

Building up Trust

Trust is one of our most precious commodities.
Ulf D. Posé tells you how to build up trust - instalment two.

Every economical crisis is also a crisis of trust. Expectations that have not been met, as well as shattered hopes and dreams that have not come true provoke distrust. Once trust is gone, you can see how hard it is to build up, because trust is full of requirements. It is based on being mutual. But that also means everybody can contribute to its growth - by being trustworthy and being prepared to trust others. Our series of articles will shed light on what builds trust.

We live in a world where everything that can be done will be done, which means that in our world everything can be used, as well as abused. This is also true for trust, which is why we need standards that must be met in order to build up trust. After all, according to Niklas Luhmann, trust is a sort of advance credit - albeit a "risky advance credit". As mentioned before, Luhmann is convinced that we advance this credit whenever we are confronted with circumstances we cannot oversee.

This happens, for example, if we do not have enough information or do not have the competence to evaluate said information. This is why the first standard is competence. You gain competence by acquiring knowledge and expertise. It indicates that you take pains to find out about something. This process should start with linguistic competence. Linguistic competence is the first of three distinctive competences. The other two are about behaviour and judgement.

This article is about linguistic competence. It is easy to see that the way we talk is a crucial requirement for building up trust. Do I actually know the meaning of a word, or is there just a vague impression what it might mean? Even Aristotle of the ancient Greek philosophers pointed out that this is where a basic problem lies. He believed that lack of knowledge caused dishonesty. In his opinion, a person behaved ethically if he was capable of talking about a subject matter, rather than just about his emotions when thinking about a matter.

Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people are interested in knowledge, let alone competence. According to the motto "why bother with knowledge, since my mind is made up already?", they rely on emotions. Then they go from door to door with their opinions and convince others that this is what everyone should believe. This is how other people get infected with opinions that can hardly stand up to critical scrutiny. Words without meaning become convictions, and when enough people share these convictions, we conclude that they must be the truth. We no longer subject them to closer inspection - which also means that the degree truth behind an argument is no longer questioned.

If you were ever interested in philosophy, you will soon have found out that it is all about two questions. Firstly: why is it as it is? Secondly: how do you know? If you can answer those two questions, then you are taking pains to gain knowledge. As newborns, we cannot yet speak, but from the moment of appearing in the world, we are surrounded by meanings. A newborn does not know that a pacifier is a pacifier, yet he will soon have a clear concept of what a pacifier is. Small children quickly grasp the meaning of words; they know the essence of an object. Without being able to speak themselves, they know their way around their world. Slowly, they learn the words with which to combine sound and meaning. Now they can say what they know. And then parents are surprised when their children's linguistic competence

explodes, which usually happens after their second birthday. This is no witchcraft: the children knew the meaning of things all along. Only the corresponding words were missing.

Why am I emphasizing this? That is easy: during our lives, we learn so many words that many people no longer care to find out the meaning along with the words. Thus, we are content to speak words the meaning and content of which is no longer clear. What would be necessary is that we become like small children again and learn to fill words with their linguistic meaning. That is linguistic competence. It means:

- Before you form your own opinion, find the facts.
- Ask yourself if you only have emotions about an issue, or if you actually know about it.
- Only offer your personal opinion on issues you know about.
- Listen carefully if someone offers to share his knowledge with you.
- Ask questions if there is something you do not know or understand.
- Just because someone does not share your opinion does not mean he is wrong.
- Do not get angry if your convictions turn out to be wrong - instead, delight in the fact that you have discovered an error.

The next instalment will discuss behavioural competence. It is a requirement for building up trust.