

The Nature Of Trust



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Guest Writer

Can you think of an experience in your life that you found so emotionally painful and unpleasant – leaving you so self-conscious with negative judgement – that the experience changed how you think of yourself? Almost all of us can.

Ordinarily, we rely upon – and take for granted – a few fundamental assumptions about ourselves and the world we live in, assumptions that generally go unquestioned and unchallenged. Life experiences that do not fit our assumptions may be overwhelming. In reaction to a perceived threat, extreme thinking in absolute terms such as “right and wrong” or “black and white” without any in-between or “grey areas” tends to evoke judgement and blame along with accompanying feelings of stress, anxiety, fear, anger and shame. We may also experience disillusionment. Preexisting assumptions no longer accurately describe the world and ourselves. New assumptions requiring a reworking of prior views may also be threatening and negative. The search for equilibrium involves efforts to re-establish a cohesive, trusted set of basic assumptions.

As human beings, we are

fundamentally social. The need to gather with others – to engage in relationships – is extremely important, especially during times of distress. Families, groups and social networks, in general, are comprised of individuals and the relationships between individuals. If, for example, the number of individuals or relationships in a social network suddenly or unexpectedly decreases, then everyone must adjust their assumptions and behaviour, including potentially grieving a loss. While some groups begin to falter under such a strain, other groups are more resilient. Over time, some groups even become stronger. What characteristics or behaviours help social networks prosper or thrive when challenged?

Open conversations among group members that encourage differences and disagreements help. Leaders and/or members of groups genuinely making an effort to take time to listen and accurately understand the perspectives of others in the group, including how people are feeling, develops group cohesion. Cohesion requires trust and boundaries. More cohesive groups tend to better tolerate ongoing tension and conflict that may arise within the group.

Unwillingness or inability to tolerate emotional reactions – such as by avoiding, ignoring or dismissing group

members' needs and vulnerabilities – hinders development of cohesion. In times when groups are coping less well, instead of communicating, collaborating, cooperating and caring for one another, members naturally cocoon, withdraw and stop interacting. Trust slowly erodes. Feelings of loneliness, as well as rates of attrition, may increase, further complicating any process of adjusting or grieving.

Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process. Simultaneously, trust is necessary to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Trust and vulnerability are the garden in which engagement, creativity, innovation and productivity grow.

Working to build – or rebuild – trust in and within families, groups and social networks requires good, positive and ongoing communication reinforcing truthfulness, integrity and reliability, and comes with no guarantee of success. In a world seemingly ever more complex and uncertain, we need creativity, innovation, vulnerability and engaged learning more than ever.

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