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Leadership, trust, and cooperation: Implications for community building in multicultural settings

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Abstract

Trust has been identified as an important component in leader-follower relationships, as it predicts cooperation, commitment to collective goals, organisational identification, and employee well-being. This paper examines theories regarding trust development, particularly the role of trust in evolutionary adaptation, and the value of healthy distrust in addressing environmental risks. Through examination of research on safety practices in high-risk occupations, as well as cross-cultural studies, the concept of trust is explored in relation to fundamental elements that may be applied to organisations with culturally diverse memberships.

Keywords: *Trust, leadership, cooperation, multi-cultural*

Over the past 25 years, trust has become an increasingly important topic in organizational psychology, reflecting efforts to identify specific causal mechanisms in Bass's transformational leadership model, especially with regard to ethics and individual consideration (Bass, 1999; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011; Ponnuru & Tennakoon, 2009). Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) described two types of transformational leadership, authentic-TL, grounded in a balanced commitment to individual and organizational needs, and pseudo-TL, where manipulation is used to control others or exact conformity. In their discussion, they highlighted the moral underpinnings of transformational leadership, particularly a leader's obligation to protect the best interests of individuals in the organization. They emphasized that authentic transformational leaders empower followers through inspirational mentorship, while pseudo-transformational leaders put forward the appearance of mentorship, in manipulative efforts to gain control. This distinction illustrates the importance of relational ethics and empowerment in the leader-follower relationship.

In recent leadership seminars I asked individuals who work at varied levels in organizations, to define their ideal leader, someone they would like to follow. Participants were enthusiastic and upbeat as they shared important ideas about excellence in leaders, including elements such as competence, humility, hard work, and the ability to connect with individuals at all levels of the organization. Several people mentioned that highly effective leaders give credit to group members in ways that are specific and detailed, demonstrating intimate knowledge of projects, and authentic appreciation for the expertise and effort of

team members. Such leaders were lauded for their support of individual group members, as well as their efforts to protect subordinates from unfair blame or excessive risks (physical, emotional, and economic). In contrast, the idiom “throwing someone under the bus” was mentioned several times in descriptions of failed leadership, a term referencing the leader’s pattern of blaming subordinates in lieu of taking ownership of his or her own errors. The spirited tone of this discussion underscored the critical role that leaders play in shaping the atmosphere or “vibe” of work-groups, and the depth of frustration experienced when leaders are untrustworthy or incompetent. Given the personal investment individuals expressed in relation to their work, it became clear that challenges in the workplace have the potential to inspire learning and growth, but also to induce significant distress. Clearly, leaders need to focus on the establishment of a sustainable and healthy workplace atmosphere, where individual and collective interests are balanced (Liu, Siu, & Shi, 2010). It also appears that trust development is a foundational component of this process.

This paper will address aspects of leadership research that elucidate the dynamic processes underlying trust, particularly as it relates to the role of distrust and repair of betrayals. As part of this exploration, we will look at evolutionary theory and research on high-risk work environments for insights regarding foundational elements of trust formation in leader-follower relationships. Finally, we will consider ways to apply these findings to multi-cultural settings.

Definitions of Trust

Although theories of trust and the processes that foster it are complex and multi-faceted, subordinates, across a wide range of cultures, describe trusted leaders in similar terms, selecting trait labels such as competent, reliable, honest, fair, self-sacrificing, credible, and respectful of individual needs and perspectives (den Hartog, 1999; House et al., 2004). Studies of trust have identified a variety of individual and collective outcomes that directly follow from the experience of trust between leaders and followers. In specific, laboratory and field studies demonstrate that trust in a leader predicts higher levels of cooperation in followers, increased commitment to collective goals, and stronger identification with organizational values (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2005; DeConinck, 2011; Yoon & Hanjun, 2011). In parallel, studies indicate that a lack of trust in leaders increases distress, disengagement, and non-compliance in followers, while simultaneously reducing identification with the organization (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Consistent with these findings, the degree of trust in leaders predicts the resilience and well-being of workers, including job satisfaction, attention to safety, perceived work stress, and frequency of stress-related illnesses (Conchie, Donald, & Taylor, 2006; Liu, Siu, & Shi, 2009). These outcomes reinforce the notion that trust in leaders is a critical factor for individual and organizational success.

The notion of authenticity has been used by a number of theorists to capture characteristics and behaviors of leaders that engender trust and inspire employees to work for common

goals. Avolio et al. (2004) describe the authentic leader as someone who is deeply grounded in an individually defined set of values and goals that are represented consistently through behavior and verbal communication. What results is a congruent presentation of self, one that inspires the belief by followers that he or she will honor agreements. The authors point out that the degree of overt authority expressed by a leader can be viewed as a separate dimension of leadership. As such, authenticity and the expression of a reliable moral compass can be seen in leaders who use varied decision models and motivational systems, including transactional leadership strategies. This indicates that respect and commitment to individual and collective achievement, may take varied forms in relation to cultural norms and distribution of power.

Kramer (1999, 2010) outlined a multi-dimensional model of trust that includes characteristics of individuals, groups, as well as organizational structures and processes. His overview of the literature emphasizes that trust is a function of numerous personal and interpersonal factors, operating formally and informally at multiple levels of any organization. Importantly, Kramer notes that trust is fundamentally a psychological state (Kramer, 1999 p. 571). Though highly complex in its development, maintenance, and scope of influence, trust as a construct embodies the idea of individual and shared expectations that others, including organizations, will protect and serve those to whom they are responsible. Further, to engender trust, the fulfillment of such expectations by leaders, must occur without the need for continued reminders or quid pro quo exchanges to maintain agreements. In other words, follower trust requires the perception of authentic concern by leaders regarding the needs and interests of subordinates, an idea directly linked to Bass's concept of individual consideration. (Bass, 1999; Kramer and Lewicki, 2010; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

In his discussion of trust, Kramer (2010) described varied aspects of organizational systems through which trust develops, including intrapersonal, interpersonal (dyadic), group, and collective elements. In each arena, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, components of individual experience interact to create the experience of trust. The cognitive category refers to elements such as perceptions, beliefs, values, personal and social identities, as well as attributions about the motives underlying behaviors observed in self and others. Emotional components reference affective aspects of trust, including instinctual physiological responses related to a sense of security or threat, i.e. elements of trust that may not have clear conscious origins (Riedl, & Javor, 2012). For example, non-verbal communication (e.g. eye-contact, pace of verbal expression, and body language) may influence levels of trust, even though an individual is unaware of the specific cues that trigger his/her feelings. Behavioral elements of trust include verbal and non-verbal actions that indicate the presence of trust (e.g., the sharing of confidential information), as well as behavior patterns related to trustworthiness, such as consistency, reliability and competence (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

Finally, organizational and procedural components that impact trust in followers may include system variables controlling communication, roles, rewards, and procedures. These aspects of organizations often include meta-level variables such as the rigidity or flexibility of interactive systems (e.g. budgets, computers, transportation), number and size of groups (e.g.

committees, workgroups, worksites), degree of governmental influence over organizational values and goals (e.g. legal and budgetary control), and social diversity of the organization or workgroup (e.g. age, class, ethnicity, & gender). The rules and practices governing hiring, compensation, and workplace safety are particularly significant to trust because they directly impact an individual's ability to maintain his or her health, sense of well-being, and economic stability, all factors linked to basic survival.

Theorists have noted that trust is an aspect of dynamic relational processes that unfold across time, with ongoing progression and regression in levels of trust. (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis 2007). For example, trust can be tentative when it is extended early in a relationship, before one has had opportunities to assess an individual's trustworthiness (e.g., when you loan your car to a new acquaintance). Without a prior track record of successful risk-based interactions, this loan constitutes an extension of trust without security, and provides a test or challenge that will be monitored for feedback. This illustrates the importance of ongoing observations of trustworthiness as part of a relationship, where assessment of the benefits in relation to costs of future risk-taking are nested within broader affective aspects of valuing.

To take an example of trust development within a family setting, we can see that parents set up challenges for their children in order to assess their maturity in taking on new responsibilities, (e.g., when we trust children to stay home alone while we are at work). At the outset, there may be higher levels of monitoring (e.g., phone calls during the day) until an adequate data set indicates that such safeguards are no longer necessary. After repeated positive experiences, a threshold of trust is attained, along with tacit understanding of expectations. In the event that agreements are violated (e.g. when a teenager holds a party at the house without permission), trust may be withdrawn or become probationary, requiring renewed implementation of monitoring and further assessment of mutuality with regard to values and expectations. Privileges may be reinstated at some point with renewed qualifications and checkpoints; the process begins again.

Through these examples, we see that trust is by its very nature relational, dynamic, nuanced, and can shift over time, depending on the environment, events, and the behaviors of individuals. We can also see that breaches of trust are repaired through a renewed process of trust-building, one that hopefully leads to a restoration of faith in the other person's respect and willingness to honor agreements. This recursive learning process reflects basic elements of interpersonal negotiation, as well as the fundamental interplay of trust and distrust.

Evolutionary Perspectives

A number of theorists, in an attempt to establish a theoretical grounding for universal processes underlying the development of trust, have looked to evolutionary psychological models for explanatory evidence (van Vugt, Hogan and Kaiser, 2008). From this perspective, trust has developed as part of biologically based adaptive strategies that were important to human survival during the evolution of our species. Trust is presumed to play

an essential role in attachment, in-group identification, procreation, child rearing, and cooperation. It is part of a broad spectrum of survival strategies that include cooperative elements, as well as competition, betrayal, and aggression. (Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003). As such, trust and betrayal can be observed across cultures, in historical, as well as contemporary settings (Delton et al., 2012).

To take a simple example for discussion purposes, we can see that individuals in communal village that produces fabric, may cooperate with each other by sharing materials, helping each other complete unfinished projects, taking turns preparing food, and watching each other's children while other group members are working. Members of this hypothetical community are likely to have developed a high level of interdependence, collaboration, and mutual trust through the course of their daily lives, leading to a social system based on collective understanding of work norms, roles, division of responsibility, and sharing of resources. The members of this community are familiar to one another, participate collectively in wide variety of agricultural activities, and help each other in emergencies. They also participate in shared family life, religious rituals, rites of passage, and friendships that strengthen their bonds and mutual identification as members of their social group. In times of conflict, they rely on one another to solve internal problems, or band together to defend against threats and intrusion from outsiders. Thus, both aggressive and cooperative aspects of behavior are employed to manage the range of survival challenges this community faces.

We can also see in this example that trust is integral to a broad range of cooperative endeavors in communal settings, and that group survival appears to hinge on patterns of cooperation that extend well beyond work projects or settings. Evolutionary psychologists presume that the small group collectivist setting is prototypical for human survival where cooperation and competition, trust and distrust, operate together to create stability and safety. In this regard, it is realistic to assume that the group serves to contain and mitigate threats to the viability of the collective system through informal and formal methods of problem solving. Leaders may play several important roles in this regard, one of which may be mediation or decision-making when informal problem solving breaks down. As a number of leadership theorists have indicated, the relationship between leaders and followers in traditional subsistence settings offers a perspective that links the idea of natural laws and evolved social systems to modern organizational settings (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008; van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008).

In particular, models based on traditional subsistence-based communities make clear that there is adaptive value in trust as well as distrust. For example, individuals who place their trust in careless or predatory acquaintances, or who relax protective measures in high-risk environments, may not survive; in these instances, caution and distrust would be more adaptive. However, in more hospitable situations, highly cooperative individuals may be very adept in forming alliances against common threats, while the competitive and disagreeable individual may be left with fewer resources and minimal protection, factors that could jeopardize his or her immediate and long-term survival (e.g. successful procreation

across generations). We can see from this illustration, that both sides of the trust/distrust dialectic confer advantages as well as disadvantages. For this reason, any characteristic or strategy must be evaluated in terms of short and long-term survival, with consideration of group as well as individual outcomes. Strategies that are adaptive over the long term (i.e. that lead to successful procreation and survival across multiple generations) are often codified biologically (via genes), as well as through cultural norms designating rules of reciprocity, social behavior, and familial obligation. Although members of cooperative groups must adhere to such norms to some degree, they must also make shifts and accommodations when circumstances change, especially during emergencies. It is evident that adaptation requires consistency as well as flexibility.

To take a simple example, imagine going to your neighborhood restaurant during a snowstorm to seek shelter and wait for help. Because of the weather, several staff members have not shown up for work. While waiting for your food, you observe one of the customers helping to explain the situation to those newly arrived, while a waiter cooks in the kitchen. To your surprise, you see a neighbor who frequents the restaurant placing candles on the tables and pouring wine, all the while singing a favorite opera tune to lighten the atmosphere. Throughout the evening the restaurant owner offers food without charge to those in need, and customers are uncharacteristically open to sharing their tables with strangers.

This relatively mundane example illustrates that novel circumstances often lead to shifts in roles, boundaries, and behavioral repertoires. Such flexibility is important to adaptive coping in emergencies, where a safe situation suddenly becomes threatening, where resources may be scarce, and typical coping potentially ineffective. These are times when people feel vulnerable and require help from others, times that lead to basic connection and bonding in service of survival. Emergencies may be frightening, but also require us to relax unnecessary standards, and behave more authentically in order to express our fears and seek, as well as offer, reassurance. Emergencies and crises form memorable events that cement learning, test competencies, and potentially enhance trust in collective interdependence. They offer opportunities to see others in a new light, noting the leadership skills in someone who is typically a follower and the flexibility of the leader in tapping into whatever resources are needed to get through the situation, including help from outsiders, and those who are of lower status in the organization. A growing area of research addresses the role of trust in high-risk settings, particularly in relation to safety behaviors, communication, and the importance of shifting roles between leaders and followers.

High-risk environments and the adaptive potentials of trust and distrust

Studies of high-risk settings (e.g. military, fire-fighting, or law enforcement) and of industries that use heavy equipment or volatile materials (e.g. commercial fishing, oil and mineral extraction, logging) also illustrate the role of trust in establishing safety and security. In these contexts accidents, near misses, and other critical incidents, are typically scrutinized in post-hoc evaluations in order to prevent future losses, and to learn from successful as well

as unsuccessful interventions. These studies illuminate the interplay of trust and distrust, because they highlight how scrutiny of real and hypothetical errors leads to system revision and improved outcomes. Such scrutiny is based on a skeptical and conservative outlook, where vigilance is normative. Looking at contemporary workplace safety, a number of researchers have also noted that the implementation of this kind of vigilance hinges on trust between leaders and followers, so that safety problems and errors will be reported immediately. Thus, caution and distrust regarding safety procedures fosters clarity about acceptable and unacceptable risks and associated rules and procedures for prevention. These settings illustrate the value of an organizational culture that fosters ongoing learning through reciprocal feedback systems among leaders, subordinates, and team members (Jeffcott et al., 2006).

In exploring the ways in which industrial work settings develop a learning culture around safe practices, Cox, Jones, & Collinson (2006), focused on the importance of open communication about mistakes and failures. Their study of safety implementation at a nuclear reactor in the United Kingdom revealed that criticism and blame over lapses in safety impeded the reportage of critical information regarding procedural violations and accidents. Through interviews and focus groups with employees, the research team discovered that this avoidance pattern reflected employee distrust regarding how information about errors would be used in performance evaluations. In contrast, when leaders fully supported the disclosure of safety errors, and taught interpersonal communication skills for challenging unsafe practices by peers, followers felt empowered, were more confident in their independent judgments, and expressed a sense of being trusted more fully by supervisors. They were also more likely to report safety violations by peers and to speak openly about their concerns.

Another aspect of research on critical incidents in high-risk environments sheds light on individual cognitive assessments of leader competence in relation to changing levels of workplace risk. Sweeney (2010) provided a vivid example of this in his study of soldiers fighting in the Iraqi combat zone. He investigated the beliefs of 75 soldiers regarding their commanding officer's competence to lead them successfully through a high-risk mission, a situation that would require an assessment of the leader's tactical skills as well as loyalty, courage, and confidence. He hypothesized that soldiers who had no prior experience fighting with a given leader would reconsider their level of trust in that commander prior to entering the battle situation. He also posited that the increased risk associated with the combat situation would lead to higher levels of monitoring and sampling of the leader's behavior in order to accurately assess risks and the potential for success (p.74).

Sweeney found that a majority of respondents (75%) reported a reevaluation of their leader's trustworthiness before entering the battlefield, with over half (58%) of these individuals increasing their trust as a result. For individuals whose assessment changed, the issue of competence was a core factor, regardless of whether trust increased or decreased. Although this study was qualitative and exploratory, relying on self-report data with a relatively small sample, it nonetheless supports theories about the dynamics underlying the cognitive components of trust. In particular the process focus of the assessment instrument

indicates that levels of trust may increase or decrease depending on situational factors, particularly as demands or risks increase. Given that most individuals reassessed trust in anticipation of increasing risks, this appears to be an adaptive process as part of gauging the degree to which the follower needs to protect him/herself. This, in a sense describes the follower's role as a leader in that moment of autonomous evaluation. In highly interdependent circumstances such as military operations, self-protection is closely linked to protection of other members in the group. Further, cautiousness and the expression of "creative distrust" appear to be important elements in the development and maintenance of safety; ultimately, we would expect this process to lead to higher levels of collective trust.

The examples from high-risk work contexts also illustrate the importance of several factors related to procedural justice and trust. First, when rules and rationales for safety measures were fully clarified, higher levels of commitment were attained with regard to maintaining safe practices. Teaching communication skills appeared to increase the likelihood of an individual speaking up when witnessing safety violations, and probably reduced the level of conflict between employees. Further, acceptable levels of human error were identified in order to ensure that individual action in service of collective goals was not inadvertently punished. These steps by leadership increased the sense of fairness, trust, and safety of the work situation. They also increased the opportunities for group members to have a voice in the implementation of safety protocols. These findings align with research on procedural justice that emphasizes a range of variables, including those that provide opportunities for followers to voice their opinions and concerns (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2003).

Cross-cultural research and multi-cultural settings

In their examination of cultural distinctions that are important for an understanding of normative expectations relevant to leadership, Javidan and House (2001) turned to the GLOBE study of 67 cultures and the development of nine key cultural attributes including: assertiveness, future orientation, gender differentiation, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, in-group collectivism, performance orientation, and humane orientation. They used these empirically derived dimensions to identify ways in which cultures differ and the appropriate leadership behaviors needed to bridge cultural gaps between managers and followers. They also considered these dimensions as potential sources for cross-cultural misunderstanding or conflict. Although it is evident from their analysis, that work in multi-cultural settings requires attention and commitment to learning about the cultural backgrounds of team members, research examining the issue of leader effectiveness has nevertheless found that individuals across varied cultures view leader traits related to trustworthiness, and integrity as highly important. (House et al., 2004). Findings from a recent study by Hamlin, Nassar, and Wahba, (2010) support this earlier work. In their study, they compared attitudes toward managers in samples derived from British and Egyptian public hospital settings. Using qualitative methods, they analyzed interview data obtained from employees from three organizations spanning both cultures. They analyzed responses

regarding critical incidents, particularly the assessment of effective and ineffective managerial behaviors.

Their results showed a high degree of overlap between Egyptian and British hospital workers' perceptions regarding effective and ineffective managerial styles. Key elements of effective behavior across both cultural samples included items related to fairness, trust, dependability, approachability, and provision of opportunities for staff members to voice ideas, suggestions, and complaints. These findings provide further support for the idea of common factors in leader effectiveness; particularly those related to individual attention, trust, and procedural justice. Additional support for this position comes from a study of HR managers in Beijing and Hong Kong. Liu, Siu, and Shi, (2010) found that trust in the leader partially mediated the positive effects of transformational leadership on job satisfaction, providing statistical evidence for trustworthiness as an underlying dimension.

Adding to the complexity of our discussion, a study by Brockner et al. (2001) found that cultural expectations about power distance moderated the degree to which opportunities to give feedback (voice) impacted commitment to an organization. They surveyed workers from Mexico, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China, Germany, and the United States. In low-power distance cultures (where expectations for input are high), a lack of voice was more disturbing (i.e. led to a lower commitment rating), than for individuals coming from high power distance cultures (where expectations for voice are lower). In spite of the fact that there was a significant interaction between cultural expectations regarding power distance and the impact of voice on organizational commitment ratings, there was a main effect for voice across all cultures. In sum, although the importance of voice is stronger in low power distance cultures such as the U.S. and Germany, individuals from all four high power distance cultures, also appeared to value voice as an important factor when assessing their commitment to organizational goals.

Discussion

Organizational researchers from around the world have worked to identify the interpersonal and systemic processes that engender trust, particularly cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; McAllister, 1995). Although individuals from different cultures enact trust and trustworthiness in varied ways, the experience of trust is an important variable in predicting a range of workplace outcomes across varied cultural samples. The connection between trust and survival is illustrated in studies of high-risk work environments, where both trust and distrust operate to increase safety levels. In this case trust in leaders impacts safety measures by facilitating communication about errors and accidents, information that depends on conscientiousness and cautionary distrust. These studies point to the fundamental role of trust/distrust as cultural universals that lead to increased collective survival, a notion that is consistent with evolutionary psychological theory.

Another issue worth noting concerns procedural justice and voice in relation to the development of trust. When workplace systems are perceived to be fair and reasonable, individuals are likely to be more trusting of those around them, even when fairness leads to short-term negative consequences (e.g. punishment for non-adherence to safety standards). The motivational trade-offs between rewards and punishments can be seen in trust building processes, where clarity, consistency, and benevolence protect against a sense of betrayal. Thus, procedural justice and fairness are not synonymous with continuous rewards, but rely instead on reasonable consequences in response to problems. That said, there is ample evidence that leaders who are positive and reassuring are more highly trusted, while those who are manipulative or who employ unfair practices in the workplace rapidly lose credibility, which in turn negatively impacts employee investment in the organization.

When applying our findings to community building in multi-cultural settings, several strategies appear likely to encourage trust and authentic connections between individuals. First, based on the previous review of literature, opportunities to share ideas, teach new skills, and give feedback to leaders, are likely to increase understanding and mutual respect among team members, and between managers and subordinates. Further, in order to increase genuine contact between team members, it is crucial to have informal gatherings outside of work, where team members can develop personal connections with one another, and see each other in the context of a wider range of social roles and identities.

The primary responsibility for team building rests with the leader, who must foster collective identity through open communication about goals, future endeavors, and by providing learning and growth opportunities, as well as balanced feedback to all members. One thing we can see as a result of this discussion, is that attention to fairness, along with authentic acknowledgment of individual and collective contributions, is critical for increasing trust, engagement, and respect. Most importantly the role of time and patience in developing trusting relationships cannot be underestimated. Creating opportunities for trust to develop requires relaxed contexts and varied opportunities for group members to develop shared interests, mutual support, and genuine interdependence.

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