

The Role of Trust in Projects¹

By Bob Prieto

Chairman & CEO

Strategic Program Management LLC

Trust is the currency of relationships and by extension the management of people. It is slowly earned; accrues interest over time, growing in value; but is quickly lost. In most relationships trust building occurs over extended periods but also may be quickly built in the face of crisis or threat. We see this accelerated trust building after disasters and in combat.

Trust is an essential characteristic of leadership, and it is questionable whether true leadership is even possible without it.

Trust is the “currency” to purchase deep emotional buy-in and commitment to achieve a project’s vision and strategic business outcomes.

But many projects have neither the luxury of time associated with the building of relational trust nor the existential threats which have been seen to accelerate trust building. This challenges us to create different mechanisms to quickly build trust in the management of projects. This paper looks at some of the challenges to quickly build trust in the delivery of a project as well as some of the unanswered challenges in building trust.

In this paper we will consider trust in several contexts:

- Trust in those who manage us (up)
- Trust of those we manage (down)
- Trust of our peers (sideways)
- Trust of stakeholders essential to project success (inside out)

What is trust?

Trust is a willingness to accept that the trusted party will act in a consistent and predictable way valuing both us, as an individual, and our trusting relationship. Trust is reliance on or confidence in the dependability of another. Trust is characterized by:

- **Shard values**, or noble purpose

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- **Honesty**, including being vulnerable
- **Transparency**, clearly showing and demonstrating our intentions
- **Committed**, delivering on your word
- **Empathy**, built on listening
- **Availability**, being there; *presence*; intimacy of relationship but in a non-creepy way
- **Humility** (the greater the ego the lower the trustworthiness)
- **Authenticity**, supporting intentions with consistent and valued behaviors
- **Appreciative**
- **Consistency**

Challenges of building trust in a project setting

Projects face several challenges to establish meaningful and enduring trust that differ from those faced in other contexts. Among these challenges are:

- **The nature of projects as temporary endeavors.** Successful projects are characterized by high levels of trust in many dimensions. The trust earned in these project settings may be transferrable to other projects or even back into the parent organization. It is not uncommon to see outstanding project leaders quickly attract those they have previously worked with to a new challenge.
- **The rapidity of project startup.** New players are constantly being introduced into the project team and each must be aligned and assimilated without diminishing broader organizational trust. The degree of this challenge is often underestimated on large, complex projects and generally on fast-track ones. The one-year team may be many times larger than the day 30 team with increases both in span of control as well as organizational layers.
- **Unforgiving emphasis on time.** Relationships develop in different ways at different rates. In a project faced with deadlines the luxury of time does not typically exist.
- **Multi-dimensional relationships are important.** Relationships up, down, and sideways are common. They usually occur within a well-defined social fabric, that while changing over time are none-the-less readily definable at any point. Projects face this same set of relationship dimensions but add one other. Relationships with stakeholders is best described as engaging an enigmatic, throbbing amoeba like mass engulfing the project. Engagement with those directly touching the project does not account for the range of trusted relationships required. Up, down, and sideways relationships are complemented by “inside out” ones.

- **Potential for multiple simultaneous crisis** that challenge trust in leadership. While they may not rise to the challenges created by disasters, they still challenge trust in leadership as preparedness is called into question. Equally, the degree to which transparency and commitment to core beliefs and values is maintained in the face of adversity will be watched closely by all. Will we continue to walk the talk?
- **Rapid, often abrupt, ending of the context in which a relationship exists**, as projects rapidly demobilize after a sprinted marathon or worse, are cancelled.

Strategies to build trust

There is much written on the importance of trust and how to go about building it. The strategies which follow are based on the author's experience and observations. Before outlining these strategies, it is worthwhile to highlight some popular ones with mixed reviews¹:

- Team building activities (outings, paintball, picnics) – only 1% of managers and employees rank this as the most effective way to build trust.
- Recognition – only 4% rank this as the most effective way to build trust. That is not to say it is not important but rather that it must be part of a broader trusting engagement.
- Transparency – only 10% rank this as the most important way to build trust. But like recognition it is an important element but does not satisfy what we look for in a trusting relationship alone. Its absence however does not bode well for the ability of a trusting relationship to develop.

Let's turn now to some strategies and tactics to build trust in large, complex, and fast-tracked projects:

- **Alignment and broad team motivation are best accomplished through shared values and motivations.** For many projects this is represented by alignment around a set of well-defined strategic business outcomes (SBOs). In some instances, these may rise to the level of a noble purpose such as responding to global climate change, redressing social injustices, or addressing global hunger and health. The failure to clearly articulate them (letting all know where you stand), getting agreement on them (which includes active listening to concerns and objections), and continuously communicating them, in light of the changes in team composition, span of control and organizational layers previously mentioned. Inadequately addressing SBOs was in the authors experience the number one reason large complex projects fail. Inadequate trust, in all dimensions, was absent.

- **Being honest with others and, importantly, with yourself.** This requires us to be vulnerable and admit what we don't know and value the insights others can bring to address our own shortcomings. Honesty is under increasing challenge today, exacerbated by fake news. In some sense we may be in a post-truth era. But while political "leaders" may each have their own sets of facts that they repeat to the point that others accept them as true, project teams have no such luxury. The facts are the facts on projects, and they are there for all to see, even if they choose not to. Cost is cost, and schedule is schedule. So, while we may honestly debate assumptions underpinning future trajectories of each, we are where we are. In one recent abandonment of a multi-billion-dollar project the facts were there for an extended period but dishonesty by key executives sought to obfuscate them. Four executive indictments later, we see dishonesty doesn't pay with multi-billion-dollar penalties assessed and one firm subject to a fire sale as a result.

In the survey referenced above honesty and the vulnerability that goes with it was the most effective way to build trust (28%). That honesty and vulnerability often begins with SBO alignment.

- **Transparency**, but in a broader context than it is typically interpreted (sharing of information). Here, when we speak of transparency, we refer not just to providing information broadly or the actions we plan to take, but more importantly, what our intentions are. Trust does not survive in opaqueness. The communication of intent, including why we choose not to act (acknowledging that we have listened and heard and why we are not acting), has been identified as a key element of building and sustaining trust (26%). This communication of intent in many ways is another dimension of honesty.
- **Committed to walking the talk** and taking actions both promised and unpromised consistent with the values and beliefs guiding the project and your own behavior. Words must be translated into action. You need to walk the talk. Trusted leaders exhibit a visible drive to all they do. This energizes others and fosters the building of trust.
- **Empathy, built on listening.** Communication, honest and two-way, is essential for trust to be built and sustained. Rarely do you hear a project suffering from too much communication. All too often the greatest barrier to communication is the perception that it exists.

But communication is not enough, even when we are actively listening. We need to go further if trust is to be built. We must demonstrate and actually possess true empathy. Empathy has been defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.” Said another way we either need to have walked in their shoes or more fully understand the context of their feelings and experiences. This is a challenge and one which we witness today around issues of social justice. True empathy requires effort and all too often we fall short.

Empathy

The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

Merriam-Webster

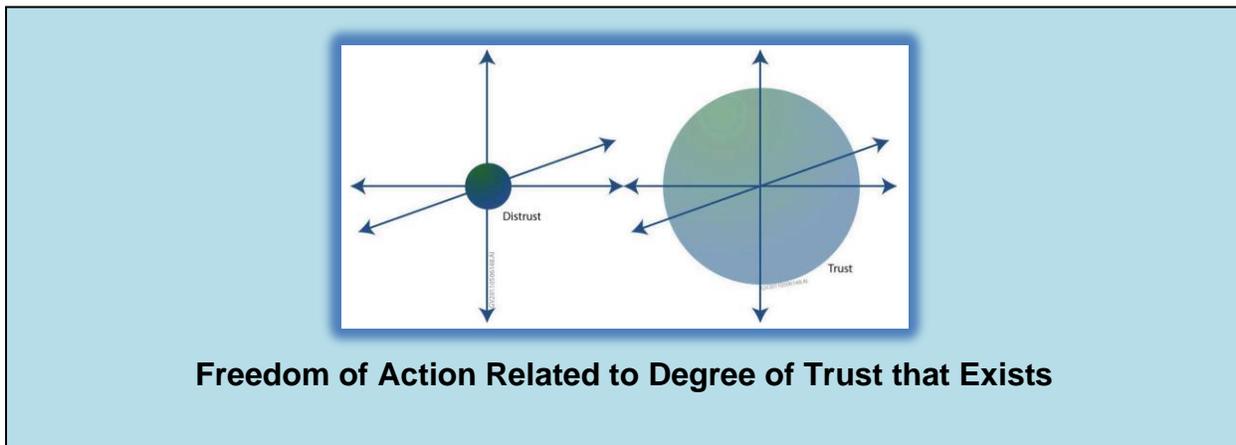
- **Presence is essential** in building trust. Earlier management theory defined management by walking about (MBWA). In today’s distributed execution and Zoom environments, presence is being redefined. As much as anything it speaks to availability and being approachable. It requires one to be attentive, engaged and in the moment. How many times have we witnessed others being present but in body only?
- **There is no “I” in team** nor is there one in a trusting relationship. We are aligned and share a deeper bond. The only “I” is when we make the unwavering commitment that a trusting relationship requires. There is no room for egos in a trusting relationship, they only get in the way. Trust involves a heavy dose of humility. Share success even more than failure.
- **Always lend a hand.** The offer to help, especially when the situation is bad, is a high-risk personal decision. But the reward, which is *trust earned*, is worth it. Your kindergarten teacher’s admonishment to “hold hands when crossing the street” is still valid today.

A helping hand extended, or received, imbues trust. Help make those around you be successful and you will enhance your own success, and in the process become a leader. Go out of your way to be helpful, that’s what the word “always” means. Go the extra mile. Help your peers be successful, they are not your competitors but your future colleagues. “Growing up together” builds bonds that cannot be bought. Support each other directly and indirectly.

- **Don't micromanage.** It conveys a lack of confidence or worse, a lack of trust. Trust people to succeed. Importantly, trust them even more in failure. The author routinely admonished young staff saying that if they didn't screw up at least once a day they weren't doing their job. The corollary was they had to tell!
- **Always remember that trust is hard work.**

Trust is essential in projects

Trust is an essential ingredient in well performing projects but regularly absent or extremely damaged in poor performing ones. Trust provides an expanded range of options in project execution while a distrustful environment limits one's freedom of action.



Building stakeholder trust in large engineering and construction projects is not a one-act show. Rather, it is a multi-dimensional, never stopping, three-ring performance. Trust building and trust sustenance must occur within the “executive” organization to which the project is ultimately accountable. This also includes the project’s organizational peers in key corporate functions such as legal, audit, safety, and the all-important accounts payable operation. Trust must exist throughout the extended project team including owner and PMC staffs as well as contractors and key suppliers. Finally, trust must exist between the project and the myriad of external stakeholders.

Trust is influenced by many factors, both positive and negative, as shown in the following table.

Trust Influencing Factors in Large Engineering & Construction Programs

- Confidence in the integrity, ability, and good character of others
- Transparency of actions
- Cultural sensitivity and context
- Predictability of action
- Certainty of information
- Emotional engagement
- Frequency of interactions
- Physical and cultural distance
- Moral assessment
- Commitment against corruption
- Purposes as viewed by others
- Access to information
- Assessment of competence
- Degree and nature of social certainty/uncertainty
- Connectedness
- Visual perception
- Timeliness of engagement
- Acceptance of delayed reciprocity

Summary

Trust is a prerequisite for project success. Building trust in a project setting represents a special challenge, tougher than what we might face in a more permanent organization. In this paper we have defined trust, considered some of the challenges faced in building it in a project context and highlighted some strategies for doing so.

Finally, we have underscored its importance in providing projects and project teams with the freedom of action that success requires, outlining some influencing factors. How might our leadership styles and management of projects change if our daily project dashboard featured a trust barometer showing the current level of trust within the project team?

Trust is earned slowly, but lost quickly

Trust is the *sine qua non* of a leader. It is the basis for all meaningful relationships and is necessary to develop the industry, client and internal team relationships that are a mark of leadership. In its simplest form it is about keeping your word. Honoring commitments you make no matter how painful it is to do so. It is about dealing fairly and never operating unilaterally. Leaders who lose the trust of others or who do not bring their clients or other employees “along” before making needed changes do not remain leaders for long.

About the Author



Bob Prieto

Chairman & CEO
Strategic Program Management LLC
Jupiter, Florida, USA



Bob Prieto is a senior executive effective in shaping and executing business strategy and a recognized leader within the infrastructure, engineering, and construction industries. Currently Bob heads his own management consulting practice, Strategic Program Management LLC. He previously served as a senior vice president of Fluor, one of the largest engineering and construction companies in the world. He focuses on the development and delivery of large, complex projects worldwide and consults with owners across all market sectors in the development of programmatic delivery strategies. He is author of nine books including “Strategic Program Management”, “The Giga Factor: Program Management in the Engineering and Construction Industry”, “Application of Life Cycle Analysis in the Capital Assets Industry”, “Capital Efficiency: Pull All the Levers” and, most recently, “Theory of Management of Large Complex Projects” published by the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA) as well as over 800 other papers and presentations.

Bob is an Independent Member of the Shareholder Committee of Mott MacDonald and a member of the board of Dar al Riyadh. He is a member of the ASCE Industry Leaders Council, National Academy of Construction, a Fellow of the Construction Management Association of America and member of several university departmental and campus advisory boards. Bob served until 2006 as a U.S. presidential appointee to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Business Advisory Council (ABAC), working with U.S. and Asia-Pacific business leaders to shape the framework for trade and economic growth. He is a member of the Millennium Challenge Corporation advisory board where he had previously served. He had previously served as both as Chairman of the Engineering and Construction Governors of the World Economic Forum and co-chair of the infrastructure task force formed after September 11th by the New York City Chamber of Commerce. Previously, he served as Chairman at Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) and a non-executive director of Cardno (ASX).

Bob serves as an honorary global advisor for the PM World Journal and Library and can be contacted at rpstrategic@comcast.net.

¹ The three most effective ways to build trust as a leader; Claire Lew; Know your team; February 12, 2019