

The Impact of Team Structure on Trust

By Steven C. Coats

Just about any discussion these days concerning the foundation of good teams will ultimately get to the issue of trust. This is hardly worth debating, as trust is fundamental to any productive relationship, be it friendship, marriage or teamwork. Too often, trust seems to become the easy answer for anything wrong with a team. How many team building sessions have you been to, where time has been devoted to building trust among all members?

However, trust is a complicated creature, and many times the angst and productivity problems in a team, which seem to be trust-centered, cannot be solved by more team and trust building. The issues are actually caused by something else, but they give the appearance of and can lead to problems with trust.

Personally I have found several culprits frequently at work to undermine trust and strain relationships in teams. The one that I want to focus on here is that of structure. For many teams, people have become less trusting because a poorly designed or ineffective team structure is spreading havoc and not being addressed.

One of my favorite expressions is, “you cannot fix a structure problem with more training.” And unfortunately, one of the most frequent actions to address an apparent trust issue is to roll out a session with personality inventories, personal sharing, or great team experiences. I am not trying to over generalize, but often times the root cause of

lapsing trust, such as structure, simply cannot get resolved from an emotional, insightful or uplifting team building session.

So let’s go a little deeper and look at how problems in structure or staffing can create trust and performance issues for a team. Surprisingly, the problems discussed here all share a somewhat common thread, and that is convenience. And as you already know, convenience is seldom the best strategy for achieving top performance.

Team structure problem number one: “Hey, are you available to help out with something?” This approach to forming the team is just what it says. A team needs to be convened to solve some kind of problem, and the team is staffed, based on the availability of people to work on it. Sometimes thought will be given about having people from different departments, but that by itself does not necessarily mean the team will have the kind of talent it needs. This reminds me when I was little, of trying to round up enough kids to play baseball during the summer. The goal was to play, and we could care less about who played which position. That is not the best way to build work teams to solve real problems.

World class orchestras, sports teams, and acting companies devote huge amounts of disciplined time and energy to getting the right people for the opportunity at hand. I don’t believe I have ever had anyone come up to me and ask if I was available to sit in as a violinist for an upcoming concert, or to play wide receiver on a football team. Yet the “can you free up some time” approach is not that

foreign in many business organizations. It is certainly convenient, but seldom effective.

You must always consider the appropriate staffing and membership of teams carefully. Unintentionally, people can literally be set up to fail with the “are you available” approach. Placing either the wrong people, or those incapable of fulfilling key roles on the team, can easily lead to them be seen as lacking competence or commitment to the team. And either of these perceptions breeds mistrust.

The second structure miscue is that old nemesis, the matrix organization. There can certainly be benefits from this design, but there is one huge stumbling block which frequently occurs. In a matrix organization structure, a person reports directly into Manager A, but is assigned to support a team devoted to meeting the objectives for Manager B (the “dotted line” manager). And time after time, I have observed that managers A and B have different goals and outcomes. And Manager B, along with his or her direct reports, wonder why the supporting, but non-direct reporting, person is not fully aligned with what their team is attempting to do. And thus, the seeds of mistrust are again sown.

If you think just reading about an organization like this can be confusing, try working in one! If team members cannot all be fully aligned and committed to a common goal, mistrust raises its ugly head. Here is a simple case in point of competing objectives.

Imagine a field office which has a revenue target to meet. The Field Manager has a leadership team which consists of herself and a handful of her direct sales and operations managers, HR, Finance, and IT just to name a few. To complicate things, the HR, Finance and IT people each directly report into their own separate corporate functional heads, not the field manager. All of those corporate

functional heads have their own individual objectives to achieve, and the need to make their own departments work most productively. Got the picture?

In an effort to reduce slow or ultimately non-paying customers, corporate finance begins implementing stricter credit standards and the need to grant final approval on even smaller deals. In the meantime the field operation has a clear cut objective to grow revenue and market share, requiring it to likely take on more high risk customers to gain traction.

The local manager tells her finance guy that in her market she has the authority to approve new business, and she expects him to support the team’s growth efforts, even those with riskier credit terms. But the finance guy, who direct reports into a corporate credit boss, is being directed to ensure that all credit deals fall within the new standards, and then are sent to corporate for final blessings.

You can easily see an opportunity for real conflict to occur, and for the field manager and her direct reports to question the loyalty, commitment, and trust of their finance guy, when he does not immediately approve the new, riskier business. It is not likely that bowling and beers will resolve this.

You can pretty well count on the fact that structuring people to seemingly work against each other, which some matrix organizations can do, will lead to dissension and suspicion at some point. However, it is much easier to create dotted lines on an organization chart, than it is to find the right solutions to competing agendas.

The last example of how structure impacts trust might be the sneakiest of them all. It is forming a team where members are entitled to be on the team merely because of their positions or titles. What is the structure of

most senior leadership teams – the big boss and his or her direct reports. On several occasions, I have seen a leadership team, by this definition, almost double in size right after a merger. There were VP's of Production and Sales for the legacy and the acquired company, as well as duplicate executive roles in all other departments. Suddenly the senior team was no longer 6 or 7, but 11 or 12, and who knows to what extent any were adding value.

On the other hand, I recall one executive I worked with years ago, who had a front line employee on her senior team. He served as a conduit for the workers, ensuring their needs were clearly understood at the top of the company, and that company decisions were clearly explained in an understandable way at the front line. Of course, this leader viewed her team as an action oriented, problem solving team, not as a group who met regularly to fulfill a calendar request.

The best performing and most trusting teams are based on contribution not position. (You may want to read that statement again!) And when people of title or higher level are not contributing equally, feelings of unfairness or politics become more and more prevalent. The consequences related to trust are obvious.

Team members have to have faith in and count

on each other for the team to succeed. Therefore, a team must be structured with the right kind of “players,” who are aligned along common objectives, and where membership is determined by contribution. So, as a starting point for forming a great team, it is always better to consider the important factors of structure, including team purpose, roles, and required talents, rather than simply relying on the more convenient methods of availability, dotted lines or organizational position.

It is tough for good people in a bad system to maintain trust and consistently produce stellar results. And any system that creates mistrust is to some degree a bad system. As a leader, you have to pay attention to all things which can erode trust. At the same time, you have to work and work at strengthening it. That is why activities such as beer and bowling, MBTI and DiSC, and the multitude of other helpful team development processes are so critical.

You simply cannot ignore structure, just because it can be politically difficult to deal with. For, even in the proverbial perfect organization, the most well-intentioned and trusting people will occasionally screw up with each other during the heat of the daily battles, causing some chinks in the armor of trust. Don't let a team's faulty formation, staffing, or design make it even more conducive for problems with trust to occur.

*Steven C. Coats is a Managing Partner at International Leadership Associates, a leadership development and consulting firm, and co-author of the book, *There is No Box*.*

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