Trust: How to Build Strong Relationships

Was it the nature of faith to create barriers, or, was true faith intended to eradicate barriers?

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THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT TRUST, which may be the most important idea you will get from this book. Think about the following statement: "Nothing significant happens between people unless there is a strong bond of trust." Do you agree? Would you say that the major characteristic of best friends is that they trust each other, even with their deepest secrets? If a doctor says, "Take this medicine," and you do, is it not because you trust her or his competence? The criteria for trust may be competence (credentials) or credibility (being trustworthy) or both. Regardless, trust is the glue of all good relationships.

If we don't trust people we probably will not spend much time with them, listen carefully to what they say, follow their advice or put much energy into the relationship. Trust makes all the difference in the quality of a relationship. This is especially true if you are sharing something of great importance, like the possibility of following Jesus. People will take you seriously only if they trust you. If you have built trust, people are more likely to listen to you and consider your message. If you have not taken the time or put in the effort to build trust, it is less likely that they will listen. Most people do not change a lifetime of patterns because someone new comes into their culture and announces that they ought to change their ways.

PRIOR QUESTION OF TRUST

A prior question of trust in its simplest form asks what would build trust with a particular person or group. Remember the snow tires that I gave my wife for our first wedding anniversary? I asked myself *What would build trust*? but forgot to add *with my wife*? If we ask only the first part of the question—"What will build trust?"—we can easily answer it from our own frame of reference and then end up looking like the monkey.

Just as I needed to ask what would build trust with my wife when buying a gift for her, we must intentionally ask ourselves what would build trust with others with whom we desire to build relationships, especially in another culture. I say "intentional" because it is so easy to forget. Eventually it will become natural. Remember to ask the entire question: "What will build trust with this person in his/her cultural frame of reference?" Do this several times a day at critical points. If you fail to do this, you will slip back into your own cultural patterns and you will be offering snow tires instead of perfume, flowers or something appropriate to the person. But it is not quite so simple when you are in an unfamiliar culture. The monkey discovered this when he tried to help the fish!

TRUST IS CULTURALLY DEFINED

In many cultures, my way of building trust does not work. In fact, it communicates the opposite. Let me explain by using a generic story gleaned from a variety of situations. Mary and Joe Smith, working in another culture, decided they would like to build a relationship with a local couple. Joe worked with Koko at his job and believed a friendship would be possible.

Joe talked with Koko, and he and his wife agreed to come to Joe and Mary's home for an evening meal. Everyone had a delightful evening. Now the Smiths waited to see if the local couple would do something to show they wanted a friendship—perhaps an invitation for the Smiths to come to their house. Several weeks went by and nothing. The Smiths

decided they would try it again and essentially went through the same routine. The other couple came again, the evening was wonderful and everyone departed happy. Weeks went by and nothing came from the couple that would signal interest in pursuing the relationship.

Miscommunication. At this point, it is important to know that both couples wanted a friendship, but both had concluded that the other couple did not want it. Why do you suppose the local couple would conclude that the Smiths did not want a friendship? It seemed pretty obvious, at least to us. Would you have done anything different if you had been in the Smiths' place?

In much of African, Hispanic and Asian culture, setting a time, place and agenda for an evening together signals that you want a more formal, prescribed relationship, not a friendship. One signals a desire for friendship by stopping by the person's house, *unannounced*. Often it's called "popping in." Popping in at mealtime is all the better; now you can eat together and spend the evening chatting. This causes many North Americans discomfort. First of all, you don't just stop by—that is rude according to our etiquette experts. Second, we do not like people stopping by unexpectedly because we put a premium on having a clean house for guests and making sure we cook a special meal. What do we do about enough food if people just pop in? Third, the evening meal in many Western homes is considered family time because of the way our lives are structured. So we assume it is family time for everyone else as well. We do not want to be interrupted during family time, and we would not think of doing it to others.

But in many cultures of the world, people will generally cook more than they need because people are always popping in. Or, if they do not have enough, the children will eat later or be sent to a relative's house where they may have some extra food. The condition of the house is not nearly so important as the fact that someone has chosen to stop by and spend time with them. Neither are they so preoccupied with whether things are tidy but more with celebrating the arrival of guests and enjoying time together.

Be culturally sensitive. Be alert to discovering how people build trust in the culture where you will be. You can do several things: observe what people do; ask veteran Westerners who have built many solid relationships in that culture; listen to conversations among friends and ask a local person what you can do to build a friendship with a person in that culture. I would use the word *friendship* instead of *trust* because there is less ambiguity with friendship. (Did you notice the "observe, ask/inquire and listen" in this paragraph? They are the important coping skills from the cultural adjustment map in figure 8.1, p. 72.)

TRUST IS PERSONALLY DEFINED

Not only is trust culturally defined, it is also personally defined. The snow tires story is a good example, but here is another. Another husband, newly married and quite the outdoor sportsman, purchased a new shotgun for his wife's birthday. He presented it to her in a nice case so it would be protected from scratches. With the gift came this message: "I think this shotgun will help us develop more intimacy in our marriage. Now we can walk out to the woods together, shoot some animals together, process the meat together and eat it together while rehearsing the hunting memories." She was not impressed.

He was completely sincere but certainly did not understand the indoor preferences of his wife. My friend bought an expensive gift, had good intentions and ended up a failure. His wife did not enjoy hunting or any sports for that matter. Like the monkey (remember the monkey and fish story) my friend had acted out of his own frame of reference. He wanted to express love and build trust but was unsuccessful because he neglected to add, "with my wife." As we practice answering this question in our own culture, it will be easier to ask and answer in the new culture.

Trust, or the lack thereof, defines all relationships. Let's not be naive. We cannot just barge into someone's life and have instant credibility. If we try, we will be giving snow tires instead of a clear message of love. Or,

as the apostle Paul said, our witness will sound more like a "clanging symbol" than genuine love (1 Corinthians 13:1).

Circles of trust. Trust is necessary every day with everyone—we can practice trust daily with everyone around us, even those with whom trust has been broken. However, it is best to focus on specific people when thinking about trust.

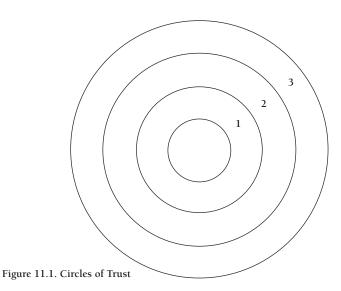


Figure 11.1 has concentric circles. Put your initials, representing you, in the smallest circle. Then, place the initials of people who are closest to you, the people you trust the most, in circle 1. In the second circle, place the initials of those you trust to a lesser degree. Next, inside the third circle, put the initials of people you trust only a little or those you do not trust at all or with whom trust has been severely broken. Do this now and please do not read further until you have given three to five minutes to put initials where you think they belong.

Now think about the following questions:

1. Where did you place your parents? Siblings? Uncles and aunts?

Grandparents? Spouse? Colleagues? Add new initials of people if you wish.

- 2. Where did you place Christians? Non-Christians?
- 3. Are there any people farther away than you would like? Should they be closer to you? How can you make this happen?
- 4. Are there some who are close to you but who have an unhealthy influence on you and maybe should not occupy such an influential place? How should you respond?
- 5. Do you have any other insights from this activity?

The circles applied. I had just finished teaching a session on trust. As I absorbed the warm sun on a mountaintop outside Puebla, Mexico, a young man of college age joined me. "I heard what you said about trust this morning," he started. "What was important for you?" I answered, believing he wanted to say more. "My dad and I haven't talked for three years, and it doesn't seem right," he blurted. "It's not that we don't ever talk. We just exchange greetings and maybe something about the weather, not much more," he continued. "You would like to change that?" I countered. "Yeah, I will be leaving college and moving away soon, and I want to have a more meaningful relationship with my dad."

Becoming more direct, I said, "What do you think you can do to begin that process?" Because the young man could not find an answer to that question, I had to ask it in several different ways. I finally said, "When your dad is enjoying himself, what is he doing?" "Working with wood," he answered quickly. "He loves making things, and he does a beautiful job." "Have you seen any wood around this place that has caught your eye?" I asked. My grandfather loved wood, and I love refinishing old furniture, so I was on familiar ground. At this the young man brightened. "Interesting you should ask. I notice wood all the time, and there is some unusual wood around here." Now we were get-

ting somewhere. "So how would your father interpret it if you sent him a nice slab of wood from Mexico?" (Note: I was asking him to put himself into his father's frame of reference—what would build trust with his father.) Now he sat upright and became animated. "He would really like that! I can do it!"

The young man realized his father had been in one of the outer circles and wanted to change that. He just needed a conversation to nudge him in the right direction. The process of a better father-son relationship had begun. Building trust is not hard, but it does take a little thought.

TRUST TAKES TIME

Two brief thoughts remain. First, it takes time to build trust. If trust has been violated it may take more time to build it, but usually you will find people ready to respond. Be patient. Keep checking to make sure that your attempts to build trust are not based on your own frame of reference but on that of the other person. The people in the new culture have probably had previous experiences with people from your culture. This history may have influenced them toward openness and trust toward you or, perhaps, to be more cautious.

Second, trust is built in slow progressive steps. We may want to build or rebuild trust with one giant act. Usually it does not work that way, particularly if trust has been broken in the past. Even in new relationships, trust starts with small acts and builds into a solid and healthy relationship. Patience pays off.

FOR REFLECTION

1. How has God built trust with you over the years? What does he do? Make a list of items.

2. What insights does this list give us in our attempts to build trust with those around us and our friends in other cultural settings?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Thinking about the culture you are going to, are there ways in which you can learn how the people build trust?
- 2. What kinds of behaviors from you would tend to undermine or break trust with the people you will be with?
- 3. Among the people you know, with whom have you had difficulty building trust? Why it has been difficult? Can you think of what else you might do that will build trust from their perspective?
- 4. Can you think of a time when trust was broken with you? How did you feel? What did it take (or would it take) to rebuild the broken trust?
- 5. Why does it feel good when someone builds trust with you?