

TRUST IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

A KNOWLEDGE ABILITY WHITE PAPER

**Dr. John Gundry
Knowledge Ability Ltd
Malmesbury UK**

August 2000

Published at www.knowab.co.uk/wbwtrust.html

There is much talked about trust in business. As they address the celebration dinner, leaders of successful teams say "We'd never have done this without trusting each other."

But what is trust, in the sense that we need to know about it for virtual work purposes? It's as though people have recognised that you can't run a meeting without coffee. Everyone repeats how important coffee is to a meeting. And while the coffee turns up, everything's fine. Then, one day, the coffee doesn't turn up, and no one has a clue where it came from or how to get any.

So here is an attempt to unpeel the onion about trust. The following statements build an argument about how leaders and members of virtual teams, and other virtual workers, can think about the trust they're given and the trust they put in others. These statements are not written from a moral standpoint. What we're looking at is organisational value - how to build the environment for virtual teams (and other forms of virtual work) to thrive.

1. Teaming depends on collaboration, because collaboration entails sharing information, knowledge and views with other people - things we need to do in a team.
2. If we don't trust other people, then we won't readily collaborate with them. It's because of collaboration that trust is so important to teaming.
3. Communication builds trust. Through communicating with people, we calibrate them, we get a better sense of them, and we understand their priorities. People who can meet face to face have the opportunity for wide bandwidth communication and thus to calibrate each other fast. This is why everyone advises that people meet face to face at the beginning of any major, prolonged, virtual activity. People will have a hard time trusting each other unless they've met.

4. In virtual teams whose members haven't had any, or sufficient, opportunity to meet, this calibration needs to happen through electronic communication. But the communication will be difficult until positive relationships emerge, and they won't emerge without communication. A paradox that virtual team leaders and virtual workers need to do something about:
 - Leaders who need their remote team members to trust each other have to work very hard to build communication amongst them. This can be done through team building, face to face or online, or through the interactions that accompany work. Often a team-wide online learning course is a good way to start a virtual team communicating amongst themselves. Either way, the amount of communication correlates positively with the opportunity calibrate others and thus to build trust
 - Members of virtual teams can increase the trust they're given, and the amount they will trust others, by actively seeking opportunities to communicate other members. By finding reasons to communicate, if none exist otherwise.
5. So teaming depends on collaboration which depends on trust which is built through communication the best form of which is face to face, but remote electronic communication, if sufficiently rich, is an alternative. This formula summarises the state of the art about trust in virtual teams, but I want to go beyond this here. For I don't believe that communication, on its own, is enough to create trust in virtual teams. To get the complete picture we have to look more deeply into trust itself, where we find two components that may be surprising.
6. The first component of trust is predictability (I'm indebted to my colleague Dr George Metes for pointing this out to me years ago). We usually use the word "trust" to mean that we believe people will act in a predictably good or positive manner. We can just as well believe that people will act in a bad or negative manner. Trust is only the positive face of predictability: the negative face is just as important. Either way, we increase our ability to predict through communication.
7. So we can make judgements that others are predictably good or predictably bad through having communicated enough with them. But what do we mean by "good" and "bad"? That brings us to the other component of trust: trustworthiness. Being trustworthy is at the root of being trusted. That sounds like a tautology, but it really isn't. The whole concept of trustworthiness has been overlooked. It seems to be assumed that everyone is trustworthy and what we're missing in working remotely from others is the chance to display our trustworthiness to them so they can trust us (or vice versa). The rather naive view holds that trust is there waiting to be revealed if only there are enough opportunities for trustworthy people to communicate.

8. I don't agree. But first, what does being trustworthy mean? Each reader of this paper will have his or her own views, and the context is very important, but perhaps we can agree at least that a fellow work team member is trustworthy if they behave as follows:

- Act in our and the team's best interests
- Be truthful
- Keep their promises or tell us when they can't keep them
- Respect the citation and /or protection of information we send them
- Share mutually-valuable information with us

(Note that I don't include "Have the same goals" or similar in this list. Shared goals are a value, not a behaviour, and are not something we can directly observe. But certainly team-building, and in this case virtual team-building, is important in developing the values that give rise to trustworthy behaviour.)

9. I said that I didn't agree that trustworthiness can just be assumed. I'm sure I'm not alone in judging that, regrettably, not everyone I meet or communicate with is trustworthy. We've all made the judgement that someone is "not to be trusted": that they will not predictably act in our best interests, will not be truthful, will fail to meet their promises, will probably make off with anything we tell them, will go behind our backs, etc. If we make this judgement correctly we have learned something useful for our dealings with them.

10. So in virtual teams, where we are consciously and unconsciously working hard to sense the level of trust (predictable trustworthiness) that we can place in our remote fellow members in order that we feel comfortable in collaborating with them, the team leader or the whole team needs to come down hard on - even expel - anyone who behaves in an untrustworthy manner. One rotten apple spoils the barrel. And virtual team leaders and members need not only to be trustworthy, but to be very visibly trustworthy. Because it is much easier to be suspicious of people when they are out of the line of sight.

11. So in addition to communication, we find that morals are important in sustaining collaboration, and thus performance, in virtual teams. But does the team leader, at the celebration dinner that introduced this paper, say "We were able to achieve all this because we were trustworthy"?

Please cite this paper as:

Gundry, John, "Trust in Virtual Teams". A White Paper from Knowledge Ability Ltd, Malmesbury UK. Published at www.knowab.co.uk/wbwtrust.html. August 2000.

Comments on this paper are invited. Please contact the author.

About the author

Dr John Gundry is Director of Knowledge Ability Ltd, a UK-based company that provides education and consulting services on virtual teaming and remote working. Co-ordinates are email: gundry@knowab.co.uk phone: +44 1666 826654. See more about Knowledge Ability at www.knowab.co.uk

This paper is based on concepts explored in Knowledge Ability's Virtual Teaming and Remote Working training, see www.knowab.co.uk/wbw2c.html

Notices

This paper is copyright © Knowledge Ability Limited 2000. All Rights Reserved. Permission is granted to copy and distribute this paper provided that it is copied and distributed unaltered and entire, including this entire Section 'Notices'. No permission is granted to exploit this paper or the information in it for any commercial purpose whatsoever.

Disclaimer: The information in this paper may contain errors. This paper does not constitute an offer or sample. This paper is provided "as is" without express or implied warranty.

Version 1.1 PDF version September 2003 Minor non-content revisions to PDF December 2004