

Building up Trust

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

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.

If you promise something, you build up hope; if you deliver what you have promised, you build up trust. Now trust is in a crisis. People exploit other people: socially, emotionally and economically - and they are even proud of it. The consequences are detrimental: we trust less, our readiness to believe others dwindles. The more we think of ourselves, the less we think of others and the less the others think of us.

Using your elbows, being self-righteous, building one's future on the backs of others: those are the characteristics of modern times. Or worse: increasing your fortune, taking advantage of other people's weaknesses and caring for nothing but your own advantage as intensely as possible. The financial crisis shattered us all. It destroyed our trust in politics, economy and society. That is why I think it might be appropriate to talk about something that we currently need more than anything: the ability to build up a climate of trust.

I am convinced that the determining factor for trustworthy, ethical behaviour is how people see themselves. It is also the requirement of freedom. It describes a world in which what you did is interpreted as something you could just as well not have done and what you did not do as something you could just as well have done. This is the attitude of a (private) director of an enterprise who embraces the world actively. No director wants to live in a world where everything is determined in advance and he himself only has the chance to react, rather than act.

The consequence of the wish to see oneself as a free human being is the ethical demand that there should always be a conscious influence on your own environment and orientation towards building up trust. Along with it, we have the duty to define values and set them into a plausible, trust-building form. If we fail to do that, everything will be left to blind necessity, structural forces, the random law of the stronger and despotism. Then there is no concept of honesty. What follows is distrust, which costs us dearly: loneliness, emotional coldness, disorientation in society, destruction of a socially acceptable community and eventually: de-humanisation.

It is quite possible that some would accept to pay this price for their own progress. I am not one of them, and I know others who think like me. Nor am I like some of those self-appointed preservers of virtue in politics and among the clerics in that I do not share their opinion that morals and trust can be rebuilt in our society by making stricter laws. If you think that the out-of-control managers just need to be brought back into line in the right way and then trust will be automatically rebuilt, you are wrong. Trust cannot be forced by laws.

It is blue-eyed to think trust can be generated through public orders. Trust is not a question of laws. Rather, it is a question of ethics and morals, of inner attitudes and character. Trust is a

very sensitive capital. It is what all our virtues are based on. Trust is the capital which parts of our economy, our politics and our banks light-heartedly gambled with and lost. During a special series of lectures, someone at Lessing-Hochschule in Berlin said: "Trust is a value per se - something serving all other values (...) Trust guarantees efficiency. If trust is ruined, this does not only build up a climate of mistrust, but it also causes considerable economical cost for an entire nation. Once it has been ruined, it is extremely hard to restore".

Basically, trust is an ethical category. Those who want to dictate it politically or even by law only show their ignorance. Conversely, we can say: only the active parties themselves - that is all and every one of us - can build up trust. We can do so by behaving trustworthy and trusting others.

But what is trust? Usually, we define trust as the assumption that our expectations in people, developments and agreements will be met exactly like we expect it. That means trust is a conviction. It means: I firmly believe that I can rely on a statement being correct. It also means: I rely on the competence or knowledge of a person or institution. Besides, trust also means: I am certain that I will be treated fairly in that people will be honest and treat me as equals, and that social responsibility plays an important role in social interaction.

There is no doubt that trust has enormous advantages: less money spent on legal advice and contracts. Two parties who trust each other will not need to draw up a long written contract. If you nurture relationships based on trust, you also do not need to look for new partners, new customers, new suppliers and new friends all the time. Nor will you have to make sure your emails or private notes will not be "cc"-ed where you do not want them.

The sociologist Niklas Luhmann described trust as a sort of advance credit to the future - albeit a "risky advance credit". He is convinced that we advance this credit whenever we are confronted with circumstances that we cannot completely oversee: for example if we do not have enough information or if we are not competent enough to evaluate said information. That is exactly where this risky advance credit is given. According to Luhmann, people who give trust anticipate their future in a positive manner and act like future events were a certainty.

Trust, however, cannot only be abused, but also broken. Or it can be a one-sided concept, someone blindly trusting someone else and expecting the same blind trust from him. With which we have defined the real problem. Since the ethical category "trust" is so important and yet so sensitive and fragile, we must think about standards that should be met in order for trust to grow.

Trust rests on three columns:

Firstly - competence, meaning linguistic competence, behavioural competence and the competence to judge fairly. Behavioural competence includes the ability to be open-minded, the competence to judge fairly includes the ability to weigh up.

Secondly - suitability, meaning that you know how to set priorities, act fairly and even punish fairly. Suitability evaluation gives you the possible extent of trust.

Thirdly - reliability, meaning that people will not be disappointed when they rely on you, that you are honest and upright both in what you say and what you do, that you only promise what you actually can deliver and that you do deliver what you have promised.

Those are the three requirements we will expand on in the six articles to come.