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It starts with trust
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Series Article

Advances in Project Management Series[1]

It starts with trust: People, perspectives and relationships as the building blocks for sustainable success

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Trust plays a crucial part in many facets of life including politics, business, sport, friendship, love, marriage and indeed, human relationships. Trust appears to be a critical precondition for success in most collective human endeavours involving more than one individual. Trust can typically appear as a social construct or a psychological belief and may often touch on ethical, personal or organisational values.

The Oxford Dictionary defines trust as 'firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something'. The word *trust* does not appear in the index of the main bodies of knowledge, and only receives a passing mention in the 5th edition of the PMI Guide to the Body of Knowledge as a key part of the interpersonal skills of effective project managers. Yet, many aspects of project practice including teamwork, power, delegation, influencing, reporting, stakeholder engagement and even leadership, intimately rely on the establishment and continued preservation of trust between individuals, team members, parties and organisations.

Assessing the crucial role of the concept, American educator, writer and public speaker Stephen R. Covey observed that 'trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships together.' (Covey, 1995, p. 203).

The five paradoxes of trust

The issue of trust evokes deeply held practical as well as philosophical contradictions and paradoxes. Revolutionary Russian Communist, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin opined that 'trust is good, but control is better'. Former US President, Ronald Reagan, who held a rather different perspective on world affairs, subsequently borrowed an often-used Russian proverb that translates as 'trust, but verify' and used it as the basis for international relations and negotiations with the Russians. International relations often uncover perplexing dependencies and relationships as partners and competitors share, reflect, respond and copy strategies. Nonetheless, the issue of trust and our interaction

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with the concept continues to offer confounding enigmas and quandaries which will be explored through the lens of the five (plus one) paradoxes of trust.

Paradox 1: Knowing and trusting: When does trust begin?

In order to trust someone, you need to know them: However,
You cannot know someone without trusting them first

The implication of this paradox is that trust requires a leap of faith that obliges one side to give the benefit of the doubt to a relatively unknown and 'unproven' person. While partial mitigation can take views and assessments from other interested parties, such as relying on the word of family members, friends, colleagues, or former partners, there is still a certain degree of embracing uncertainty through opening up a potential vulnerability to an unknown person or entity.

Paradox 2: Balancing potential success and vulnerability

Ambition for greater success exposes enhanced vulnerabilities

In order to build stronger relationships and achieve through greater partnerships and alliances, one must embrace new, and untested opportunities, thereby exposing oneself to potentially fresh vulnerabilities. The confidence of aiming at new targets and delivering innovative achievements is thus tempered by the additional vulnerabilities that emerge from the relationships and the dependencies that underpin and support the dynamics required to make the new achievements materialise.

Arnold Relman, Former editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, identified a similar tension within science and research. 'It seems paradoxical", he pondered, 'that scientific research, in many ways one of the most questioning and sceptical of human activities, should be dependent on personal trust. But the fact is that without trust, the research enterprise could not function."

Indeed, human achievement and social development are predicated on such reliance that allows alliance, co-operation, partnership and collaboration to underpin growth and sustain achievement. Ironically, in order to become bigger and stronger, we seem to need to allow ourselves to become more vulnerable: Indeed, the stronger we are, the more vulnerabilities and dependencies that we may be harbouring…

Paradox 3: Difficult to build; but easy to destroy

Trust takes a significant effort to build over long time; but,
It can be irredeemably destroyed in an instant

Effort is not proportional to achievement; instead depending on the stage of the relationship. Once trust is lost, it is practically impossible to re-establish. Yet, it can take very little effort to derail years of established relationship through a minor detail, a divergent viewpoint or a misunderstanding. Put differently, the evidence required to

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distrust something, even after it had been held in trust for a significant period, appears to be less demanding and less conclusive. A single incident, a minor failure, or a minute breach of confidence or trust can set back the most dedicated relationship or partnership and jeopardise future cooperation.

Moreover, such feelings carry over from one incident or domain to other facets of life, impacting the way partners and collaborators are perceived in other arenas:

'Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters.'

– Albert Einstein

Paradox 4: Me vs. us: Here comes everybody else

Without trusting others we could not function as a society; however,
Being overly reliant and trustful could also jeopardise our potential prosperity and relative safety

Teamwork and cooperation bring other individuals into the conversation. Success is thus devolved from the individual, to the wider group or community that they inhabit. The relationships they form, become essential to the continued survival and thriving of the wider community. Such reliance on others opens up new vulnerabilities.

When we build teams, organisations and supply chains we become dependent on all parts of the network or the chain. The failure of one agent in a tightly knit and well connected supply chain, can derail the entire network, as other participants who have lost particular capabilities and connections through the normal functioning of the network are suddenly forced to look for alternative means of completing their network and replacing the missing agent. Following a long partnership, partners may discover that certain skills that have been outsourced to others, may have been lost and connections with alternatives suppliers, or clients, may no longer exist. Our communities of trust and cooperation may thus bind us into different structures and arrangements that may make us more vulnerable over time as we increasingly learn to rely on others.

Paradox 5: More trust but less trusting

As the ambitions of modern society become more demanding, trust is increasingly more essential in realising the achievements and targets required to make those ambitions come true; yet,
Trust in institutions, leaders and even experts, is eroding at an unprecedented rate

While we need to build more trust in order to achieve increasingly ambitious common goals, we seem to be witnessing a societal retreat from awarding trust to representatives, experts and change agents. An increasingly sceptical public is challenging authority and are increasingly too resentful to put their trust in governments, NGOs, commercial organisations, news services, educational

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establishments, polling organisations and dedicated interest groups. People increasingly say they can no longer trust our public services, trains, doctors, scientists, banks, newspapers, politicians and even religious figures.

Such a perceived crisis of trust can have a significant impact on the institutions we have built through trust; potentially destabilising society, democracy, individual freedoms and the support structures and assets we have toiled to create on a shared basis. Unless we can regain the lost trust through greater scrutiny, visibility, accountability and control, we may yet emerge less protected, less involved and less able to respond, thrive and prosper in our wider groups and communities.

The ultimate trust paradox: To trust is to risk

Perhaps the biggest underlying paradox is that to trust, which implies a pining for safety and protection, is to risk, to open up, to become in some ways more exposed, vulnerable and dependent. The quality which enables us to achieve more in groups, also makes us more dependent on the wider group and the individuals with whom we interact. Under some extreme conditions, the kryptonite of trust can deprive us of the special powers that come from belonging, sharing and colluding with a wider community, leaving us more exposed and vulnerable to some potential scenarios of accident and exploitation.

Developing different viewpoints

One part of the answer is to develop a moral compass that can account for multiple parties and interests that make up every partnership and collaboration.

British Army Officer Robert Baden-Powell, who provided the inspiration to the world Scout Movement, asserted that 'trust should be the basis for all our moral training'.

Trust implies a deeper recognition of the parties we interact with. In projects and programmes it necessitates a deeper need to engage with stakeholders, define the expected benefits and work on outlining and supporting the relationships and recognising, advertising and promoting the expectations of all involved parties.

Following the exploration of the paradoxes, we can develop an alternative description of trust: If we accept the core implication of trust, as a willingness to become vulnerable through deeper interconnectivity, we also recognise that it bears new types of risks. However, the increased vulnerability and interconnectivity require a more intimate understanding of the potential cooperation and its intended impacts and implications.

To account for the behaviour of organisations, partnerships and other collaborative arrangements there is a need to identify mechanisms able to address multiple sets of concerns reflected in the reality of organisational, or inter-personal, life. The article by Douglas Long and Ngaire Hunt offers a fresh perspective to address competing concerns and multiplicity of perspectives. The article is derived from a recent book *The Ethical Kaleidoscope: Values, Ethics and Corporate Governance* by Douglas Long and Zivit Inbar published by Routledge. The article uses a construct of the ethical kaleidoscope

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developed in the book and applies it to the context of managing various types and arrangements of projects.

The work of Long and Inbar attempts to make sense of the multiple perspectives related to governance of all kinds of organisations. The research is informed by the challenges faced by company directors as they grapple with tensions and competing demands to lead organisations through the moral, ethical and operational challenges that are found in modern business environments.

The Kaleidoscope offers a multi-lens perspective that can account for multiple views, values and issues, informing the decision making and governance structures by incorporating legal as well as moral considerations. Combining the perspectives of intuition, risks, processes and culture allows for a richer exploration of issues and implications to encourage the adoption of a wider and better-informed perspective.

Return on trust

Russian playwright and master storyteller, Anton Chekhov, observed that 'you must trust or believe in people or life becomes impossible'. Relying on others is important for all undertakings, and particularly so in modern endeavours, invoking greater uncertainty, multiple participants, and conflicting objectives and intentions.

Scottish author and poet, George MacDonald noted that 'to be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved'. Trust maintains a key role in human and organisational development. Trust leads to openness, approachability, open collaboration, ultimately enabling the harnessing of new opportunities and the collaborative exploitation of bigger and bolder prospects.

Management professor and author, Gary Hamel observed that 'trust is not simply a matter of truthfulness, or even constancy. It is also a matter of amity and goodwill. We trust those who have our best interests at heart, and mistrust those who seem deaf to our concerns'.

The range of concerns requires careful balancing and prioritising amongst ethical, financial, legal and other concerns. Tools such as the Ethical Kaleidoscope proposed by Long and Inbar empower leaders and managers to construct knowledge from a multitude of lenses, cope with new information, confront discrepancies, update their insights and understanding, and develop a refined understanding of the multiplicity of concerns and issues.

High trust collaborations, where trust is sustained over time, tend to outperform risk averse organisations and structures. This is often reputed to translate into superior products and execution, improved relationships, engaged participation, informed and sustained collaboration, exceptional service, greater loyalty, high performing teams, low staff turnover, greater adaptability and organisational agility, and a higher rate of innovation. Focusing on trust can also transform relationships and re-focus agendas and priorities.

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Trust reprised

US Leadership expert, Warren Bennis, reflected that 'Trust is the lubrication that makes it possible for organizations to work.'

Developing an enhanced version of smart trust attuned to the modern challenges of society requires engagement with trust, collaboration, knowledge, insights and risk. Above all it requires recognition of the participants and their challenges and issues, but offers an informed perspective for addressing the increased volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity of modernity.

If to trust is to risk, it has to be the right risks, whilst acknowledging the new vulnerabilities. In an era of increasing uncertainty and upheaval, we would do well to re-establish our acquaintance with trust. Otherwise, we are destined to face the downside of risk and the effects of increased vulnerability tending towards catastrophic mistrust, relational breakdowns and a withdrawal from collaborative organisational participation. The breakdown of trust may also herald a collapse towards a greater inwards focus on the individual in isolation; a stage we have managed to eclipse as a society.

Many of the challenges we face require collaborating and working together at the societal and global levels extending beyond physical boundaries and imposed constraints and limitations. Our ambitions are unprecedented and demanding and can only be overcome through wider collaboration and mutual trust.

The final warning for lack of action comes from the farewell address to the Nation by another US president, in a different era:

"This world of ours... must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.
-- Dwight D Eisenhower, January 17, 1961

Ultimately, only intelligent and informed trust carries within it the necessary seeds for collaboration, hope and future progress.

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Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice,* an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management.* Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond.

Darren is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an academic advisor for the *PM World Journal.* He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.

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