Chapter IX
Trustworthiness as an Impression

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses current developments in the theory of trust and distrust drawing upon a field study between solution providers and their clients in the IT industry in Poland. It addresses the question of how the suppliers (trust-takers) establish the image of being trustworthy, and how their trustworthiness is in turn examined by their potential customers, when cooperation takes place in the context of the openly expressed lack of trust (or distrust). Trust in the chapter is seen as a tranquilizer that suspends the feeling of vulnerability and enables action regardless of uncertainty involved in the situation. Cooperation is understood in dramaturgic terms—the supplier is to produce an impression that will make them appear trustworthy as perceived by the customer.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the research project that forms the basis for this chapter originated from two reflections. On the one hand, the researchers usually agree on the crucial role of trust in business contracting practice: it is seen as “vital for the maintenance of cooperation in society and necessary as grounds for even the most routine, everyday interactions” (Zucker, 1986). It seems to me that it is particularly relevant for the high-tech business, where—in terms of knowledge—a substantial asymmetry between the supplier and the client may exist; this asymmetry is accompanied by a relatively high disclosure of key information about the organization on the part of the client. This, along with the oftentimes-particular character of the service (e.g., software design) that eludes precise evaluation, forms an environment conducive to the emergence of trust. The significance of trust for enabling mutually advantageous relations of exchange and cooperation between organizations has been largely acknowledged (e.g., Sako, 1992, 1998). Especially in the case of buyer-seller
relations, trust plays an important role because even if both parties are interested in continuing the relationship, there is still vulnerability and the potential hazard of opportunism (Möllering, 2006).

Regardless of various virtues attributed to trust, we still have only limited understanding of its functioning in market processes (cf. Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Tillmar, 2002). The reason for that may be twofold. First, according to Möllering (2006), it is because empirical studies of trust have been dominated by quantitative endeavors. Taking this into account, the field project, the excerpts of which I am partially presenting here, was originally intended to address the need of local, interpretative studies of trust pointedly expressed in the recent literature (e.g., ibid, p. 151-154). Second, as Beckert (2005) claims, our problem in understanding how trust works, specifically in market relationships, originates in a bias that is characteristic of most of the existing research. It is assumed that in dyadic market relationships, e.g. between buyers and sellers, the buyer is the trust-giver (i.e., initiator of the relationship). The general problem is that the majority of research so far has been focused on the role of trust-giver, and somewhat ignored the likely contribution of the trustee to forming the successful relationship, especially by appearing trustworthy even before the actual business contact is even initiated. It is not to mean that the role of the trust-taker has been completely neglected, but rather that the parties were not seen in a balanced mode, with a clear bias towards the role of the trust-giver.

Through the research project that I draw upon in this text, I wanted to address this issue and look at the specific cases of market cooperation from equal perspectives of both partners.

An interesting framework for conceptualizing the role of the trustee in the market relationships is offered by Beckert (2005), who claims that the key to understanding the initiation of market exchange based on trust is the “performative acts” of the trust-taker. “Performative here means the production of the impression of trustworthiness, especially through acts of self-presentation with which the trust-giver tries to persuade the trust-taker of the sincerity of his intention to cooperate” (Beckert, 2005, p. 5). I believe that drawing upon the dramaturgic metaphor (Goffman, 1959) and concept of “performative acts” proposed by Beckert may cast a new light on the cooperation between business partners. Furthermore, in my case, the parties declare openly that they are rather distrustful, or at best wary towards each other, so establishing grounds safe enough to start cooperation constitutes here an additional challenge.

The question I am going to address throughout this chapter is how the suppliers (trust-takers) establish the image of being trustworthy, and how their trustworthiness is in turn examined by their potential customers, when cooperation takes place in the context of the openly expressed lack of trust (or distrust). In the first part of this chapter, I will clarify the notion of trust and discuss its role in market relationships. Trust will be seen here as a tranquilizer that suspends the feeling of vulnerability and enables action regardless of uncertainty involved in the situation. Cooperation, in turn, is understood in dramaturgic terms, according to the metaphor of drama (Goffman, 1959). The supplier is to produce an impression that will make them appear trustworthy as perceived by the customer. This section is most heavily based on Möllering’s (2006) conceptualization of trust, and the view of market exchange set out in the article by Beckert (2005).

What follows is the presentation of excerpts of empirical studies that are to address two issues: (1) the perception of the phenomenon of trust and (2) the practical methods for verifying trustworthiness of the supplier before making the decision about entering the project together. The process of cooperation will be presented from the viewpoints of two parties engaged in cooperation: the suppliers and the customers. This is to avoid bias towards the trust-giver and fulfill the