

A Question of Trust David Trickey - Senior Partner for TCO International Diversity Management (Italy) based in Bologna

Measuring and developing trust in teams

According to the World Economic Forum¹ the level of trust levels in governments, the United Nations and global companies is now at its lowest level since tracking began in 2001. A Harvard Business School report² found that trust in business leaders has been steadily falling over a seven year period with less than 1% of respondents having a very high opinion of their bosses honesty and ethical standards.

Such low levels of trust affect bottom-line productivity as people minimise their vulnerability by 'playing safe', ever more elaborate and costly checking systems are introduced, offers of advice are ignored, and valuable but sensitive information is withheld. This all leads to communication breakdowns, defensiveness, poor team learning and higher levels of anxiety. Team energies are diverted away from the external needs of the customer towards second guessing the real motives of colleagues internally.

On the other hand, there is plenty of research evidence to show that high levels of trust can be linked to the successful management of some of today's key business challenges (see Table 1). Indeed, most business leaders see high levels of trust as a competitive advantage in the

Table 1.
There is now clear research evidence for higher levels of trust linked to:

HIGHER LEVELS OF

- cooperation and collaboration in business
- competitive advantage
- performance in alliances
- knowledge transfer
- productivity in virtual teamwork
- innovation
- support for change initiatives
- leadership effectiveness
- organisational commitment and morale
- employee retention
- effective working relationships

struggle to retain talent, to motivate teams and bind people together across borders. It is probably the cheapest and most under explored lever for increased productivity available to organisations. But, when was the last time you explored the issue of trust openly with your work colleagues? How many team-building processes explicitly put the issue of trust on the table or seek to measure and build trust between team members in a focused way? The rarity of such events lies in the acute sensitivity of the trust issue. Suggesting that there is a trust deficit hurts people at the level of identity. It is also not a simple concept to understand. My own reading suggests there are over a 100 definitions. Trust

has many facets, operates on a number of levels, changes over time and repairing its often fragile membrane can make a surgeon's job seem easy.

When working across different national boundaries the building blocks of trust are even less available. We tend to place higher initial trust with friends, family members or people who share our way of thinking and behaving. Foreigners don't so easily fall into these categories. The meaning of trust is not universal - *vertrauen* in German has different associations compared to *fiducia* in Italian which, in turn, is conceptually different from *trust* for Anglo-Saxons – so we may conclude that people from other cultures are untrustworthy simply because we have grown up to give different emphasis to a range of trustworthiness signals.

As a result we tend to bury any open discussions of the issue....and hope for the best, instinctively believing that trust development, although essential, is ultimately elusive.

¹ World Economic Forum Trust Survey – latest figures for December 2005 at <http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Full+Survey:+Trust+in+Governments,+Corporations+and+Global+Institutions+Continues+to+Decline>

² Harvard Business School and Pew Research Center, 2002

Over the last few years I have been asked to support a number of multicultural teams where trust was surfaced as a key ingredient for productivity. Those which developed higher levels of trust found that it acted as both as the lubricant which brought out the best in their cooperation as well as the glue which bound them together under the strains of geographical distance and cultural diversity. The rest of this article tells the story of one of these teams...let's call it the 'EuroTeam'.

The 10-member 'EuroTeam' was responsible for leading the European integration of new IT systems and with members from seven countries. Already established for 18 months, they had survived a number of organisational restructuring traumas and cost-cutting drives which had lead to a refocusing on national targets. The 'EuroTeam' had been considered a pioneer in the 'international days' of the organisation as their systems were the first to link the multinational structure together – but informal conversations with the members suggested that the way they worked together could be improved and there were fears that the new challenges ahead would severely test their levels of commitment to a geographically dispersed team – especially with the organisation's trust damaging move to recentralise. Perceptions of the relative commitment of some members came to the surface in this respect and Marco, the team leader, expressed frustration that members were not sharing information proactively enough. Working virtually most of the time, Marco found it tough even to arrange meetings twice a year, but he firmly believed that "such eyeball-to-eyeball meetings help us to deal with some tougher 'soft' issues which we just can't work through in a conference call" – and trust was one of the issues he wanted to deal with at their next meeting when I first joined as external facilitator.

Prior to the first team development session we asked all members to complete *The International Team Trust Indicator*. This is a diagnostic questionnaire by WorldWork Ltd, a company which designs international management development tools. Two years ago I had been commissioned by WorldWork to research the key criteria for trust at an international level – since US trust instruments seemed to rely heavily on US trust criteria - on the basis of which their psychometricians would develop an on-line questionnaire (see Table 2).

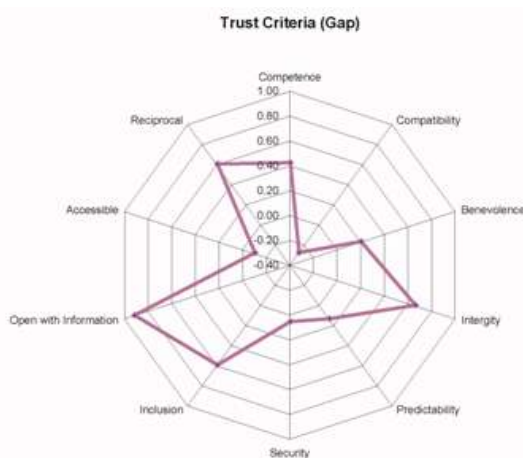
Table 2. 10 TRUST CRITERIA

1. **Competence** Trust based on a perception that team members are competent, and so will not let me down
2. **Commonality** Trust based on background, values, approaches, interests and objectives held in common
3. **Benevolence** Trust based on the belief that other team members are concerned about my overall welfare
4. **Integrity** Trust based on the fact that other team members maintain promises, are team oriented and behave towards me in accordance with a moral code
5. **Predictability** Trust based on the observation that the behaviour of team members is consistent over time and in different contexts
6. **Security** Trust arising from the feeling that I have nothing to fear from the other members of the group
7. **Inclusion** Trust based on the observation that other group members actively include me in their social and work activities
8. **Open with information** Trust based on the fact that other team members share information important to the team proactively and clearly
9. **Accessibility** Trust based on the fact that other team members share their true feelings and I can relate to them at a personal level
10. **Reciprocal** Trust based on the observation that other group members are trusting and co-operative towards me

The 50-item questionnaire identifies the behaviours and attitudes that each team member needs from their colleagues if they are to trust them, and also what they are actually experiencing in this respect. These individual results are then pooled to provide an overall report for the team as a whole. The report contains a range of graphical analysis options that enables the team leader and team members to identify the nature of any trust deficits within the team.

The results of the pooled responses revealed there were specific aspects of trust to be dealt with by the Euroteam: a deficit in being *Open with Information* and most particularly a significant gap in openness about team members needs and motives.

In subgroups the team focused on team trust alignment by identifying specific actions to close the top three trust gaps. One action we carried out on the day was to clarify what their



individual needs actually were, based on an explanation of issues facing them in their local context. This apparently simple process produced a huge insight into why they had not been proactive in the past. It emerged that there was a basic lack of understanding of each others' context which inhibited the proactive sharing of information. As one team member said "how could we have been proactive if we didn't know you needed this kind of support? Now I know the kind of things you need and why you need it, I'll ensure you get the information before you get into difficulty!". A range of gap closing actions were prioritised, planned and implemented.

At their next meeting, six months later, we redid the survey and by facilitating one of their team meetings, we could measure clear progress on these issues. The results showed that information was perceived to be exchanged in a more transparent and unambiguous way, people were more approachable and responsive, readily sharing information with others. This was confirmed by nodding heads around the table and a few concrete examples of open information exchange.

However, this time we identified new trust related challenges resulting from shifts in the wider organisational strategy. The new project they were working on required higher levels of interdependence and exerted tough deadlines. A predictable 'competence crisis' had emerged. Although colleagues were perceived as having good reputations in their fields two year ago when they started, the questionnaire results were showing a perceived deficit in the skills, qualifications and experience to cover their roles in the team and there were new doubts about how reliable colleagues were in delivering to a high standard. We used a part of the session for everyone to show vulnerability by trusting others with, what were till now, unspoken fears and concerns that had they had about their role in the imminent project.

'Compatibility' was another new trust related issue. People realised for the first time that others in this multicultural team, although similar in professional background and education, did not hold values consistent with their own and did not share their way of thinking or approach. There were already clear signs that this could lead to severe breakdowns in communication, especially between team members who favoured direct feedback to develop trust and those gave feedback more implicitly and focused more on preserving personal relationships. This was most apparent between the straight talking Germans and Dutch on the one hand and the more interpersonally 'careful' British on the other. This created an opportunity to explore in concrete terms how those in a team with opposing values to ours can be our best teachers.

The ensuing exchange on these issues was far removed from the polite and passive meetings six months earlier where new initiatives and actions were driven forward by the ever enthusiastic volcano of ideas, Marco. People were listening, sharing contributions and challenging more. They were also taking responsibility for getting a temperature check from quieter members. Since everyone had been involved in an unreserved, passionate debate on the issues people left with a heightened sense of commitment to the decisions made.

After this second facilitated meeting the team was now more able to independently manage the normally elusive issue of trust. They created practical guidelines to ensure that the key trust criteria needed within the team were more consciously provided by all members. With the trust issue being looked at through a problem-solving rather than a 'personal' lens, we were able to tackle issues quickly and in the open (itself a trust developing act). Marco admitted to me after the second session that if they had not been able to bring the dimension of trust to the surface and deal with it consciously and concretely, the team would have buried a whole range of issues which in time would have caused the team to implode on impact with the new project.

I have third session with the 'EuroTeam' in six months when we will use the *International Team Trust Indicator* to monitor how the new project is affecting the levels of trust factors needed to sustain the team. In addition Marco will be doing the team leader's version of the questionnaire to identify what specifically he needs to do to match his team's trust criteria. The simple act of accepting to do this has already further boosted the team's trust in him to understand their needs and priorities.

There is no easy way to turn around the World Economic Forum survey on trust, however, the opportunity to work explicitly on this issue is available and necessary in thousands of teams the world over...the Euroteam being just one example. If organisations are really going to leverage trust to their competitive advantage we must work on the daily actions of leaders, managers and teams where trust *can* be both measured *and* developed. Through the virtuous cycle of giving and getting trust according to differing needs we can make a profound difference to the quality of collaborative work as members chose to think of the consequences for trust of their every action. As Reinhard Sprenger says in his excellent book on trust: "[trust] is a microcosmic phenomenon between you and your colleagues, between this person and that; how you behave in the world not when everything's right with the world, but when the going gets tough...As a manager, you must consider the effects on trust of any action by management."

Is your organisation doing enough to cultivate a culture of trust beyond including the word in mission and values statements? Those that actively deal with the issue head on at all levels will be developing the key intangible for increased corporate value.

Information about *The International Team Trust Indicator* can be received from www.worldwork.biz or from David Trickey at *TCO International Diversity Management* d.trickey@tco-international.com