



# Trust Comes Before Risk-Taking

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In the general drive to be more innovative, we often talk about the need for greater risk-taking. However, there are reasons people don't take risks – some are related to an individual's personal style and some are related to the culture around them, specifically the level of trust that allows a person to feel safe enough to try new ideas that might fail.

Innovation, by definition means trying something new, something where the outcome is uncertain, where failure is a possibility if not an out-and-out probability since research indicates that as many as ninety-six percent of all innovation projects fail.

If we're asking people to share ideas and take risks of this magnitude, they need a high level of trust that they will not be ridiculed for suggesting ideas that don't make sense initially and that

they won't be punished for failures (sometimes called, in more enlightened organizations, "nice tries that didn't work.") Trust is the relationship glue that holds innovation efforts together. Without trust, no one volunteers ideas or agrees to work on projects that aren't safe bets.

In a recent InnovationNetwork survey, 90% of the responders stated that trust is very or extremely important to innovation. However, even when organizations make a commitment to improve the level of trust, it seems to be a somewhat daunting challenge. One organization we worked with a few years ago did a climate assessment to create a benchmark for their work. Committees formed to improve each element of the assessment and, when the assessment was repeated a year or so later, each element had improved except for "trust."

We wondered at the time why this element resisted improvement and have talked frequently about what would help people make progress in this area. When we studied the literature, we found that most writers (such as Fernando Flores and others) recognized that trust is an outcome that results from a complex of interpersonal elements. The most common elements discussed were *competence* and *reliability*. While we agreed that these elements are critical for trust in the workplace, we weren't satisfied that they fully explained the rich texture of trust. To explore the deeper layers of trust, we launched a series of conversations and surveys within the InnovationNetwork.

This work led us to seven elements of trust and to a set of questions related to the elements (ranked here in order of importance per the survey).

**Openness** - Do people feel safe communicating opinions, ideas and suggestions openly? And, do they feel those around them are being open in their opinions and ideas, too?

**Honesty & Integrity** - Are honesty and integrity valued and expected?

**Reliability** - Can you count on promises and commitments being kept?

**Competence** - Does the right level of competence exist for the jobs required?

**Fairness** - Is everyone treated equitably regardless of position or rank, and is credit given where due?

**Concern for Well-being** - Is there a sense of concern and compassion for the well-being of all?

**Safety** - Is it safe to take risks and are mistakes considered learning activities?

Since we were presenting a session at the Innovation Convergence on this subject, subject, we used the opportunity to stimulate a conversation centered on the importance of having concern for the well-being of people as a way to build trust. The opinions were polarized -- one group felt that it wasn't the responsibility of business to "care for" people, that the purpose of business was to make money. Another group maintained that only when people feel that their managers and organizations have concern for their well-being, as well as the organization's, are they willing to take the risks demanded by innovation.

Philosophically, there was no right answer to this question but it did appear that in this era of downsizing, reorganizations and corporate scandals, people do not seem to expect more than a modest level of caring and concern from their organizations. However, when we asked people to share stories related to a time when they felt that trust and innovation were high, many told stories that indicated a high level of caring and concern by their organization. Interestingly enough, a clip from "Apollo 13" was shown during this same meeting as a way of identifying the qualities of an innovator. The scene is a life-or-death moment when the fate of the astronauts depended upon the ability of the ground engineers to, literally, fit a round peg into a square hole. It was clear that everyone shared the commitment to the well-being of the astronauts, that nothing was more

important than getting them safely back to earth. This shared value and commitment transcended all smaller issues and gave them the power to work together without regard to rank, seniority, function or experience in an environment of complete trust.

The seven elements of trust provide a structure for looking at the underlying culture within an organization—what we call the “playing field for innovation.” The processes of innovation are changing rapidly with new software support tools multiplying rapidly. The two questions which seem to be asked most frequently are: “How do we get senior management support for innovation?” and “Which software system should we buy?” We believe that these are great questions but we believe they shouldn’t be the first ones we ask. Important questions that must be answered first include: “Why are we ‘doing’ innovation? How will it benefit us and our customers?” and “How can we create a culture that supports

innovation?” More specifically, “How can we build a level of trust that invites and sustains innovation?”

Stimulating conversations around the elements of trust and having people tell stories about times when they have felt trusted or trusted others is an important step in building a culture of innovation. Unfortunately (or, perhaps, fortunately) there still isn’t a software package that will build trust between people. Trust is built by having meaningful conversation around trust and by working together on meaningful projects where people can display their openness, competence, honesty and integrity, reliability, safety, fairness and concern for the well-being of each other and their mutual mission.

One outcome of this work has been the development of a trust survey built around the seven elements. If you would like to discuss using this survey in your organization, please contact Joyce Wycoff at 760-920-2853.

### **Further Information:**

Results of the two studies conducted on trust can be seen at the following addresses:

1st Beta Survey: 242 responses

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=61617577549>

2nd Survey Ranking Trust Elements: 42 responses

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=62729427959>

Here are some recommended readings on trust:

**“Collaboration, trust and innovative change”**

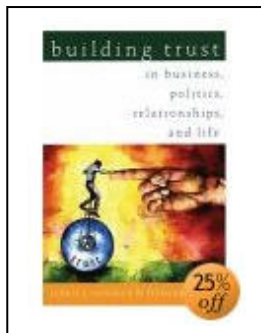
by Ruth Ann Hattori and Todd Lapidus

This article, published in the UK’s *Journal of Change Management* examines the relationship between trust and innovation. The article cites two case studies of American companies who make a concentrated effort to build trust within their organizations and in supplier or customer relationships specifically in an effort to enhance innovation. <http://www.thinksmart.com/library/Collaboration-Trust.pdf>

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For more information about the Journal of Change Management:

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/14697017.asp>



**Building Trust: In Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life**

by Robert C. Solomon and Fernando Flores

**Review:** The authors distinguish three kinds of trust: *naive trust*, that unreflective innocent trust of a small child with no concept of betrayal; *blind trust*, that self-deceptive willful denial of any evidence of betrayals; and *authentic trust*, reflective and honest, the mature trusting relationship that the book is concerned with. The first two are what most people think of as trust, and why they then have problems in how to sustain, and regain, trust. Additionally, because people use the metaphor of trust as a *fragile thing*, it can consequently be too easily *broken*, and difficult or impossible to *mend*. But authentic trust is an ongoing *process*, a relationship that incorporates the concept of distrust; such authentic trust can be negotiated, built, and rebuilt.

Full review at: <http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~susan/bib/nf/f/frndflr.htm>