



Virtual Teams and the Importance of Building Trust

Georgina Harell and Tugrul U. Daim

Portland State University

Trust in the workplace is both an ethical and a management issue. Virtual teams have become common in IT, but the importance of building trust in such teams is often underappreciated. In this installment of IT Ethics, we look at several definitions and theories of trust and examine their application in virtual IT teams.

Definitions of Trust

The idea of predicting the future is a fundamental aspect of trust. For upcoming events that are almost certain, trust is unnecessary—it seems superfluous to place your trust in a tree growing. But events with an uncertain outcome sometimes do involve trust—you tend to believe that your doctor can properly diagnose your ailment. Ultimately, though, trust is more than just considering the possible outcomes of future events: it also involves action, by making a commitment despite uncertainty.

Trust in its purest form is placed in individuals. Although people might claim they trust the government, they actually trust individuals in the government. The level of trust that a person extends is

conceptually explained by gradually expanding circles known as a *radius of trust*.¹ Your inner radius includes close family members; next come the people you know by name. After this, you tend to place trust in the individuals you recognize but with whom you don't directly interact. Finally the outermost circle of trust includes the people with whom you merely have something in common, such as religious affiliation, political preference, or ethnicity;² that's also the point at which the lines between personal and social trust start to blur. The trust that occurs in this outer radius can be biased by circumstance, prejudice, and stereotypes—for example, a person living in a country known for its corrupt government wouldn't likely trust politicians in general. Most relevant to virtual teams are *secondary objects of trust*—experts, reliable witnesses, governing authorities, and other entities that provide guidance into primary objects worthy of trust.

Dimensions of Trust

According to Piotr Sztompka, a professor of sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków,

Poland, the nature of trust is a three-dimensional concept.³ The first dimension involves relationships: although initial trust is instilled by completing an action as expected, the eventual outcome results in the formation of a relationship between the truster and the trustee. This relational dimension of trust is addressed in rational-choice theory,⁴ in which both truster and trustee are rational individuals attempting to maximize their goals by assessing the given information. A variant on relational trust—and the most complex aspect of trust in general—occurs during cooperation, when all parties strive to achieve a goal that they can't attain separately and that hinges on the actions of everyone involved, thus greatly increasing both uncertainty and risk. Naturally, the cooperative aspect of trust is of prime importance to virtual teams.

The second dimension of trust is psychological and manifests itself as a personality trait of the truster. Numerous authors assume “basic trust,” a “trusting impulse,” or fundamental trustfulness,⁵ all of which are products of successful socialization. For

example, a particularly trusting individual might ignore available information about a situation and voluntarily place his or her trust where most people wouldn't.

The third dimension of trust is cultural—it doesn't stem from a calculation or a psychological disposition but from a social context. If a community generally accepts a rule about trust as a given, then its individual members will likely be biased toward that same view. The global nature of virtual teams makes the cultural dimension crucial.

Granting Trust

As part of his three-dimensional theory, Sztompka found three foundations from which trust can be granted or withheld: reflected trustworthiness, agential trustworthiness, and trust culture.³

Reflected trustworthiness relies on three categories to assess a target's primary trustworthiness: reputation, performance, and appearance. In this context, reputation is simply the historical assessment of similar or relevant experiences; performance is a snapshot of current positive outcomes that aren't yet proven to be typical or sustainable; and appearance is simply how the object under consideration looks to the truster. Of the many external influences on appearance, three are generally considered the most imperative: dress, bodily discipline, and civility.⁶ The category of appearance is problematic for virtual teams because they don't often meet face to face; using webcams at least some of the time might help enhance trust. In addition to reputation, performance, and appearance, trusters can use two secondary categories to assess reflected trust: accountability and situational facilitation.³ Accountability means that the trustee's trustworthiness is enforced or monitored in some

fashion, and situational facilitation means that the setting in which the truster and trustee find themselves can enhance trust. Another aspect of situational facilitation is any preconceived notion associated with the location in which trust is conferred.

The second foundation of trust is agential trust, or a trusting impulse. This idea of inherent trust is widely discussed in the literature—for example, Anthony Giddens speaks of "basic trust" and Russell Hardin discusses the

of information to change understanding within a time interval";¹⁰ the basic premise is that different media are more effective at communicating a given message in a timely manner. Social presence theory states that a communication technology's effectiveness is related to its social effects: "social presence" is loosely defined as the medium's ability to communicate intimacy and warmth to the recipient.¹¹ The social identity model of deindividuation effects differentiates the cognitive and

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"capacity for trust."^{6,7} The final foundation of trust is cultural. Similar to agential trust, it's based on a history of events. However, unlike agential trust, which stems from personal experiences, trust culture is the result of long-established societal rules.

Group Trust Theories

Although the fundamentals of individual trust have validity for groups, several theories have been developed specifically around group trust. Here, we briefly introduce four of these theories: swift trust; time interaction and performance theory (TIP); media richness theory; and social presence theory. Swift trust in virtual teams is based on trusting team members in the role they're currently performing, not on personal relationships or past performance.⁸ The TIP theory places a heavy emphasis on communication and distinguishes three group functions: production, member support, and group well-being.⁹ Media richness theory stems from "the ability

strategic effects of communication technologies and the results of less personal communication modes.¹²

Virtual teams don't always have the luxury of meeting face to face. Management picks a group of individuals and deems these people a "team" with a goal and timeline. Initial research indicated virtual teams couldn't develop trusting relationships, but research in 1998 demonstrated that you could indeed build trusting relationships in virtual teams.¹³ Long-established ways for building and maintaining trusting relationships include "familiarity, shared experience, reciprocal disclosure, threats and deterrents, fulfilled promises, and demonstrations of nonexploitation of vulnerability."¹⁴ Virtual teams don't have the traditional option of building trust relationships via so-called "face time," so they should seek the assistance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as instant messaging, email, teleconferencing, and Web meetings.

As global virtual teams become more common, managers must recognize that team members might have cultural biases and are unlikely to trust people with whom they have no identifiable or common cultural traits.³ Using Geert Hofstede's individualism versus collectivism dimension of culture (see <http://feweb.uvt.nl/center/hofstede/page3.htm>), global virtual managers can help members think "we" instead of "us/them." A recent study also found that the middle "you/I" relationships were the most important to foster because they lead to the "we" collective collaboration, the final goal of virtual teams.¹⁵

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Stages of Virtual Teams

Additional research has found that virtual teams follow five distinct stages: planning and establishing, commencing, organizing, transitioning, and accomplishing the task.¹⁶ As the team moves through the stages, it also moves through different types of trust.

Planning and Establishing

During the planning phase, management is key to ensuring that each virtual team member is engaged, heard, dealing with conflicts, and building trust.¹⁷ Each virtual team member requires not only technical knowledge and experience, but the ability to trust teammates he or she will only know virtually. The manager must therefore be aware of the amount of dispositional trust each possible team member possesses—his or her "trusting impulse."^{5,7,16} People with high levels of dispositional trust

tend to perform better in virtual teams.¹⁶

Commencing

Team management can also play a pivotal role in helping team members develop swift trust during the commencing stage. One method is for the manager to perform introductions that are positive yet explain each person's practical role and importance to the team.^{3,16} Managers should also think about the media richness theory when choosing initial team communications. Picking the best possible media can help give the team a positive first impression.^{10,16} Team

members might be able to video-conference, talk on the phone, and chat over the Internet, but understanding another person's cultural and nonverbal cues isn't straightforward and can be easily misinterpreted.

Organizing

Different cultures have different views of deadlines, work roles, and management styles.¹⁷ Clear documentation of roles and responsibilities, project goals and expectations, and team definition are crucial for fostering trust among global virtual team members. Member involvement is critical during the organizational phase, when people are starting to make trust judgments based on fellow team members' abilities and integrity. Management can help by encouraging non-work-related communications; social connections help develop trust.¹⁶

Transitioning

During the transition stage, the team gets down to working on the program—the finish line is in sight, so the ability to meet deadlines and finish tasks is on full display. Integrity, follow-through, and work quality foster trust at this stage.¹⁶ Management should strive to communicate that all members' contributions are valued: in low-trust teams, individuals might claim a position of power within the team that fosters hostility and an "us/them" mentality.

Accomplishing the Task

Trust in virtual teams is built on performance and attentiveness instead of social or face-to-face interactions.¹⁸ As the task comes to completion, team members should make every effort to answer each other promptly and thank each other for their efforts and a job well done. Team bonds and trust built during the project might prove useful in building trust with another team member in the future.¹⁶

The human dimensions of virtual teams are a crucial factor in their chances of success. Both for the project's sake—and for the participants'—the issue of trust should be a central concern. As virtual teams become the norm, such teams will require additional effort in creative trust-building activities. Clearly, much work remains to be done. ■

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Georgina Harell is a PhD student at Portland State University. Her research

interests include building trust in teams, renewable energy, and predicting future demand for emerging alternative energy sources. Harell has an MS in engineering and technology management from Portland State University. Contact her at georgina_harell@yahoo.com.

Tugrul U. Daim is an associate professor of engineering and technology management at Portland State University. He has a PhD in systems science/engineering management from Portland State University. Contact him at tugrul@etm.pdx.edu.

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