

Sparrow Media Group

ARTICLE

Like leadership, trust is hard to describe, let alone define. We know when it's present and we know when it's not, and we cannot say much more about it except for its essentiality and that it is based on predictability.

**Warren G. Bennis & Burt
Nanus**

Trust

by John Gould

PRODUCT NUMBER 2001

Trust...

Trust...

Copyright © 2006 By John Gould

No part of this article may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine, newspaper, or on the Web-without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, please contact Sparrow Media Group, Inc.

THE DEFINITION OF TRUST

Trust: firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something...

Old Norse/Middle English for strength

-- The New Oxford American Dictionary

Trust has been extensively studied since the 1950s. The literature on trust is mostly derivative, discussing trust in its relation to other dimension of group dynamics such as openness, commitment, compliance, learning, participation, loyalty, and cohesiveness. Other related terms include: gullibility (Rotter); vulnerability (Zand, p.230); confidence, reliance, dependence, faith (Barber, p.8); expectancy (Rotter); constancy (Bennis, p. 21); dependable and consistent (Rogers, p. 298); degree of influence (Athos and Gabarro, p. 294); and credibility (Kouzes and Posner). Gibb (p. 5) thought that the term "confidence," being based on prior experience or solid evidence, was a narrower, more "cerebral" concept than trust, but it is perhaps the closest synonym.

All of these terms are closely related to time. Trust has a temporal quality, a focus on expected future performance, often based on past success.

Trust connotes a future behavior, a future full of "what ifs," a relative certainty in the face of general uncertainty. Statistics measures probability and reliability as the likelihood that an event will occur or a controlled experiment will result in the same outcome. The recent past is weighted and projected into the future. Trust has a momentum, which, as interactions and meanings are shared, stabilizes relationships across time. Like liquidating a stock portfolio, the costs of ceasing to trust are high (so-called "switching costs," not to mention the increased risk of establishing new personal relationships). Predictability, reliability, projected return-on-investment, future utilities—all can measurably diminish.

Trust, once established, is assumed and generalized. Developed over time, Value congruence between persons or organizations is essential for agreement on expectations:

Attributions of trustworthiness are based on interpersonal interaction history ... or on social/demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, family background, education) ... a proxy for personal experience. (Sitkin, Roth, p. 368)

Trust, then, has many aspects. Trust is a function of:

- time (or number of satisfactory transactions in the past plus realistic expectations of more interactions in the future);
- the level of risk (quantity of money, depth of emotions, physical vulnerability);
- the immediacy of an event and the interdependence with others;
- the frequency, duration and authenticity of communication;
- environment, such as reputation, cultural norms, perceived competence
- more tacit dimensions of understanding (such as "a gentleman's code" or the empathy of women) which avoid "minimal compliance" or opportunism.

One of the original investigators of trust was Jack R. Gibb, who wrote,

... trust makes it unnecessary to examine motives, to look for hidden meanings, to 'have it in writing,' to have someone—priest, minister, lawyer, therapist, or bureaucrat—intervene between you and me so that we can understand each other or be sure that neither of us is going to hurt the other. (Gibb, p.5).

Trust is not an accounting term, but a company's "good will" may be estimated as some figure above real asset valuation plus discounted income flows. But this figure is subjective since trust remains a "soft" asset.