

On Trust

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Abstract:

Authentic trust is a truly powerful concept. It has been researched, studied, written about, lectured upon, and proven to greatly enhance both relational and life experience, yet ironically it remains in many cases somewhat of an enigma. We know about it. We understand it. We see its value. In our very hearts, we passionately desire it to be trustworthy and to engage in relationships with others worthy of our trust. Yet somehow we remain actively and collectively reluctant to fully engage. In this essay, we will define, explore, and perhaps even more clearly reveal the intrinsic value of trust to re-emphasize the significance of a trust experienced.

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Introduction:

“Of all of the attributes of credibility...there is one that is unquestionably of greatest importance. The dimension of honesty accounts for more of the variance in believability than of all factors combined. Being seen as someone who can be trusted, who has high integrity, and who is honest and truthful is essential.”

(Kouzes & Posner, 1993, p. 24)

Social science experts refer to it as the basis for all societal relationships, and leadership experts refer to it as the very foundation of authentic leadership. Amazon.com currently warehouses over 400 book titles relating to it, and everyday people all over the world are made, or perhaps even broken because of how they employ or exercise it. Each of us wants nothing more than to gain it, express it, and benefit wholly from the gifts it bestows.

Trust is perhaps the most genuine act of offering or acceptance we as individuals engage through. It precedes love, hatred and every imaginable human emotion in between. It governs our thoughts, actions, reactions, and inactions. It leads us as individuals and influences how we lead others. It is that powerful. Yet somehow as a society and culture, it often eludes us seeming somehow over-sensationalized yet painfully under-realized.

In the presence of such abundant and accurate research on trust, it would seem to follow that trust then would be plentiful, not only in our relationships but in the workplace as well. However, in our nation alone we cite the institutions of healthcare, big business, and government alike; the very entities that exist only to serve us as a society, as the least trustworthy of all (Major Institutions, 2006). Trust as a means in and of itself rather than only a means by which we are to achieve some other desired end merits consideration.

Perhaps in all that is written and said, we simply do not yet understand the power and force behind its influence or the human wholeness it creates. Or maybe we do, and lack the moral fortitude to sacrificially risk and apply what understanding we have. Either way, we will use this opportunity to revisit what we know and perhaps both challenge and inspire a greater personal commitment to the subject at hand. In doing so, we will better understand ourselves and others, and better engage the passion and energy present when the two, or three, or ten thousand unite through trust in pursuit of common and passionate purpose.

Trust Defined:

The topic of trust is well defined in a multitude of resources ranging from dictionaries and encyclopedias to the Bible and other works of both non-fiction and fiction. For our purposes here, we will explore trust as it is currently defined in Webster's Dictionary; Trust is an "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone" (Trust, 2006).

As defined, the very spirit of trust requires that when given or received, it will only exist in its most authentic form where there is a worthy or proven confidence in the very nature or contributions of self or another. Trust research agrees and in some situations takes the implications one step further in saying that genuine trust only occurs when we make ourselves vulnerable to other people whose subsequent behavior we cannot control (Kouzes, Posner, Maxwell, McAllister-Wilson, Lencioni, Ortberg, et al., 2004).

Authentic trust is simply not about making ourselves vulnerable only to safe people. Trust by nature implies both risk and peril. Trust through experience demonstrates the risk is worth taking. Peter Koestenbaum describes this saying that the

very essence the human heart desires intimacy, bonding, and connectedness (2002). He goes on to say that none of this can be achieved without openness or without trust. "Two hearts must be revealed to each other, and so must two minds" (p. 122). It is in this transparency, in this risk, that we fully engage with other people and authentic trust occurs.

Trust research by and large over significant periods of time and across all cultural boundaries, consistently reveals that honesty is the single most desired attribute in human relationships both professional and personal (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). We desire honesty because in honesty there is an inherent security, and where this is this *assured reliance*, there is trust.

Trust Explored:

It is here in this simple definition that we can begin to explore and gain some initial insight into the most precious and purposeful value authentic trust offers. It is here too that we gain perhaps even greater insight into why people are reluctant to fully engage. Trust represents an unknown. By nature, we have a tendency to fear the unknown. It also represents a lack of control over the actions or inactions of others. And again, by nature, we prefer those things in which we can exercise some control or influence.

Trust is an emotional risk. And in addition to this, genuine trust actually requires that we do something and implies that it is us who must act first. Authentic trust rarely happens all by itself. We must actually do something...we must possess character, demonstrate ability or strength, and our actions...our *doing* must be genuine. We often think of trust as a gift we bestow on others deemed worthy. But genuine trust...mutual

trust really begins with us as individuals engaging *first* to demonstrate the attributes worthy of trust *before* we can make any fair and correct assessment of the trustworthiness of others or them in us.

In his book *The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni uses the metaphor of pyramid to express the significance of trust as a foundation for organizational success (2002). See Figure 1. The same pyramid may be equally applied to us as individuals. It may also be viewed conversely in a more positive or *functional* perspective as suggested by Figure 2. For example, absence of trust from a more positive perspective is simply the presence of trust. Fear of conflict becomes open communication. Lack of commitment translates to commitment. Avoidance of accountability becomes accountability and inattention to results translates positively to results.



Fig. 1: The Five Dysfunctions

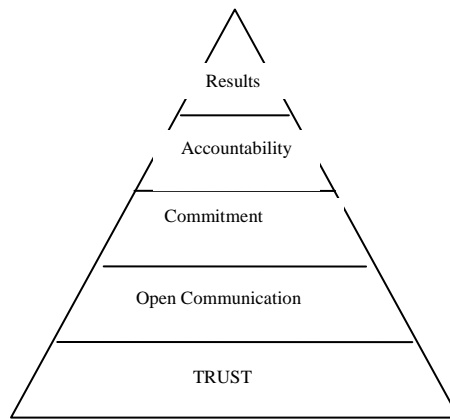


Fig. 2: The Five Functions

Organizationally speaking, when we strive first to create a trusting environment, we better position ourselves to have open and free-flowing communication among

workers and empowered communication to our customers. Free flowing communication allows organizations to internally communicate openly about not only what works well, but of equal importance those things that may not be going well. When people are encouraged to communicate openly and contribute to solutions, we are more committed. When we are committed, we own the responsibility for success, and when we own it, we are passionate. Passionate people produce results.

Personally, the application is much the same. When we engage in relationships based on trust; a marriage, a close friendship, etc. we are more inclined to communicate openly, expressing even more truth and honesty. We are more committed to one another as we understand mutual interests are well intentioned. We also assume greater ownership for the trials as well as successes in the lives of those closest. Then we celebrate their victories as we would our own.

Note how each element links directly with our working definition; Trust as an “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone” (Trust, 2006) and may be further explained as a trusting relationship based on open communication, cultivated commitment, ownership, and enjoyment of reciprocated results (Kouzes, et al., 2004). To be trusted, we have to extend ourselves by being available, by volunteering information, by sharing our personal experiences, and by making connections with the experiences and aspirations of others (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). To trust authentically, we must act first.

Lencioni’s theme of trust as a foundation for both organizational and individual success is anchored in both personal and organizational values. In the absence of clearly understood and expressed values, people are likely to operate without clear moral

boundaries, and in doing so risk the loss of precious credibility. Valuable synergy between our intentions and our actions is created when values are clearly understood and presented so others experience us as one unified self. Values speak directly to the integrity and reliability of who we are either as individuals or as an organization.

Awareness of personal values and if or how they align with corporate values, and a consistent adherence to them, will present not only a more authentic individual, but a more trustworthy organization. Individuals make organizations. Credible, trustworthy individuals make great organizations.

Leadership author Tom Marshall has written much on the subject of trust as the foundation and true basis for all human relations. In his works he often shares the following quote:

“You will never lead people unless you know them;
You will never know people unless they reveal themselves to you;
They will never reveal themselves to you unless they trust you;
They will never trust you unless they know you;
They will never know you unless you are open to them.”

Organizationally, people will not follow a leader who does not have an expressed genuine interest in who they are as individuals. Here we see that to lead, and indeed we all do in some respect, we must act first because people will not willingly share their hearts, their passions, nor their time and energies with a leader who does not engage and value them as individuals *first*. People must trust our intentions, and to gain that trust, we must reveal a bit of our own hearts, passions, fears, and energies with them. Leadership like relationships is reciprocal, and trust anchors both.

Here again, this application applies not only to organizations, but the individual as well. Each of us *lead* ourselves, and others in some capacity. Though many of us may not hold positions of great authority, we each possess great influence, and because of this influence Marshall challenges us as leaders in our own unique respect to understand the power of trust. We do not have to be position leaders to be extremely influential. In fact, many of the most influential people in our lives will probably never even be aware of the things they have taught us (Carpenter, 2005).

In 1998, John Maxwell wrote a book entitled *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* throughout which he highlights attitudes and maxims for personal and professional success. He shares on the book cover a powerful reminder that finds us once again entwined in the idea that to be trustworthy, we must take the first step. Below the title are the scripted words "Follow them and people will follow you". People will follow us as long as they trust us, and they will trust us as long as we are authentic to them. We are most authentic when we endeavor to first trust them.

Law number six of the professed twenty-one, though not arranged in any sequence of importance, is the *Law of Solid Ground* (Maxwell, 1998). This law speaks directly to the underlying importance of trust as it precedes all other attributes associated with both relationships and leadership. He says that "character makes trust possible" (p.58). Maxwell then uses the analogy of a journey to share the energy created or deflated in the presence or absence of trust respectively. On a journey, the way the trip is going to turn out is predicted by our character (notice he says *our*, not *their*). With good character, the longer the trip is, the better it seems. But if our character is flawed, the longer the trip is, the worse it gets. Why? Because *no one* enjoys spending time with

someone they do not trust. Transparency or an authentic openness of character to others about our feelings, beliefs, and actions – represents our integrity, and creates a sense, an assurance that we can be trusted (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002).

The act of trust...the conscious risk, often surpasses much of our human instinct and willingness to engage. However, when we do connect and expose our very hearts, we enable others to do the same. It is in this moment that powerful relationships...bonds are formed and we as individuals become less alone and better equipped to navigate other perils ever present in the journey of life.

Trust Revealed:

Authentic trust begins and is revealed through a true assessment of ourselves as whole individuals rather than the more common inclination to first evaluate others. This assessment best begins with a fair and accurate appraisal of personal values; who we are, what is important, and how we want others to perceive or experience us. Every action, every word, every expression tells others something of our values and our real influence is often not so much who we are but who we appear to be (Carpenter, 2005). To productively and critically evaluate how others may be experiencing us, we must accurately assess whether our actions, attitudes, and behavior align with core values to create for them an environment consistent with who it is we would like them to be experiencing. This awareness on our part becomes a significant means whereby we may better represent our trustworthiness.

When we understand our values, we can more honestly evaluate our actions and behaviors. For example, if one of our core values is faith and whatever it may look like to us, then actions which disrespect the faith beliefs or practices of others may present to

them an inconsistency with this value. When we significantly value something like faith, it is indeed quite possible others may share the same core value but do so through different perspective and expression. If for example one of our core values is family, then we must recognize and respect it as a very likely value for others as well. To fully acknowledge the credible presence of this value in them, here again we are required to allow them their own personal expression. This initial exercise requires that each of our core values be clearly defined and evaluated in much this same way. With each identified value, we must address whether our subsequent actions align and entertain where discrepancies are likely to occur.

Behavior is huge. We are always communicating in word or deed and our actions or even inactions can and do significantly influence how others perceive or experience us. For example, someone who is very focused may take a great deal of personal pride in their ability to stay on task and make most efficient use of their time and others. But those who experience this person may perceive them as someone who is very cold or unapproachable. In contrast, someone who is very outgoing in relationships with others may be viewed by some as naïve or less genuine because they devote brief time to many and quality time to few. Who we are and how we are experienced by others are significant factors contributing to our ability to gain their trust. How we may be experiencing them is also a tremendous factor in determining our willingness to trust. This being said, our goal is to present an authentic self. We are to be who it is that we are, or desire most to be. And in doing so, we must be *aware* that others may perceive us as something we are not through observations they make about our behavior.

Interestingly, none of these concepts relating to the subject of trust are new. Over 100 years ago, Abraham Lincoln spoke on trust saying that it “is the essential building block for successful relationships” (Phillips, 1992, p.35). Yet even today, though surrounded by the vast evidence and accumulated data, we continue a societal reluctance to embrace the wisdom of ages. Leadership author Daniel Goleman and his research team have conducted numerous studies over vast demographics and a credible length of time, and conclude scientifically much has Lincoln and those before him did with only perspective and abundant common sense; in life over 80% of our personal and professional success will be attributed more to relational ability than to intellectual prowess (2002).

Leadership philosopher and author Peter Koestenbaum further confirms Goleman with his own findings among a review of military tactics training which surmised that while the actual training in such programs is 85% weapons and 15% people, time spent operationally is more often 85% people and 15% tactics (2002). Trust is essential for successful relationships and relationships are essential for successful life.

In an overwhelming response to the success of their book *The Leadership Challenge*, authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner called on various professional experts and theorist across the fields of leadership and relationships to further anchor principles explored throughout their first book with more faith-based values. The culminating result is a second publication entitled *Christian Reflections on The Leadership Challenge* (2004). It is in this text that readers are encouraged to reflect upon and more actively apply personal values to five very specific areas of leadership credibility or trustworthiness. These five areas include: model the way, inspire a shared vision,

challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. While the authors discuss each in terms of application to position leadership roles, it is equally noted that as we do all lead through at least the mere influence of our actions, each of the five apply first on a very personal level.

Peter Koestenbaum speaks directly to the power and influence of *modeling the way* (Kouzes, et al., 2004) in his book *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness*, by stating quite specifically that we must be a leader in all areas of life: work, family, self, ecological responsibility, social responsibility, and financial strength because leadership is holistic. Much the same can be said for trust. It must be nurtured in all areas of our lives because it is the most visible expression of our character and represents us as a whole (2002). Even the fabled but all wise Kenji in Kevin Cashman's *Awakening the Leader Within* reminds us that we must always endeavor to "live a life of wholeness!" (2003. p. 66) People are experiencing us in each and every interaction we have with them. A staggering 89% of how and what we learn about things...and about *people* is learned through visual experience (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). When we demonstrate genuine openness, others are more inclined to do the same. When we present ourselves in word and deed as trustworthy, they too are more likely to do the same in their interactions with us. The discipline of the behavior of others in both personal and professional relationships will be greatly influenced by how we lead our own. It is imperative that to gain trust, we first model an individual worthy of trust.

The next area of suggested emphasis is to *inspire a shared vision* (Kouzes, et al., 2004). Notice the authors do not say to inspire a vision; they have intentionally used the word *shared* to describe exactly what vision is truly worthy of inspiration. Robert

Greenleaf has written much on the subject of leadership and even more on the greater act of servant leadership. He says that servant leaders gain trust because they share everything - power, control, rewards, information, and recognition (1977). When the vision is allowed to present itself through the very body required to realize it, it becomes exponentially more likely to be fully accomplished. When power is shared up to and including the actualization of a proclaimed vision, trust is built. And in the presence of trust, people and their collective energies flourish.

The third area requires that we *challenge the process* (Kouzes, et al., 2004). Sam Walton is most recognized for the retail company he founded in Northwest Arkansas some forty years ago. What some may not know is that he actually began his career with other leading retailers including both J C Penny and Ben Franklin (Walton & Huey, 1992). However, after some years of learning the business, and some time *experiencing* retail, Sam began to understand that there was perhaps a better way things could be done to improve organizational efficiencies, and more importantly better serve the customer.

When his progressive ideas fell on deaf ears, he broke from the pack to begin his own business in which many of these ideas would be later realized. Sam understood the intrinsic risk / reward offset to challenging a process. Knowing he now needed a *shared* vision, he set out to find others who might contribute to these ideas and began to build a leadership team that has not only brought Wal-Mart the success it knows today, but provided an outstanding example for other organizations and industry to do the same. When we as leaders take personal risks to achieve our own success in partnership with that of others, we gain credibility, and we earn trust.

Next, we are challenged to *enable others to act* (Kouzes, et al., 2004). Some call this empower, others perhaps authorize, but what it really speaks to is a very genuine trust in not only the ability of another, but the credibility of their own character in earning such. For example, Goleman tells us that people don't leave companies; they leave people (Goleman, et al., 2002). His research confirms it as do several years of consistent Gallup Poll findings. A vast majority of people report that they do not leave the companies they work for because of some transgression of the company itself...they leave these companies because of some experience or collective experience with the people they work for...or with do to some breach of trust.

We as individuals want nothing more than to not only feel, but be genuinely recognized for what it is we have to uniquely contribute. We want leaders who will manage us not from the top down, but lead us from alongside so that we might learn from them, and then apply our own knowledge to accomplish meaningful tasks. Koestenbaum reports that a simple 5% decrease in employee turnover could correlate to as much as a 25% profit increase for some organizations (2002). Enabling others engages them, and when we are engaged, we are synergized with the objectives of the organization.

We trust because we are trusted. In personal relationships, enabling others means allowing them to find their own way. It means standing alongside of them through trials and tribulations not so much to give advice or provide answers, but to listen and support them as they find their own way. When we enable them, we are allowing them to challenge their own paradigms with the added comfort of companionship. We come alongside with them in a now shared vision for how things can and will be, and in doing

so we are modeling the same sincere and respectful behavior we too might like under similar circumstances.

Finally, we are reminded that we must *encourage the heart* (Kouzes, et al., 2004). Few things engage others as quickly or as well as doing so on their own terms. Marshall speaks of it in the quote referenced above, and we would be hard pressed to find a credible relationship writing that fails to acknowledge the energy created when our primary actions to engage are others oriented first. For example, the ages tell us we must seek *first* to understand...then to be understood (Covey, 1989).

Even the very early Greek civilizations employed an extremely advanced emotionally intelligent relationship philosophy. For them, they spoke of engaging to trust others using the sequential words: ethos, pathos, and logos. Here, ethos represented credibility...and as noted sequentially, this must come first. It further represents the faith people have in us as a result of our trustworthiness. Pathos is next and represents empathy and our ability to genuinely align with the very real and present emotional component of another's communication. Here again, to paraphrase Marshall, they must know us first to reveal any of themselves. Finally, there is logos. Logos represents logic or mental process. The process order here is so very important because where our natural reactive instincts may lead us directly to logos (logic) when demonstrating personal trustworthiness or evaluating it in others, we must first pass through ethos (our values and character) and pathos (our relationships) before we can correctly assess and thus effectively employ more intellectually grounded logic.

Genuine trust is only revealed through an extremely personal and complex appraisal of personal values, behavior, and how the two unite and are employed to

engage others. When we begin to really know and accept ourselves as who we are, and when we become unafraid to be open and honest, people will trust us (Cashman, 2003). We must connect first with ourselves...the deepest level of our own being, because the more we connect to that, the better we will be able to connect with others.

Conclusion:

Becoming trusted requires reciprocity, a willingness on the part of both parties to enter into dialogue and conversations...and relationships (Kouzes, et al., 2004).

Authentic trust, much like most of the best things in life requires that we take risks. We must take them in ourselves through a willingness to be more open to others, and we must take them with others in allowing them to be more genuine themselves. It is the true leader who will risk a willingness to go first. Life becomes more meaningful when we endeavor to make every minute with the people in our life count – connecting with them, showing them that we love them and care about them, because we are strongest when we let ourselves be open (Cashman, 2003).

So here then is our mission should we choose to accept: Genuine trust is the basis for all human relationships. Relationships are the basis for all life success. This being said, we must engage what we know about trust, we must embrace it as the foundation, we must recognize our role and responsibility to act first, we must consciously explore and understand how those actions can and do influence the perceptions of others about us – true or untrue. Then, we must use these understandings to lead our behaviors so that we might have more meaningful influence in their lives, thus greatly enhancing our own. Trust truly is an “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone” (Trust, 2006), and that someone begins first with us.

“When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn’t change my nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn’t change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.”
Unknown Monk, A.D. 1100.

(Soderquist, 2006)

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