

# The Three Elements of Trust

By: Wilma J. Slenders, Ph.D.

Think about the people you trust. Who are they? How do you know that you trust them? The answers may be straightforward or difficult to answer. Let's explore the concept of trust.

## What is trust?

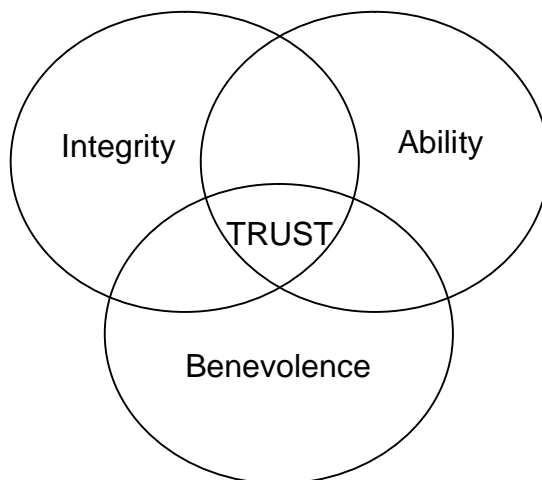
In any trusting relationship one must first acknowledge that a relationship must exist between two parties. This could be two individuals, two teams, or two organizations.

Reviewing trust research, Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), defined trust as the "willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the action of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). One of the key phrases in this definition is the "willingness to be vulnerable," frequently used as the definition of trust. Willingness to be vulnerable means opening oneself up to someone else.

A second key concept is the expectation that the other individual will do something for the trustor. Since relationships are typically a two-way street, there is always an expectation, whether explicit or implicit, that this is the case – one person will do something for the other. It may not necessarily be that the individual will do something specific, but there is the expectation that s/he will act or behave in a certain way.

The third key concept in this definition is the inability to control the other party. Trust means letting go of the need or desire to control what the other party will do and being open to what happens.

Knowing this, we can discuss what needs to be in place before the trustor is willing to be vulnerable, take the risk, and trust someone else. Mayer et al. (1995) found that there are three elements that must be in place before trust exists. They are ability, integrity, and benevolence. The convergence of these three dimensions is where trust truly exists. If one is missing, trust does not exist.



Let's look at each of these more closely.

### **Ability**

Ability is having knowledge, skills, or competencies that allow an individual to have influence in a specific area (Gubbins & MacCurtain, 2008; Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). What this means is that individual must be knowledgeable or skilful in the area that is important to the individual who is the trustor. For example, as an entrepreneur I seek out counsel for financial issues and concerns. It is reasonable that I would seek advice from an individual who has specific training in the area that I seek advice. I would not seek financial advice from someone who does not have knowledge or skill in this area.

### **Integrity**

Integrity "involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 719). This means that each individual in the relationship must be on the same wavelength with respect to what those principles are. They may be explicitly discussed, but more likely are implicitly assumed to exist and agreed to. A personal example is the sharing of intellectual property. I would expect that anyone in my circle of colleagues who wanted to share something that I had created would ask me prior doing so, because I have the same expectations of myself.

### **Benevolence**

Benevolence is "the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 718). Benevolence has to do with caring about the other person, about not having a vested interest, and not benefiting from the relationship. An example from my consulting days: I am a successful change management consultant and often times individuals who sought to be consultants asked to "pick my brain." Many times I offered advice and guidance, not expecting anything in return.

### **How can I use this information?**

How do the relationships that you have measure up? Does each relationship have the three elements of trust? How strong is each dimension? What about you? How well are you doing? What are you doing to ensure that trust is built and maintained?

### **References**

Gubbins, C., & MacCurtain, S. (2008). Understanding the dynamics of collective learning: The role of trust and social capital [Electronic version]. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 10, 578-599.

Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integration model of organizational trust [Electronic version]. *Academy of Management Review*, 20 (3),709-734.

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