is one thing, think again. Consider this (incomplete) list of the different types of trust in our lives:

- 1. Assurance - You always have my back.**
- 2. Consistency - You always do what you say.**
- 3. Reliance - You do what you believe is in my best interest.**
- 4. Dependency - You do things to keep me well and happy.**
- 5. Values - We share common core values and trust each other to abide by them.**
- 6. Fearless - It is safe to voice an opinion without fear of retribution by you.**
- 7. Vulnerability - You are willing to listen and admit mistakes**
- 8. Safety - You will protect me from harm.**

These are just eight of the obvious categories of trust, and they only include the trust between individuals. There are several other major categories and many subcategories of the ones I have listed. Trust also is evident in every aspect of our lives. It is there in the people we know, the services we obtain, our institutions, and the products we use. Trust is ubiquitous.

Trust is all around us

We cannot get out of bed in the morning and go to work without experiencing trust several hundred times. We are rarely conscious of the interplay unless something does not work. We walk into the bathroom and turn on the light switch trusting that the lights will go on. We turn the spigot in the shower trusting the water to come out.

As long as things go as expected, then we are not conscious of the possibility for something else to happen.

Most conscious trust

We pay most attention to the level of trust between ourselves and other people. This is the most common form of conscious trust. What we experience is a kind of one-way trust.

We often fail to recognize that trust is always bilateral. The other person trusts us at some level just as we trust her at some level. The levels are rarely the same at any point in time.

Dynamic trust

Trust is far more dynamic than we realize. Our trust in a peer at work may shift slightly several times in one day. It depends on the moment-by-moment interplay of dialog and activities. These shifts are usually small, but if they are all in the same direction, a great deal of trust can be either gained or lost in a single day.

Trust between people is cumulative rather than zero-based. We start each interface with roughly the level of trust we had at our last interface. Each person has an "account" of trust with the other person. The balance of trust is the sum of all deposits and withdrawals in the account up to that point. I made a demonstration of how trust works between people using a bunch of metal and plastic scraps. I made a short video about it: [Trust Barometer](#).

The point of this article is that trust is far more complex than most people realize. It is everywhere in our lives. The cumulative impact of all the trust in your life creates your equilibrium with things and people.

Expand to cover an organization

Imagine taking several hundred people and putting them together in a kind of pressure cooker called an organization. You have a rather complex situation. The cumulative level of trust between people in the entire organization is what gives the entity its power to operate.

The role of leaders

Leaders provide the environment where this fragile commodity called trust will flourish or be extinguished. I believe it is the **behaviors of the leaders** that determine the level of trust in any organization.

Trust is not dependent on the desires of leaders, their intelligence, or their intentions. All leaders seek high trust. It is their behaviors that govern the reactions in people that lead to higher or lower trust. Here is a [two-minute video explaining this point](#).

If an organization is struggling with performance issues, the root cause is normally one thing. It is the inability of the leaders to **create an environment where trust grows**. That is both good news and bad.

The bad news is that most leaders do not believe what I just wrote. It is easier to blame others or circumstances. The good news is that there is a way to educate leaders and actually do better. The hurdle is getting leaders to recognize that the outcome is created by their behaviors.

Conclusion

My mission in life is to educate as many leaders as possible about these ideas. By doing that, I can make a tiny difference in our world. Come and join me by passing this article on to a leader you know.

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.