

Why Can't We Talk About Trust?

By Stephen M. Dent

Recently I met with two separate clients that have formed a partnership. Both of these businesses are successful, and the people who are responsible for the relationship of the alliance are bright, articulate, and dedicated to making the alliance work—for both parties.

As I worked with their internal teams in their home offices, the talk turned to trust. My sense was not that there was a lack of trust between them; it was more that they wanted trust but were not exactly sure how to go about discussing it.

I asked both internal teams the same question, “Have you talked to your partner about trust?”

Both had the same answer—“No.”

They both acknowledged that they had spoken about wanting trust and that recent incidents challenged trust between them; but neither could actually say they “talked about trust.”

I find this is not an uncommon situation with my clients. They want trust, they need trust, and yet they are reticent to talk about trust.

In his latest book, *True North*, Bill George, retired Chairman of Medtronic Inc., talks about leadership and some of the qualities it takes to be a great leader. When asked about the key characteristics of authentic leaders, Mr. George talked about having empathy for customers and employees, courage to make tough decisions, and having long-term, enduring relationships. He closed his interview with this statement: “Finally, you must build an organization where people trust each other and trust their leaders to do the right thing under pressure.”

But how does one go about building trust when it is difficult to even talk about it? When I ask people why they are afraid to bring up the topic of trust, I am told that it is because “if we bring up trust, our partner may think we do not trust them.” In fact, most people bring up the topic of trust only when trust is broken and usually by then, it's too late.

Trust is about perceptions. People perceive trust slightly differently, based on their values, beliefs, past experiences, assumptions, and their interpretation of the facts. People view trust through their own experiences and personal mental maps about others, organizations, businesses, and even governments and politicians. Even when they have the “facts” right in front of them, how they interpret those facts can make a difference between trusting and not trusting someone.

When we at Partnership Continuum consult with people about trust, we make some suggestions around some areas of behavior that contribute to building trust or destroying it. We refer to these as the “10 C’s of Trust” and break them down into two components: task and relationship.

Let’s talk about task first.

Have you ever wondered if someone is competent to do the job he or she claims to be able to do? Have you ever wondered if someone is credible? Do you think your partners are committed to keeping their agreements?

People must trust that their partners and others have the skills to do what they promise to do. The 5 C’s of Trust on task include:

- Commitment to agreements
- Credibility
- Competency
- Contribution
- Collaboration

When people don’t keep agreements, can’t accomplish what you expected or told you they could, don’t contribute at the level you expect, are not credible, or do not collaborate with you, these behaviors diminish trust.

Then there are the relational issues around trust. These have more to do with personal interactions and how people relate to others when working with them to build trust.

When people are in relationships with others, they set expectations. When they break those relational expectations, it diminishes trust.

For example, the 5 C’s of Trust focusing on relationship include:

- Commitment to the relationship
- Candidness
- Consistency in behavior
- Compassion
- Communication

When people set expectations when working on task or in relationships and fail to communicate those expectations, they risk having trust destroyed. They may not even realize that by doing something as innocent as asking a question, a working relationship can be damaged.

That is why it is important to quickly establish expectations around trust to make sure that you do not do something that may seem innocent to you but is viewed as untrustworthy behavior by your partners.

So when is the right time to bring up trust?

Right at the start of the relationship and then continue to monitor trust on an ongoing manner using a trust index.

By asking the simple question, “What does trust mean to you?” you open the door to establishing trust. You have the opportunity to explore with others what trust means to them and then you as a group can come to a common definition on trust. If everyone agrees to the group’s definition of trust, you have accomplished two important milestones on the road to building and sustaining a trusting relationship:

1. You have built a common framework or platform on which you have defined trust and created a language to talk about it between yourselves.
2. You have built ownership of those definitions of trust by the people involved; with the ownership comes a commitment to keep the trust.

Trust is the foundation of all business relationships. However, in today’s information- and knowledge-based economy, trust is even more critical, as it is the lubricant that keeps communication open and flowing. Without the flow of communication, all creativity and innovation shuts down. No business can afford to stop the flow of communication.

If you don’t think trust stops the flow of communication let me ask you: When was the last time you shared information with someone you didn’t trust?