INTERPERSONAL TRUST

Key to Getting the Best from Behavior-Based Safety Coaching

By E. SCOTT GELLER

Greater numbers of occupational injuries will be prevented when individuals work in teams to develop checklists of safe and at-risk behavior, use these checklists to observe work behaviors, then provide constructive feedback from these observations in one-on-one and group situations (e.g., Geller; Krause, Hidley and Hodson; McSween). Of course, those who receive behavioral feedback must believe the feedback. They need to feel good about reports of safe behavior and be willing to correct at-risk actions.

These aspects of behavior-based safety are often met by active resistance. "No way," some workers say. The thought of a co-worker watching them work and tallying observations of safe and at-risk behaviors sounds intrusive. Similarly, managers and safety directors often support the basic observation-and-feedback concept of behavior-based safety, yet contend, "Our plant is not ready for such a process."

What causes such active resistance to an interpersonal observation-and-feedback process? What is missing in a work culture that is not "ready" for this basic component of behavior-based safety?

Both answers involve trust. Lack of interpersonal trust causes resistance to an observation-and-feedback process, and interpersonal trust is the missing ingredient in a culture deemed not ready for behavior-based safety. This article explores the concept of interpersonal trust, introduces an assessment tool for its measurement and reviews basic strategies for building trust within a work culture.

WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL TRUST?

In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the first definition of "trust" is "confidence in the integrity, ability, character and truth of a person or thing." "Interpersonal" merely limits the term to "person" or situations between people. This definition refers to behavior (as in "ability") as well as internal or person-based dimensions (as in "integrity" and "character"). As such, it is consistent with a measurement tool used to assess interpersonal trust in a work culture. This survey device (Figure 1) is based on research by Cook and Wall (39+).

The survey distinguishes between intentions and ability. In other words, one may be confident that a person means well, yet doubt his/her ability to complete the task at hand. In such cases, one trusts the person's intentions but is unsure that stated outcomes will occur—one doubts the person's ability to fulfill a promise.

This perception is common in situations where well-intentioned managers or safety leaders verbalize missions or policies that are viewed as idealistic or unrealistic. When punishment or reward contingencies are not carried out consistently and fairly, for example, interpersonal trust may be limited to intentions, not actions.

In addition, an individual may have faith in others' ability, yet mistrust their intentions. For example, suppose employees are not informed of decisions preceding a policy change that will affect daily work life. When the change is implemented with no warning or rationale, workers may become suspicious of management's intentions. They may believe managers have the skills to make events occur, yet might be concerned about what events will occur. "Does management truly have our welfare in mind when they deliberate about changes in equipment design or production quotas?"

Could a disconnect exist between intention and capability when management establishes a safety incentive program? Consider a program that offers everyone a prize provided no one is injured during a certain period of time. This pressures employees to hide injuries because if one person reports an injury, then everyone loses the reward. Consequently, workers often perceive such a program as a scheme to "keep the numbers down," not as a sign that management truly cares about their welfare.

INTERPERSONAL TRUST AMONG CO-WORKERS

Thus far, examples have focused on whether a worker believes in the intentions and/or ability of management. However, interpersonal trust in a work culture also refers to the extent to which people ascribe good intentions and abilities to their peers. In other words, a line worker might have confidence in a co-worker's ability to perform a job safely and competently, yet might hesitate to tell that colleague certain information because s/he doubts that person's intentions.

The success of a behavior-based observation-and-feedback process requires a high degree of interpersonal trust among co-workers. To accept and use behavioral feedback, a person must believe the feedback is accurate. And, if the feedback comes from a peer, the worker being observed must believe in the coach's ability to obtain the information used for feedback. This requires confidence in the tool used to record observations *and* in the observer's ability to use the tool correctly.

However, it is not enough to believe in the validity of the process and in the co-worker's ability to carry it out. One must also trust the observer's intentions. The observee must believe the information will be used *only* to prevent injury, not as grounds for punishment. That is why a

one-to-one behavioral feedback process begins with the coach asking for permission to observe.

AN INTERPERSONAL TRUST SCALE

This discussion has identified two dimensions of trust: a) faith in the *intentions* of others and b) confidence in their *ability*. To the line worker, these dimensions can refer to either co-workers or management. Cook and Wall used this fourfold classification system to derive a 12-item questionnaire designed to assess "interpersonal trust at work" (Figure 1). This scale can be administered to a discussion group or work team to stimulate group discussion and build understanding of interpersonal trust.

Surveys should be scored as follows. Except for two items (2 and 12), the higher the scale value, the greater the perceived interpersonal trust. Since items 2 and 12 are negatively phrased, these must be reverse scored. In other words, for these two items, the number selected is first subtracted from "6," so a "1" becomes "5," a "2" becomes "4," etc.

Totaling the 12 item scores yields an estimate of an individual's perception of overall interpersonal trust in the work culture. An overall trust index can be derived by calculating the mean survey score of many respondents. In addition, dimensions of trust can be estimated. Specifically, items 3, 5 and 8 assess faith in intentions of peers (or co-workers), while items 1, 7 and 12 address faith in management's intentions. Confidence in a peer's ability or actions is measured by items 9, 10 and 12, while items 2, 4 and 6 assess confidence in management's ability.

Items may be reworded to better suit a particular culture, and items can be replaced or added. In addition, although the scale was developed to measure interpersonal trust from the viewpoint of an hourly worker, with some slight adjustments, it can also estimate trust from a manager's perspective.

In industrial settings, one must differentiate perceptions of interpersonal trust as targeting management or co-workers and with regard to others' intentions versus their actions. Suppose everyone trusted their co-workers' intentions with respect to health and safety. Then, when at-risk behavior, a "near miss," property damage or injury occurred, the focus would be an individual's ability to act safely under given circumstances.

This would lead to fact finding (not fault finding) about ways to improve behavior (rather than to correct a "bad attitude"). As a result, the observation-and-feedback process would be trusted as a method of obtaining information relevant to correcting environmental and system factors that facilitate at-risk behavior or human error.

BUILDING A TRUSTING CULTURE

Now that a definition of "interpersonal trust" has been developed, a more-important issue can be addressed: How can interpersonal trust be facilitated?

Since the current literature provides no answers, a common-sense approach is necessary. A group of research students and colleagues were asked: How can we increase interpersonal trust among members of our various research teams?

First, the concept of interpersonal trust (as defined here) was explained, followed by a "brainstorming" discussion of the trust-building question. Ideas were characterized according to the "intention versus ability" dichotomy.

The resulting list was then refined via a consensus process. Participants were asked to suggest ways to eliminate or combine items. The goal was not to identify items that made participants believe another person could be trusted, but rather to determine ways to increase perceptions of interpersonal trust. Subsequently, a list of proposals for increasing interpersonal trust was developed, as was a beneficial approach for teaching the recommendations to others.

THE SEVEN "Cs" OF TRUST-BUILDING

Near the end of the brainstorming session, the group attempted to encapsulate the various suggestions with certain words. It seemed that many words beginning with the letter "C" reflected specific recommendations. Consequently, seven C-words were noted to capture the essence of this group exercise. The phrases associated with these words summarize the key definitions in the *American Heritage* and *New Merriam-Webster* dictionaries.

Communication

Exchange of information or opinion by speech, writing or signals. How people interact with others is a key determinant of interpersonal trust. What people say—and how they say it—influences trust in both their ability and intentions. Expertise is displayed by spoken or written words, and by the confidence and credibility linked to those words. The way something is said, including intonation, pace, facial expressions, hand gestures and overall posture, has greater impact than what is actually said.

Caring

Showing concern or interest about what happens. Taking the time to listen says, "I care." When people believe someone sincerely cares about them, they will care about what that person says. They believe this person will look out for them when applying his/her knowledge, skills and abilities. They trust this person's intention.

To show caring with specific behavior-based questions, one must take the time to learn what others are doing. This involves active listening and behavior-based observation. It goes beyond "walking the talk" to "listening to the talk and watching the walk." This shows caring and gives one an opportunity to "talk the walk," which builds trust in intentions.

Candor

Straightforwardness and frankness of expression; freedom from prejudice. People trust those who are frank and open, who "don't beat around the bush." Such people are direct, whether asking for a favor or offering behavior-based feedback.

The second dictionary definition of candor—freedom from prejudice—reflects another important aspect of trust-building. People mistrust those whose interactions reflect prejudice or the tendency to judge based on stereotypes; they question their ability to treat others fairly.

Consistency

Agreement among successive acts, ideas or events. People usually trust those who readily confess their inability to answer a question. This trust grows when they find and report an answer quickly.

What happens when the reply is not prompt—or is never given? Perhaps the quickest way to destroy interpersonal trust is to not follow through consistently. This is also the easiest way to stifle trust. How often do people break promises? Most promises are behavior-consequence contingencies—a certain consequence will follow a certain behavior. Whether that consequence is positive or negative, trust decreases when the behavior is not rewarded (or punished) as promised.

This scale can be administered to a discussion group or work team to stimulate group discussion and build understanding of interpersonal trust.

One problem with punishment contingencies is that they are difficult to implement fairly and consistently. It is easy to state, "Anyone who does not use appropriate personal protective equipment will be 'written up.'" It is quite difficult to execute this contingency consistently.

Commitment

Bound emotionally or intellectually to a course of action. People who are reliable not only show consistency, they demonstrate commitment. Fulfilling a promise tells others, "You can count on me to do what I say I'll do." Honoring a commitment builds trust in both intention and ability.

Sharing a personal anecdote to illustrate a point is one way to demonstrate commitment. When this commitment is consistent with the theme of spoken or written words, credibility increases. The audience has reason to trust the speaker's intention to provide accurate information.

FIGURE 1 ASSESSING INTERPERSONAL TRUST

The statements below express opinions that people might hold about the confidence and trust that can be placed in others at work, both fellow workers and management. Circle the scale numbers next to each statement to indicate how much you agree with it.

	Highly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Highly Agree
1) Management in my company is sincere in its attempts to meet the workers' point of view.	1	2	3	4	5
2) Our company has a poor future unless it can attract better managers.	1	2	3	4	5
3) If I got into difficulties at work, I know my co-workers would try to help me out.	1	2	3	4	5
4) Management can be trusted to make sensible decisions for the company's future.	1	2	3	4	5
5) I can trust the people I work with to lend me a hand if I need it.	1	2	3	4	5
6) Management at work seems to do an effective job.	1	2	3	4	5
7) I feel quite confident that the company will always treat me fairly.	1	2	3	4	5
8) Most of my co-workers can be relied upon to do as they say they will.	1	2	3	4	5
9) I have full confidence in the skills of my co-workers.	1	2	3	4	5
10) Most of my fellow workers would get on with their work even if supervisors were not around.	1	2	3	4	5
11) I can rely on other workers not to make my job more difficult by careless work.	1	2	3	4	5
12) Our management would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving the workers.	1	2	3	4	5

Consensus

Agreement in opinion, testimony or belief. Demonstrating personal commitment to a mission, purpose or goal builds group consensus. When a group reaches consensus about some topic, all members agree on—and support—a decision or course of action. Leaders or group facilitators who develop consensus among people build interpersonal trust. Consensus-building is the opposite of top-down decision making.

How can group consensus be developed? How can the outcome of debate on ways to solve a problem be perceived as a win-win solution that everyone supports, instead of a win-lose compromise that damages interpersonal trust?

Consensus-building takes time and energy. It requires candid, consistent and caring communication among all group members. It requires straightforward opinion sharing, intense discussion, emotional debate, active listening, careful evaluation, methodical organization and systematic setting of priorities. In other words, when people demonstrate the C-words for building trust in interpersonal dialogue, they also develop consensus and further facilitate interpersonal trust regarding a particular decision or action.

The outcome of this process is well worth the investment. When a solution is developed that every potential participant can champion, the interpersonal trust needed for total involvement has been cultivated. In turn, involvement builds greater personal commitment and trust, which further increases involvement.

Character

The combined moral or ethical structure of a person or group; integrity; fortitude. This word means different things to different people. In general, people with "character" are considered to be honest, ethical and principled. Such people are credible or worthy of trust because they display confidence and competence in following a consistent set of morally sound beliefs.

Someone with character practices the strategies discussed for cultivating a trusting culture. Therefore, this C-word epitomizes interpersonal trust from both the intention and ability perspective. Other methods also fit this category.

Reaching Consensus: Six Basic Steps

Set the decision goal. What is the purpose of the consensus-building exercise? What will be the end result of the group's decision process?

Spell out criteria needed to make the group decision worthwhile. What qualities or characteristics of the decision are needed to reach a particular goal? Which criteria are consistent with the team's ultimate mission? What are budget constraints? What principles or quality standards are relevant? What will a decision provide for the team? What criteria or restrictions are essential? What criteria are desirable but not absolutely necessary?

Gather information. What information is useful for making the decision? Where is this information and who can provide it? How should the information be summarized for optimal understanding and consideration?

Brainstorm possible options. What are possible solutions? Does everyone understand each option and its ramifications? How does everyone feel about the possibilities? Has everyone had a chance to voice an opinion?

Evaluate the brainstormed options against the group's criteria. Which solutions appear to meet the "must have" criteria? Which options meet the "nice but not necessary" criteria? To what degree will each option meet both the "necessary" and "desirable" criteria? Can certain options be combined to meet more criteria?

Make the final decision as a team. Which option or combination best meets the "necessary" criteria and most of the "desirable" criteria? Who has reservations and why? How can we resolve individual skepticism? Can everyone support the most-popular option? What can be altered in the most-popular action plan to gain unanimous support and ownership?

Source: Rees, F. *Teamwork From Start to Finish.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997.

First, individuals with character are willing to admit *vulnerability*. They realize they are not perfect and need behavioral feedback. They recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and find exemplars to model. By actively listening and observing behavior, these individuals learn how to improve their own performance.

Having the courage to admit weakness indicates a willingness to apologize when a mistake is made. There is no better way to build trust than to admit an error that may have affected another person. Such vulnerability enables a person to heed the powerful enrichment principle: *Good, better, best. Never let us rest, until good is better. And better best* (Bird and Germain 111).

What is the trust level for a group leader who not only admits failure, but continually seeks ways to improve? This is the ideal leader because other team members can admit their incompetencies or insecurities without fear of ridicule or reprisal. This person appreciates others' desire to improve and will offer guidance to help them. Such a leader can also be trusted to keep confidential any disclosure of personal failure or vulnerability.

"Back-stabbing" fosters "back-stabbing." Eventually, the work culture will be filled with independent people "doing their own thing," fearful of making errors and non-receptive to performance-based feedback. The key aspects of behavior-based safety—team building, interpersonal observation and coaching—are difficult to implement within such a culture.

CONCLUSION

The literature offers limited guidance on how to build interpersonal trust throughout a work culture. Therefore, one must rely on common sense and personal experience. Many people suggest that the best way to facilitate interpersonal trust is to be trustworthy. "If you want others to trust you, you need to trust others and behave toward them in ways that warrant their trust." Although this is sound advice, a critical question remains: "What kind of behaviors are trustworthy?"

The seven C-words presented are easy-to-remember and, although their meanings overlap, each offers distinct directives for trust-building behavior. *Communicating* these guidelines to others in a *candid, caring* manner initiates the dialogue needed to start people on a journey of interpersonal trust-building. Then, people must give each other *consistent, candid* feedback regarding those behaviors that reflect these trust-building principles. With *character* and *commitment,* they must recognize others for doing the job right and offer corrective feedback when necessary.

Recipients must accept feedback with *caring* appreciation and a *commitment* to improve. Then, recipients must show the *character* to thank the observer for the feedback, even when the *communication* is not positive or not delivered effectively. In turn, recipients might offer feedback on how to make the behavior-based feedback more useful. Such dialogue is essential to building *consensus* and sustaining a journey of continuous trust-building. Such a journey must be made in order to reap the many benefits of behavior-based safety. ■

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