

Organization

Trust in Virtual Teams

Coutu, D. L. 1998. Trust in virtual teams. *Harvard Business Review*, 76 (3): 20–21.

For a team to work effectively, its members need to trust one another. They need to be sure that everyone will fulfill his or her obligations and behave in a consistent, predictable manner. But what happens to trust on a virtual team? Can trust develop in a group whose members are geographically dispersed and have to work together without any face-to-face contact?

Professor Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa of the University of Texas at Austin and Associate Professor Dorothy E. Leidner of INSEAD in Fontainebleu, France, decided to find out. They spent six weeks studying 9.9 virtual teams operating globally and communicating strictly through E-mail. They found that trust can and does exist in virtual teams, but it develops in a very different way than in traditional teams.

Past studies of teams have shown that trust tends to evolve in three stages. First comes deterrence-based trust: team members do what they say they will do simply because they fear they'll be punished if they don't. Then as members become more and more familiar with one another, knowledge-based trust develops. Each member knows his or her teammates well enough to predict their behavior with confidence. Finally, identification-based trust emerges. Trust is built on empathy and shared values; members are able to put themselves in their teammates' place.

Although the researchers found evidence of all three types of trust in virtual teams, they did not find the three-stage development pattern. "What drives the evolution of trust in conventional settings is direct, face-to-face interaction—the kind of interaction that does not take place in virtual teams," says Jarvenpaa. "Instead of evolving slowly through stages, trust in virtual teams tends to be established-or not-right at the outset. The first interactions of the team members are crucial."

In fact, the initial electronic messages appear to set the tone for how virtual-team members will interrelate throughout an entire project, the researchers found. In one team, for example, the appointed leader sent an introductory message with a distrustful tone, implying that he was suspicious of other members' commitment to the team. Throughout the project, the team was plagued by low morale and poor performance. Its members were never able to forge a trusting relationship.

In another case, a team focused initially on establishing a set of strict rules for the way members would work together. In effect, the team was trying to impose deterrence-based trust on itself. The effort backfired. Because members had no direct contact, they were never able to move beyond deterrence to a higher, more empowering

level of trust. "In virtual teams," says Jarvenpaa, "deterrence is not a first step toward real trust; in fact, it can be a barrier."

So how can virtual teams build the kind of trust that leads to high performance? The researchers found that the teams with the highest levels of trust tended to share three traits. First, they began their interactions with a series of social messages-introducing themselves and providing some personal background- before focusing on the work at hand. This initial period of electronic "courtship," as the researchers call it, appears to be particularly important in establishing knowledge-based trust. Second, they set clear roles for each team member. Assigning each member a particular task enabled all of them to identify with one another, forging a foundation for identification-based trust. The third hallmark of the trusting team had to do with attitude: team members consistently displayed eagerness, enthusiasm, and an intense action orientation in all their messages. "One pessimist has the potential to undermine an entire virtual team," says Jarvenpaa.

Perhaps most important of all, though, is the way those initial contacts are handled. "Virtual-team members should be very careful about what they say in their first messages," Leidner says. "In a virtual world, the old adage 'You never get a second chance to make a first impression' rings truer than ever."

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