



BUILDING TRUST

by Muktananda

The ancient Greeks held that a belief was related to three distinct concepts, one of which was trust and confidence. Nothing can undermine a relationship more completely than lack of trust. In marriage, business, politics, indeed in any significant relationship, trust is the essential precondition upon which all real success depends. But what precisely is trust, and how can it be achieved and sustained? And, most importantly, how can it be regained once it has been broken?

Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores address these issues in *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships and Life* (2001). They argue that trust, first and foremost, is always about the future. Having trust or not having trust can impact our future possibilities in certain domains of concern. Secondly, because trust is about a concern for the future, it is directly tied to the promises we and others make. In other words, the ability to trust others depends upon how effectively they fulfill their promises. Trust, therefore, is not just a *feeling* as many assume; it is an *assessment* or judgment we make in the following three domains:

- **Competence**: Competence is a person's ability to perform the actions necessary to fulfill his or her promise. If I assess that, despite his good intention, John is not competent to fulfill his promise, then, in that domain of action, I do not trust John.
- **Reliability**: Reliability is a person's ability to consistently fulfill the promises she makes on time. For example, if Jane is not clear on what is being requested, does she ask questions to seek clarification? Does she renegotiate in a timely manner if she cannot fulfill her promise on time, or cancel and make a new promise? If she does none of these, then I assess Jane to be unreliable and, therefore, I do not trust her in that domain. I may trust her competence, but not her reliability.
- **Sincerity**: Sincerity is a person's intention to do what they say they will do. A person is sincere when their private conversation about their promise is consistent with their public conversation. Conversely, we say a person is *insincere* when we have the assessment that

he or she is hiding something from us. We make this assessment in the moment that someone makes a promise to us. If I assess that a person is not sincere, then my ability to trust him or her is negatively impacted.

PROMISES, TRUST AND PUBLIC IDENTITY

By fulfilling our promises, or by renegotiating them in a timely manner, trust is built between people. Trust is also an important factor in building your public identity. Depending upon your competence, reliability and sincerity in fulfilling your promises over time, positive and negative assessments will follow. Other's assessments of your trustworthiness either enhance, diminish, or sustain your public identity. What follows are some of the judgments people make and why.

- Trustworthy: People will be judged as trustworthy if they fulfill their promises on time. They also revoke and renegotiate their promises as soon as they know they will not be able to fulfill what they promised. These people are competent, reliable and sincere and take full responsibility for the consequences of their promises. Surround yourself with these people.
- Sincere but Incompetent: These people are sincere and really want to fulfill their promises but are not competent to do so. When confronted with their non-performance, they make excuses and claim that they are doing their best. If you wish to engage with these people in the future, they must be offered or must seek training and coaching.
- Competent but Unreliable: These people are competent to fulfill their promises, but they are unreliable. When they find out that they are unable to fulfill their promises on time, they say nothing. They take no responsibility for the consequences of their promises. These people should be warned that this behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated again. Or, if they possess a skill that is vital to the success of you or your company, you may decide to live with their unreliability and not count on them to deliver their promises on time.
- Competent but Insincere: These people make promises they have no intention of keeping. If you have evidence that this is the case, or if you can ground this assessment based on evidence of other such occurrences of this behavior in the past, then don't engage with these people because they cannot be trusted.

CHARACTERIZATIONS

Characterization is something that happens in conversations. It is not a thing or the description of a thing - it is a conversation. It is a special kind of conversation because it concerns our identities. If we are asked to identify someone, we will most likely give characterizations, such as intelligent, funny, arrogant and so forth. With those characterizations, we say something about who someone is.

We may also characterize ourselves. We have conversations with ourselves and with other people, in which we identify our strengths and weaknesses. We do this when we are asked to tell others about ourselves in social situations. We do it when we assess blame or praise others. When making characterizations, we often forget that characterization is a conversation. When we identify someone as intelligent or lazy, we do so as if we were describing a permanent feature of their personality. Yet, these features only exist in language. We are not describing an inanimate object such as an automobile or a smartphone. Fernando Flores refers to this phenomenon as the *impoverishment of our possibilities through characterization*.

When we fail to recognize that characterization is a conversation - something that only happens in language, it's as if we are describing a permanent feature of our personalities. If, for example, I describe myself as "reliable", it sounds as if I possess a feature called "reliability" meaning that I will always do what I promise to do. But that can't be true because no one can know how I or anyone else will always act. No one can predict the future with certainty.

When we use characterizations in this way, we shut off opportunities with other people, "He is too dumb, arrogant, dishonest." Or with ourselves - "I am too lazy, stupid, undisciplined." We offer excuses that make it seem as if we could never act competently - "I just can't keep my checkbook balanced" or "I'm bad with numbers." We destroy our capacity to act with such characterizations, or to become competent in areas in which we now find ourselves incompetent. If we characterize ourselves as "bad with numbers," we are forever bad with numbers; we can do nothing about it. Our characterizations fix our competencies and incompetencies forever, and they fix the competencies and incompetencies of others around us forever. This happens because we forget that characterization is a conversation.

By recognizing that characterizations happen in conversations, we are free to change the conversation - to change the negative assessments we have about ourselves and others. We

do so by designing conversations that are in alignment with our intent. Those design conversations shape the actions necessary to change the assessments that impact, positively or negatively, our public identities.

MOODS AND TRUST

Moods are beliefs that manifest as automatic assessments about the future. We don't choose to be in certain moods, we find ourselves in them. They precede us. When it comes to trust, we must become rigorous observers of the moods that impact our ability to trust others because such moods open or close possibilities for action. What follows are five such moods.

- Naiveté: When someone is naïve, they make ungrounded assessments that people are "always" sincere or competent to fulfill their promises. In other words, they trust without discrimination. This mood closes possibilities for effective action.
- Distrust: Someone in a pervasive mood of distrust always assumes that people are never sincere or competent to fulfill their promises. This mood is an ungrounded generalization usually based on a former experience which can be misleading. For example, I was married once before, and now I distrust all men/women. This mood closes possibilities for action.
- Skepticism: In a mood of skepticism, I am assessing cognition, not competence or sincerity. I may trust the person, but not his or her hypothesis.
- Simple Trust: Simple trust is a willingness to trust someone without investigating. This is an ungrounded assessment that the other person is sincere. In this instance, I can afford not to be prudent and can live with the consequences even if they betray me. For example, I may decide to make a loan to a friend I care about even though I have a strong feeling that he won't be able repay me. Since I know I can afford to make the loan without getting paid back, I go ahead and make the loan. Here, only the degree of risk is grounded. This mood opens possibilities for action.
- Prudence: Prudence is a grounded assessment someone makes after conducting an investigation. For example, this is what a bank does before making a loan. This takes time and effort but opens possibilities for action. An investment banker friend of mine lived by the credo that there is uncertainty in almost every venture. The essence of his job is to overcome that fear and take calculated risks. By calculated risks he means that there are plausible, probable and actual outcomes. To assess the risk he must do the math for all possibilities. For him, luck is superstition; it is lazy math.

Beliefs shape our reality. We shape that reality by making conscious choices that are not driven by unconscious scripts, patterns and beliefs. With that awareness, we must take responsibility for the condition of the world in which we find ourselves. After all, it is our beliefs that created this situation. Taking responsibility means that it's time to create a different world - one that is based on trust, love and care for ourselves and every other living creature.

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