Chapter 7

Trust in Distributed Teams

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ABSTRACT

Creating and maintaining trust amongst distributed team members is required for an organization to benefit from a distributed team model. Where face-to-face interactions were once the only model to gradually create trust, different models are required for a team that is not co-located. This chapter examines the basic need for trust, how the individual comes before the team, barriers to trust, and prepares the reader to examine his or her own situation to improve or create a new team based on trusting professional relationships.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the dimensions of trust and teamwork in the context of one or more distributed teams. The sections presented attempt to coalesce recent academic research, practitioner findings and industry case studies into digestible knowledge that can be used to make team creation and management decisions.

The reader will see throughout the chapter that trust can be interpreted in a myriad of ways and go through many transformational stages. This is demonstrated in the first half of the chapter by examining the state of trust in a professional context, incongruity in teams, and issues of structure in the distributed team environment. The second half of the chapter deals with agitators to building trusting relationships, self-defeating behaviors, and introduces a system dynamic of trust. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for building trust in a new team. By the end of the chapter, it will be clear that trust may or may not be a critical concern for a particular team – but it must be addressed in order to assess teamwork effectiveness and efficiency - and it will always begin with the individual.

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BACKGROUND: TRUST IN A PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

Creating trust in the workplace is a different process than creating a friendship with a component of trust. Relationships in the workplace are formalized by the ethos of the company, department, or workgroup. New members to such a team often take cues from existing members, human resource department literature, and preparation by the team leader or manager when they first arrive. The individual, though influenced, is still an autonomous being who will make his or her own judgments on trusting peers (McKnight, et al., as cited in Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004).

As mentioned, a team’s ethos can influence an individual joining the group but not be a portent for the growth of trust in other team members. The greatest inhibiting factor to this osmosis of team culture is an individual’s past experiences. From the moment two team members meet, a new coworker joins an existing team, or someone joins an organization of 10,000 people – each will make inferences related to what they see today by what they experienced in the past. These inferences can produce positive effects, wherein someone with a high trusting disposition may connect and bond earlier with remote colleagues. This is contrary to someone with a low disposition for trust who may not bond with coworkers because trivial matters are creating cognitive blockages for them – something that will be discussed later in the chapter.

These positive and negative effects can quickly exacerbate as the high trust individual is more likely to hold positive attitudes regardless of workplace situations while the low trust individual will have lower satisfaction with the team and output quality. This turns into a metaphorical situation of Sue wearing rose-colored glasses and Paul lumbering under a perpetual rain cloud. Trust in others can lead toward either extreme.

Trust can also have significant mediating effects in a team. For example, consider what happens when a trustor does not receive a timely response to a voicemail from a team member. Because the trustor does in fact willingly trust the other party, he or she may forgo interpreting the lack of response as negative (Jarvenpaa, Shaw, Staples, 2004). Trust can have a great mediating effect here.

Fortunately, since individuals in a professional environment bring their previous life experiences to the act of joining the team, they will assess new situations using the positive and the negative experiences from their past and hopefully offset one extreme or another. The unfortunate part is many individuals have never been part of a well functioning team.

Never Been On a Real Team

Regardless of education, culture, or socio-economic background, most professionals today have never been on a well functioning team (Dyer, 1994). That is not to say that they have not participated on teams whose output has been regarded as successful. And it is not necessary that past teams were full of egotistical, rude, and utterly selfish individuals – but teams (as we know them) fulfill a purpose outside of themselves before they fulfill themselves.

If individuals making up a team are instructed to be output focused, when do they bond? When do they form trusting relationships? For most people this has been their life experience – in business school, a computer science project, volunteering, an advertising proposal, etc. Round up a bunch of people, try to identify the goal (more on that later in regards to team high and low structure) and get working. All the while, most team members do not even have the training or experience to participate on a team in handling such simple things as managing group problems, moving toward a goal, or forming consensus.

It has been popularly accepted by managers over the past two decades that influencing individuals is more effective than controlling output;