# More Trust, Less Bullshit

Developing a culture of “trust” is crucial to the long-term success of almost any institution, from romantic relations to families to sports teams to military organizations to entire nations. This is true of business, as well. If employees cannot trust their coworkers or managers to “do their part” for the team, or to provide honest feedback when asked, it is almost impossible to accomplish any large-scale task. This is a problem with both moral and nonmoral dimensions, since a lack of trust harms not only the individuals who work there, but often the business profits as well. With this in mind, we’ll be taking a look at what exactly *trust* is, and how it might be effectively cultivated.

## What Exactly is trust, Anyway?

**Trust as an intrinsically moral process.** Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores (1998) argue that **trust**is, among other things, a “dynamic aspect of human relationships. It is an ongoing process that that must be initiated, maintained, sometimes restored, and continuously articulated. Trust isn’t a social substance or a mysterious entity; trust is a social practice, defined by choices.” In defining trust in this way, they want to emphasize that trusting somebody is something you *do,* rather than something you *know.* So, for example, it is tempting to think that “trusting” a given person involves knowing certain things about them: for example, that they are the sort of person that can be depended on to keep their promises. One problem with this view is that, absent a trusting relationship, it is very difficult to see *how you could possibly know such things.* This isn’t to say that you should simply trust people blindly—it’s just that trusting will always involve a risk that isn’t fully supported by your knowledge.

Solomon and Flores also reject the idea that trusting people is simply a manner of pursuing (self-interested) efficiency. So, for example, they would reject the idea that thoughts like “Well, I have to trust this person, because it’s the only way the job will get done” represent genuine trust. By contrast, they argue that trust is a fundamentally *moral* notion—people morally deserve (or morally don’t deserve) our trust. While trust often has the *effect* of allowing us to increase business efficiency, this isn’t the essential “nature” of trust.

**OK, so what exactly does trusting someone mean?** Carolyn McCleod (2015) argues that **trusting** requires that we are:

1. “vulnerable to others (vulnerable to betrayal in particular);
2. think well of others, at least in certain domains; and
3. be optimistic that they are, or at least will be, competent in certain respects.”

So, trusting someone involves taking a *risk—*if the person chooses to betray us (or if they simply aren’t competent to do the task we’ve trusted them to), this will genuinely harm us. Trusting also involves a certain sort of belief—that the trustee is a “good” person, in certain non-trivial respects (she won’t betray us, she’s good at her job, etc.). McCleod takes these conditions to be uncontroversial. She also notes a fourth condition which IS controversial:

1. we are “optimistic that the trustee will have a certain kind of motive for acting.”

To see why this last condition is controversial, an example may help. Imagine that you work for a successful company with trustworthy leadership. Employees look out for one another, and violations of company policy are usually discovered and punished appropriately. Now imagine that you have a coworker Jones who you have good reason to believe (based on things you know about his private life) is a bit of lazy jerk—when it is possible, he regularly takes advantage of others to benefit himself. Can you trust Jones at work? According to some theorists, the answer might be “yes,” so long as your business culture ensure that it is *in Jones’ self-interest* to not betray you (if he did betray you, he’d be punished). According to other theorists, the answer is “no,” since we only trust people whose motives are *good* (“I trust Jane, because she genuinely cares about my well-being.”)

Figure 1 In the Lord of the Rings, can Frodo and Sam (right) trust the villainous Smeagol (left)? Smeagol’s cooperation is ensured solely by self-interest (find the ring, avoid punishment), and NOT by genuine concern for the heroes.

## How to Build a Culture of Trust

A number of authors have argued that there is growing “culture of distrust” in ordinary people’s attitudes toward both government and business, especially in the areas of finance and banking. Tamar Frankel (2005) has argued that this growing culture of distrust may actually lead to greater long-term harms than will the acts of fraud or malfeasance that have inspired it. However, she also argues that there are definite steps involving moral norms, laws, and market mechanisms, we can take to rebuild a culture of trust.

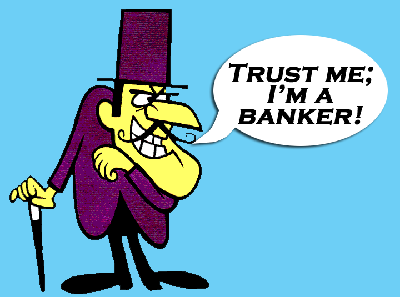
**Why trust matters.** Frankel begins by defining *culture* as “social habits,” or as the sorts of things we do “without second thought.”. She defines *trust* as the “reasonable belief that trusted persons will (1) tell the truth and (2) keep their promises.” So, where a culture of trust assumes that people can be trusted (until evidence shows otherwise), a culture of distrusts assumes that people CANNOT be trusted, except in special cases. Among other things, those living in a culture of distrust will have a much harder time getting things done, and building effective institutions. (The political scientist Francis Fukuyama has argued that a society’s level of trust is one of the most important predictors of how effective and fair the government is). On an individual level, people living in a culture of distrust may be reluctant to invest their money, to start new businesses, and even to pay taxes for common goods.

Figure Beliefs such as "bankers have become more untrustworthy in recent years" can cause significant harm to ordinary people, regardless of this belief’s underlying truth.

**Problem 1: Changing moral norms.** It is plausible some parts of our moral judgement are instinctive—for example, the vast majority of humans feel empathy for those in obvious pain, and feel angered by obvious “unfairness” (studies have increasingly shown that chimps respond similarly). Similarly, there is some sense in which an ability to “trust” may be part of our biological hardware. However, this capacity can be significantly strengthened or weakened by our education. So, for example, Frankel suggests that certain aspects of business and economics education (the emphasis on rational, self-interested behaviors) may contribute to the growing culture of distrust, since these models (implicitly) encourage those going into business to adopt these sorts of behaviors.

**Problem 2: Weakening protection of the law.** Starting in around the mid-1970s, governments have increasingly deregulated various markets (such as telecommunications, housing, securities, and so on), and have weakened various “consumer protection” regulations. The idea behind this “market regulation” was that, so long as companies provided their customers with all of the relevant information, customers should be free to do whatever they want with their money. However, because this information was often too complex for consumers to understand, these changes could (and did) lead to cases where customers lost large amounts of money.

**Problem 3: The increasing scope of the market.** Defenders of market regulation note that the market can (and does) punish untrustworthy companies who exploit their consumers—after all, when their bad behavior is discovered, no one will do business with them in the future. Frankel grants this point, but argues that allowing the market to enforce violations of trust is often much more costly and painful than would solutions based on morality and the law. This is not to say that she thinks the market has no role whatsoever—it is simply that the market (by itself) cannot be counted on to rebuild a culture of trust (which will itself have long-term negative consequences for the market).

While Frankel is writing mainly about the effect of trust on society as a whole, these same factors also apply to individual organizations and businesses. Business environments which have an “every employee for themselves” culture, that fail to enforce effective policies concerning employee’s treatment one another, or that default to a “hand’s off” philosophy of handling intra-employee conflict are likely to be low in trust. Conversely, high trust environments are those where everyone feels they are on the same “team,” where policies governing bad behavior are enforced, and where those who are victimized can expect to be supported by their colleagues and supervisors.

## Bullshit and the Importance of Caring About the Truth

*“One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory. I propose to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis. I shall not consider the rhetorical uses and misuses of bullshit. My aim is simply to give a rough account of what bullshit is and how it differs from what it is not, or (putting it somewhat differently) to articulate, more or less sketchily, the structure of its concept.” (Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit”)*

“On Bullshit” is a 1986 essay by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt. In 2009, it was made into a (very short) book, and Frankfurt appeared on the *Daily Show*, among other places. In the essay, Frankfurt tries to define **bullshit,** and argues that the tendency to “bullshit” is, in many cases, a much bigger problem for people and organizations than is out-and-out lying.

** Bullshit v. Lying.** A *liar* is someone who deliberately tries to get other people to believe something that he or she believes to be false. Lying requires that you consider what is really true, then figure out how to deceive your audience. By contrast, **bullshit** just requires that you try to present a certain image of yourself, regardless of whether this is based on truth. For the bullshitter, the truth or falsity of what they say is simply *irrelevant.* What they care about is the impression their audience—“Wow, that person sounds smart! They can really relate to me, and I can tell they’ve really thought about this issue.” The prototypical liar would be a salesperson who *knows* the product is bad, and consciously conceals this from the consumer. The prototypical bullshitter, by contrast, is a salesperson who has simply never seriously thought about whether the product they are selling is good or bad, since this is basically irrelevant to their job. The things they say to the customer don’t count as lies (since they don’t involve conscious deceit), but this certainly doesn’t mean they are true (since the bullshitter simply says whatever the customer wants to hear).

**Bullshit as an enemy of truth.** Frankfurt claims that bullshit is a “greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” Why? Both the habitual truth-teller and the liar have to pay attention to the way things really are when they speak. Habitual bullshitters, by contrast, simply say whatever strikes them. They pay no attention to the external world. In this sense, bullshit is a greater danger to communication than is lying. A workplace filled with bullshit is one where it’s very difficult to trust people to follow through on what they’ve said (since there’s no guarantee they actually meant what they said).

**Why is bullshit so widespread?** People are often asked to express opinions (in school, in the workplace, on social media, etc.) on complex scientific, business, political, or moral issues that they basically know nothing about. So they bullshit. People (falsely) believe there is no “right answer” about these important issues, and that “all opinions are equal.” So, they express their sincere beliefs about the issues without making any effort to consider how these beliefs relate to anything they believe, or how they relate to the evidence.

## Review Questions

1. What are some specific methods that a business might establish trust among its employees? What sorts of policies or behaviors do you think *interfere* with building trust? Defend your answer with information from the reading and/or from your own experience.
2. In what sorts of contexts do you think peoplemost likely to bullshit within the business world? Do you agree with Frankfurt’s argument that our tendency to “bullshit” is a major problem? Why or why not?
3. Do you think it is possible (or desirable) to build a “more trusting” society? What sorts of laws, policies, or institutions would this require?

## References and Bibliography

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