

Robert C. Solomon and Fernando Flores

### Building Trust

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In our experience, business people feel uncomfortable talking about trust, except, perhaps, in the most abstract terms of approbation. When the topic of trust comes up, they heartily nod their approval, but then they nervously turn to other topics. Executives are talking a great deal about trust these days, perhaps because they rightly suspect that trust in many corporations seems to be at an all-time low. One of our associates, who also consults for major corporations, recently gave a lecture on the importance of trusting your employees to several hundred executives of one of America's largest corporations. There was an appreciative but stunned silence, and then one of them—asking for all of them—queried, “but how do we control them?” It is a telling question that indicates that they did not understand the main point of the lecture, that trust is the very opposite of control. Or, perhaps, they understood well enough, but suffered a lack of nerve when it came time to think through its implications. Like the first-time skydiver who had eagerly read all of the promotional literature about the thrills of the sport and had listened carefully to instructions, he asked, incredulously, “but now you want us to jump out of the plane!?” We all know the importance of trust, the advantages of trust, and we all know how terrible life can be without it. But when it comes time to put that knowledge into practice, we are all like the novice skydiver. Creating trust is taking a risk. Trust entails lack of control, in that some power is transferred or given up to the person who is trusted. It is leaping from the dark, claustrophobic fuselage of our ordinary cynicism into what seems like the unsupported free-fall of dependency. And yet, unlike skydiving, nothing is more necessary. Today, there is a danger that trust is being over-sold. There is such a thing as too much trust, and then there is “blind trust,” trust without warrant, foolish trust. Trust alone will not, as some of our pundits promise, solve the problems that our society now faces. Thus we think there is good reason to listen to doubters like Daryl Koehn, who rightly asks, “should we trust trust?”<sup>1</sup>

But the urgency remains, we believe, on the side of encouraging and understanding trust. There is a lot of encouraging going on today. What is lacking, we want to suggest, is understanding. The problem is not just lack of an adequate analysis. The problem is an aggressive misunderstanding of trust that pervades most of our discussions. The problem, if we can summarize it in a metaphor or two, is that trust is treated as if it were a “medium” in which human transactions take place, alternatively, as “ground,” as “atmosphere” or, even more vaguely, as “climate.” Benjamin Barber, for instance, who is one of the early writers on trust and often appealed to by the current crop of commentators, says that trust is “the basic stuff or ingredient of social interaction.” But as “stuff” or “ingredient,” as a “resource” (Fukuyama<sup>2</sup>), as “medium,” “ground,” “atmosphere” or “climate,” trust all too easily tends to seem inert, simply “there” or “not there,” rather than a dynamic aspect of human interaction and human relationships. This is our thesis: Trust is a dynamic aspect of human relationships. It is an ongoing process that must be initiated, maintained, sometimes restored and continuously authenticated. Trust isn't a social substance or a mysterious entity; trust is a social practice, defined by choices. It is always relational:

A trusts B (to do C, D, E). We can say that A is “trusting,” but by that we mean that he or she has a

disposition to readily trust people. Indeed, the very word “trust” is misleading, insofar as it seems to point to an entity, a thing, some social “stuff.” Although we will continue to use the word, it might better be thought of as “trusting,” an activity, a decision, a transitive verb, not a noun. Accordingly, the discussion of trust, in other words, is shot through with what French existentialist

Jean-Paul Sartre

called “bad faith,” the distancing of our own actions and choices and the refusal to take responsibility for them. The not very subtle message of too much of the talk about trust today is, “The problem isn’t me/us, it’s them,” as if WE are perfectly willing to trust others—if they are trustworthy, that is, but, unfortunately, they are not or have not proven themselves so. Thus say the Bosnians and the Serbs, the Israelis and the Palestinians, many parents and their teenage kids, and all too many managers and their employees. The misunderstanding of trust, accordingly, takes the form of a dangerous rationalization. Trust(ing) presupposes trustworthiness. Either one is trustworthy or one is not. So trusting takes the form of a kind of knowledge, the recognition (which may, of course, be fallible) that someone is trustworthy. So, if one trusts, so the rationalization goes, then nothing need be said, and it is much better that nothing be said. That is the core of our problem. Trust is rendered inarticulate, unpresentable. According to this view, to even raise the question, “Do you trust me?” or “Can I trust you?” is to already instigate, not only indicate, distrust. (Blaze Starr’s mother warns her, “never trust a man who says, ‘Trust me.’”<sup>3</sup>)

If one does not trust, then nothing much is accomplished by saying

so, except, perhaps, as an insult, a way of escalating an already existing conflict or, perhaps, as a confirming test (“If you tell me that I should trust you, then you are doubly a liar.”) When a politician or a business leader says, “trust me,” he takes a considerable risk. Those who support him may well wonder why he needs to say that, and become suspicious. For those who are already suspicious of him, such an intrusive imperative confirms their suspicions.<sup>4</sup>

On the

other hand, when someone says “I trust you,” there is always the possibility of some sense of manipulation, even the unwanted imposition of a psychological burden, one of whose consequences may be guilt. The reason for talking about trust is not just to “understand” the concept philosophically but to put the issue of trust “on the table” in order to be able to talk it through in concrete, practical situations. By talking through trust, trust can be created, distrust mitigated. Not talking about trust, on the other hand, can result in continuing distrust, and lack of trust is calamitous to one’s flourishing as a business and as individuals. Economic approaches to trust, while well-intended and pointing us in the right direction, are dangerously incomplete and misleading. Trust in business is not merely a tool for efficiency, although it does have important implications for dealing with complexity and therefore efficiency.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, it

would hardly be honest to guarantee (as many authors do these days) that more trust will make business more efficient and improve the bottom line. Usually, of course, trust has this effect, but there is no necessary connection between trust and efficiency, and this is neither the aim nor the intention of trust. Indeed, trust as a mere efficiency-booster may be a paradigm of inauthentic or phony trust, trust that is merely a manipulative tool, a facade of trust that, over the long run, increases distrust, and

for good reason. Employees can usually tell when the “empowerment” they receive like a gift is actually a noose with which to hang themselves, a set-up for blame for situations which they

cannot really control. Managers know what it is like when they are awarded more responsibility (“I trust you to take care of that”) without the requisite authority. Like many virtues, trust is most virtuous when it is pursued for its own sake, even if there is benefit or advantage in view. (Generosity and courage both have their pay-offs, but to act generously or courageously merely in order to obtain the pay-offs is of dubious virtue.) To think of trust as a business tool, as a mere means, as a lubricant to make an operation more efficient, is to not understand trust at all. Trust is, first of all, a central concept of ethics. And because of that, it turns out to be a valuable tool in business as well.

#### TRUST AS AN EMOTIONAL SKILL: SIMPLE TRUST, BLIND TRUST, AUTHENTIC TRUST

Trust is an emotional phenomenon. This is not to say that its significance is first of all “felt,” or that it is merely transient. Trust, like love and indignation, finds its significance in the bonds it creates (or, better, in the bonds we create through such emotions), and it is the very essence of trust, like love (but unlike indignation), that it is enduring. Nevertheless (as with love) it may be cut short, betrayed, interrupted, and, on occasion, it may be all too fleeting, usually because it has been foolish. But trust, like all emotions, is dynamic. It defines our relationships and our relationship—our “being tuned”—to the world. The importance of understanding emotion as a dynamic is essential to our view of emotion in general and trust in particular.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast is the usual

passivity picture of emotions as physiological interruptions of our lives that happen to us. Trust, in particular, is not something that simply happens, or is found or intuited. It is rather created through interaction and in the making of relationships. This is not to deny that there is an innate predisposition to trust, as evidenced so obviously in most babies, and it is compatible with the fact that trust may (tentatively) be established very quickly, within the first few minutes, of a relationship. But what this means is that we will have to be very careful how we talk about trust, careful that we do not collapse and confuse several very different phenomena. Trust comes in various forms and degrees of sophistication and articulation. We can and ought to distinguish, just to begin with: simple trust, naive trust, trust as yet unchallenged, unquestioned (the faith of a well brought up child), blind trust, which is not actually naive but stubborn, obstinate, possibly even self-deluding, basic trust, which consists in the sense of physical and emotional security which most of us happily take for granted, which is most blatantly violated in war and in acts of random violence, and authentic trust, which is trust reflected upon, its risks and vulnerabilities understood, with distrust held in balance. (Distrust admits of similar distinctions and levels of sophistication.) Authentic trust, as opposed to simple trust, does not exclude or deny distrust but rather accepts it, even embraces it, but transcends it, absorbs it, overcomes it. With simple trust, one can always be surprised. The reasons for distrust are not even considered, much less taken seriously. Authentic trust can be betrayed, of course, but it is a betrayal that was foreseen as a possibility. There is no denial or self-deception, as in blind trust. There is no naivete, as in simple trust. Authentic trust need not be opposed to basic trust, but when basic trust is violated authentic trust sees clearly what trust remains. Once trust is spelled out, all sorts of new possibilities arise. It can be examined. It can be specified. It can be turned into explicit agreements and contracts. The mistake is to think that such agreements and contracts precede or establish trust. There can, of course, be agreements and contracts in the absence of trust, typically with elaborate enforcement mechanisms. But it is just as much of a mistake to conflate all trust with articulated trust as it is to conflate all trust with simple or basic (inarticulate) trust. The

emotional life of trusting relationships is much more intricate and humanly complex than either contracts and cognitive interactive strategies or “non-cognitive security about motives” would alone allow. Trust is created (and damaged) through dialogue, in conversation, by way of promises, commitments, offers, demands, expectations, explicit and tacit understandings. It is through such dialogue and conversation, including the rather one-way conversation of advertising, that producers make the nature and quality of their products known, that professionals and companies make their services and the abilities known, that expectations get initiated and intensified. This is not to say that trust is entirely linguistic, the product of promises and expectations verbally created. There is a good deal of trust embodied in our mere physical presence to one another, in our gestures, looks, smiles, handshakes and touches. Animals (especially “social” animals) have enormously complex trust relationships, often highly competitive at the same time, as any casual observation of two or more dogs (or wolves) together will confirm. Nor is the emphasis on dialogue and conversation suggested to imply—as so many social analyses too quickly conclude—that trust is an “agreement” or a “contract” (formal or informal). Contracts, too, are too static (although the negotiation of them, and negotiation out of them, may be dynamic indeed). Nor should trust be understood primarily in terms of limited or momentary interactions or transaction—or any number of them. Analyses of trust too often take as their paradigm either the most intimate of relationships—mother and child, husband and wife or lovers—or the most casual of them—notably, the one-shot business deal (for example, buying gas on the Interstate), or, the repeated one-shot business deal (buying gas at the same station on the way back down the Interstate). An interaction—even repeated interaction—is not yet a relationship, although, obviously, such repeated exchanges—and, occasionally, even a single one, can easily turn into one. A relationship is by its very nature on-going and dynamic, in which one of the central concerns of the relationship is the relationship itself, its status and identity and, consequently, the status and identity of each and all of its members. Trust is an essential and “existential” dimension of that dynamic relationship. With this in mind, we can understand why lying betrays trust and is so damaging. Even just one lie—or a serious exaggeration or attempt to “spin” the truth—can undermine the accumulated trust and good will with which most of us approach new relationships and come to take for granted in established ones. Betrayal from a friend or neighbor may, with great difficulty, be overcome and eventually forgiven (though rarely forgotten), if only because these people are not easily eliminated from our lives. But betrayals in business, where associations are voluntary and there are always other possibilities, are typically fatal. Why work with or work a deal with someone you can no longer trust when there are so many others available?