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Considerations for Building Trust in Organizational Leaders at the Systemic and Community Levels

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Abstract

According to the research on subordinates' trust in their superiors, this feeling is based on the subordinate's subjective evaluation of their boss's character traits. To begin, when employees have faith in their superior, it shows that they have faith in the system that the superior exemplifies. Second, while determining whether or not to trust their superior, employees use factors derived from systemic qualities such as group identities and shared values. Third, teams play an important role in translating systemic factors into criteria for judging a superior's trustworthiness and in the social building of confidence in a superior. We back up these assertions with quantitative and qualitative research on cadets' trust in their team leaders over time and into the important occurrences that develop or break that trust. Our research and analysis establishes a bridge between the systemic, the social, and the personal dimensions of trust.

Keywords : trust, leaders, teams, values, identity

Introduction

There has been a lot of discussion and writing in recent years on how to build trust in organizations. This focus stems from the widespread belief that trust in organizations is becoming increasingly important in light of recent developments in the field, including faster-paced environmental and technological change, higher demands for adaptability and cooperation, a greater emphasis on teams and teamwork, and different employment relationships and career paths (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998).

'As organizations have gotten flatter and more team-based, organizational officials' monitoring of their subordinates has given way to less autocratic techniques of interpersonal influence,' Brockner et al. (1997: 558) write. The capacity to earn the respect and loyalty of employees is more important than ever for managers. Summarizing studies in this area, Brockner et al. (1997) conclude that confidence in organizational authorities improves support for such authorities, increased commitment to the authorities, and readiness to act in ways that serve to forward the aims of the organization. Trust in authorities has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, including conformity to authority decisions (Tyler and Degoy 1995), pro-organizational behaviors (Organ, 1990; Podsakoff et al. 1990; Konovsky and Pugh 1994), and organizational citizenship (Organ, 1990; Podsakoff et al. 1990).

From a comparable standpoint, many authors on leadership consider trust as a crucial component of leadership (e.g. Bennis and Nanus 1985; Locke et al. 1991, Zand 1997). In the eyes of some, it is the distinguishing feature. To wit, Solomon states that "leadership is an emotional relationship of trust" (1996: 80), while Conger and Kanungo write that "leading implies fostering changes in followers through the building of trust and credibility" (1998: 46). Several theories of leadership place significant emphasis on the importance of followers' faith in the leader.both overtly and subtly. For instance, trust is an integral part of the Leader-Member-Exchange theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), which examines the dynamics of the dyadic interactions between the group's leader and its members. House's (1977) and Conger & Kanungo's (1998) theories of charismatic leadership see followers' confidence in the leader as fundamental to the charismatic connection.

Several research looked at what motivates employees to have faith in their superiors. Subordinates' confidence in their superiors was studied by Butler (1991), who identified many "conditions of trust" that include managers' consistent and honest behavior. Podsakoff et al. (1990) observed that managers' transformational leadership behaviors were associated with subordinates' organizational citizenship behaviors via a mediating mechanism of subordinates' confidence in their superiors. According to research by Conger and Kanungo (1998), followers are more likely to put their faith in a leader who inspires respect and admiration. Several studies conducted by Mayer and his coworkers (Mayer and Davis 1999; Mayer and Gavin 1998) corroborate the theoretical claims made by Mayer et al. (1995) in an earlier theoretical paper, namely, that followers' faith in their leader is contingent on their leader's perceived competence, kindness, and honesty. Most of these social and psychological research and ideas treat trust as if it were an internal, private trait. According to a recent assessment of the literature by Kramer, despite variations in specific theories, "most trust theories agree that, whatever else its essential features, trust is fundamentally a psychological state" (1999: 571). These models have tended to see trust as an interpersonal phenomena. The development and deterioration of been linked to the trustee's own internal mental processes, based on his or her personality and actions.

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Systemic Trust

In contrast with the above-mentioned social-psychological literature, the sociological literature on trust emphasizes the systemic level of trust. Writers from this perspective (e.g. Simmel 1950; Parsons 1951; Luhman, 1979; Fukuyama 1995. For a recent review see Lane, 1998) view trust as a quality of social systems that enables the maintenance of social order within the system. Systemic trust is impersonal in two senses. First, it is trust in systems or institutions rather than in specific individuals, and, second, unlike interpersonal trust, it is often not based on the personal experience of the trustor.

However, as several writers have noted, trust in organizations often combines both systemic and interpersonal considerations. For instance, Grey and Garsten (2001) have recently noted that the systemic and interpersonal level of trust are interrelated and affect each other. Following, they argue that a full understanding of systemic (organizational) trust is not possible without reference to the individuals who are members of the system and a full understanding of personal trust is not possible without understanding the systemic context in which such personal trust (or distrust) develops. In a similar vein, Zaheer et al. (1998) have noted that in organizations, trust can exist at both the systemic and the interpersonal level.They further noted the importance of studying the influence process between these levels, namely how trust translates from the individual level to the organizational level and from the organizational level to the individual level, and the lack of empirical studies that address this issue.

An important arena in which the interplay between systemic and interpersonal considerations can be studied is trust in formal organizational leaders. Formal leaders stand at the intersection between systemic and interpersonal considerations. Trust in formal leaders islikely to be affected by both systemic considerations, because such leaders represent the organization or the system in the eyes of their subordinates, and interpersonal considerations arising from the interactions between leader and subordinates. Furthermore, the two bases of trust are likely to affect each other. Systemic trust might affect trust in particular leaders, and trust in particular leaders might influence systemic trust. These issues have been ignored in the social-psychological studies of trust in leaders and managers reviewed above.

Therefore, the first purpose of the present study was to contribute to understanding of the relationships between systemic and interpersonal trust and to extend the study of trust in organizational leaders by adding systemic considerations to the interpersonal considerations emphasized by extant theories and studies in this field.

The Role of the Group in Social Construction of Trust

The second purpose of the study was to explore the role that groups play in the formation of trust and distrust in formal leaders and in translating systemic trust to the interpersonal level. It is implicitly assumed in social psychological theories and studies of trust in organizational superiors that each subordinate independently forms his or her opinion of the superior as trustworthy or not and reacts accordingly. However, in most organizational situations, individuals are embedded in groups. Often superiors' actions are not directed to an individual but to an entire group, and even when they are directed to an individual, they may become group-level events. Their interpretation may be socially constructed, and subordinates may react to them as a group.

In other words, between the systemic and interpersonal levels of trust there is often a third level--the group level. Groups may play an important role in the formation of trust in organizations for two reasons. First, trust, like many other attitudes and expectations of organizational members, is not only an individual level phenomenon. It is likely to be a collective phenomenon due to social information processes. Following a long tradition in sociology and social psychology, Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) suggested, that organizational members' job perceptions and attitudes are influenced by social information processes. They argued that individual perceptions and attitudes are influenced by information obtained from the person's immediate social environment, which provides cues which individuals use to construct and interpret work-related objects and events.

This social influence takes various forms. First, it operates by structuring a person's attention processes, making aspects of the environment more or less salient. By noting certain aspects of the environment, and talking frequently about certain dimensions, co-workers cue an individual as to what to consider in the work setting. Second, social influence affects attitudes through the interpretation of environmental cues. More than just focusing attention, others provide their constructed meaning of events. Third, these constructed meanings often include evaluations of objects and events communicated to the individual by the immediate social environment either directly through the overt statements of co-workers or indirectly through their behaviour.

It can therefore be expected that teams of organization members working under the same superior will develop shared interpretations of the superior's trustworthiness, and that individual members' trust-related attributions and perceptions, and indeed the level of trust itself, may be influenced by these shared interpretations. This claim is consistent with Burt and Knez's (1995) argument that third parties in organizations (e.g. other team members) are important conduits of trust because of their ability to diffuse trust-relevant information via gossip and informal communication.

Second, and perhaps more important from the viewpoint of our first research purpose, namely to study the relationships between systemic trust and personal trust, group processes are likely to act as bridging mechanisms between the systemic and personal levels. While individuals may be carriers of systemic values and norms, groups are more likely to embody

these values and norms and to apply them in judgements of trust than any single individual. Groups may also be more likely than individuals to develop or embody values, norms, and expectations that oppose those of the system in which they are embedded. Despite these considerations, group-level processes are virtually missing from the literature on trust in organizational authorities. Clearly, the literature needs to be complemented by bringing such processes into the picture.

Background to the Study

The present study examines the relationships between systemic trust and interpersonal trust in a formal leader and the role that groups play in these relationships in the context of officers' training courses in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Part of the training in these courses is carried out in teams. Each team consists of 15 to 20 cadets under a lieutenant or second lieutenant, who is the team commander. Cadets' trust in the team commanders is the focus of the present investigation. This context is appropriate for studying the relationships between systemic and interpersonal aspects of trust because both types of considerations are likely to be inter-related and affect cadets' trust in their team commanders.

As pointed out by several authors (Hardin 1998; Kramer 1999), in some organizational contexts, trust is likely to be based mainly on calculative or instrumental considerations. In others, it is more likely to be based on relational and moral or normative considerations. The present study was conducted in a latter context. The IDF is a normative institution (Etzioni 1961). It has a high status in Israeli society, and military service, though compulsory, enjoys strong normative support. Furthermore, cadets in officers' training courses are relatively veteran soldiers who have served as non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and have already been socialized into the military system, its values and norms. They volunteer to the officers' training course (which entails an obligation to extend the normal three years service by at least one year) and are being selected to the course in part on thebasis of their motivation to serve. Therefore, due to the nature of the organization and its selection and socialization processes, in such a context, system level considerations are likely to play a salient role in affecting subordinates' trust in their superiors, in addition to the interpersonal considerations emphasized by previous studies.

The study has two parts. In the first part, we employ a large sample of cadets and use quantitative measures and a longitudinal quantitative analysis to demonstrate that cadets' trust in their superiors at the beginning of the course, when they first meet their leaders and before they form groups, is largely an individual-level phenomenon. At this time, the level of trust in the leaders is affected by cadets' personal disposition to trust others and their general level of trust in the system. Later, after several months of interaction with leader, trust becomes more of a group-level phenomenon, and the relationships between trust and the initial bases of trust, namely the personal disposition and the initial trust in the system, weaken.

In the second part of the study, we rely on qualitative analysis of critical incidents of trust building and trust erosion pertaining to a single highly sensitive trust-related issue, that of expulsions from the course. We show how the collective nature of trust is expressed in the way organization members talk about trust building and erosion, and explore some of the group-level antecedents and consequences of subordinates' trust in their superiors. This analysis demonstrates that even after several months of interaction with the leader, trust does not become a purely interpersonal phenomenon. Systemic considerations continue to play a role in determining the level of trust in a superior. More importantly, the analysis shows that the group becomes a major carrier of systemic considerations and plays a major role in translating these considerations into evaluations of the superior's trustworthiness.

The Quantitative Study

Purpose and Hypotheses

In the quantitative part of the study we employed a longitudinal design to compare cadets' trust in their team commanders at the beginning of the course with their trust in the commanders' at a later stage of the course. Due to the high status of the IDF in general and the officers' course in particular, and the selection and self-selection of cadets into the courses, the cadets can be expected to have some level of trust in the team commanders when they arrive at the course. However, when new cadets are randomly placed into teams at the beginning of the course and meet their superiors for the first time, their trust in the commanders is likely to be largely impersonal because the cadets lack knowledge about the trustworthiness of their particular leader. Differences among cadets in the level of trust at this stage are likely to be based primarily on two sources: their personality, and their level of trust in the system that the commanders represent.

First, there are differences in individuals' general disposition to trust others (Rotter 1971). These differences are likely to be reflected in social situations such as relationships with a new superior. Second, there

may be individual differences among the cadets in the level of "category-based trust" or "role-based trust" (Kramer 1999). Category-based trust is depersonalised trust predicated on information regarding the trustee's membership in a social or organizational category. In the case of trust in formal leaders, category-based trust is likely to take the form of "role-based trust"—the assumption that role occupancy signals both intent to fulfil role obligations and competency in carrying them out (Kramer 1999: 578). Such trust develops from people's knowledge about the barriers of entry into organizational roles, their presumptions of the training and socialization processes that occupants undergo, and their perception of various accountability mechanisms intended to ensure role compliance.These perception, in turn, stem for the level systemic or institutional trust, that is the general attitude or expectancy about the social system (Luhman 1979) or institution (Zucker 1986) in which the relationships are embedded, in this case the IDF in general and the officers' course in particular.

However, trust between interdependent actors thickens or thins as a function of their cumulative interaction (Kramer 1999: 575). Therefore, at a later stage of the relationship, after the parties have interacted for some time, and the cadets have been exposed to relevant information about the leader's trustworthiness, personalized trust in the particular leader is likely to be strengthened or eroded. Trust at this later stage is likely to be influenced by the character and behaviours of the leader as revealed in interaction, and the extent to which experience with the leader has either validated or discredited the cadets' initial impersonal expectations. One implication of this process is that the relationships between the two initial bases of trust, dispositional trust and role-based trust, and the level of trust in the leader are likely to weaken as additional bases of trust are added through interaction and experience.

Another implication of this rationale is that at the beginning of the course, there should be no noticeable differences in the level of trust accorded to different team commanders, because the grounds of trusting the leader are general and not specific to each leader. Some differences may be observed due to differences in first impressions and the commanders' reputation, but these differences should be small. Later on in the course, differences among teams of cadets in their level of trust in their leaders should become larger for two reasons. First, subordinates have had a chance to develop evaluations of their leader's trustworthiness on the basis of his or her character and actions, and the latter are likely to differ from one leader to another. Second, cadet teams have had a chance to develop as teams, and engage in social information and social influence processes that may differ from one team to another.

In sum, we expected to find only small differences among the teams in the initial level of trust in the team commanders at the beginning of the courses, and larger differences at alater stage of the courses. In addition, we hypothesized that the initial level of trust in the commanders will be related to dispositional trust and role-based trust, and expected these relationships to weaken at a later stage of the courses.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample included 84 teams of cadets who participated in officers' training courses of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). All cadets and team commanders were male. An attempt was made to collect data from all the cadets participating in the courses given at the IDF officers' training school during a year. Data was collected by questionnaires at three time points: T0 – just before the beginning of the course, when institutional trust was measured; T1 – three days after the beginning of the course, when the disposition to trust, and cadets' initial trust in the commander were measured; T2 – after two thirds of the course, when trust in the commander was measured again. Response rates were 83%, 88%, and 88% respectively. The number of cadets participating at T2 was 1100. Of these cadets, 893 also participated at T1, and 661 participated at all three data collection phases. Analysis was based on the last two samples.

The qualitative study Background

In the qualitative part of the study, we decided to focus on a single issue, which was strongly related to cadets' trust in their commanders, the issue of expulsion from the course. This decision was influenced by several considerations. First, as will be shown later, expulsions and the way they were handled by the team commander emerged from our data as the most crucial issues affecting the level of trust in the commander. This was not surprising because trust and distrust are closely associated with trustor vulnerability (Kramer 1999; Rousseau et al. 1998), and perhaps the most harmful thing that a team commander can do to his cadets is to effect their expulsion from the officer's course.

The consequences of collective distrust

The incidents reported in the previous section suggest that, at least in the minds of the commanders, the role that the team played in the evolution of trust between them and their teams was not limited to the construction of collective perceptions, but included the possibility of collective action. The role of the team as a collective actor was further exemplified in one complex and rather extreme case in which the differences of opinion concerning

an expulsion decision deteriorated to an open power struggle between the commander and his team. The interviewed team commander gave the richest description of this incident:

Interpretation and Discussion of the Qualitative Evidence

In this section, we attempt throw further light on the manifestations of the collective nature of trust described in the previous section by linking them to certain of features of the context in which they occurred and to broader theoretical considerations. We discuss three issues: The role of the group in protecting systemic values, the moral nature of trust in a superior and the vulnerability of superiors to subordinate teams.

The role of the group in upholding systemic values and a collective identity.

Clearly, the team's actions in relation to expulsion decisions by the team commander involved more than automatic manifestations of solidarity. They focused on the content of the decisions and their justification. In order to understand these team responses, we have to remember that the officer's training course is an organizational 'rite of passage', and an expulsion from the course can be viewed as a rite of separation having great symbolic significance. As a consequence of its symbolic relevance, the expulsion issue becomes an arena for negotiating the values and norms of the system. Both sides, the team commander and the team, acted not only to protect themselves or their teammates but also to defend the system and their definition of the system. This is particularly evident from the fact that a substantial amount of controversies between teams and their commanders around expulsion decisions concerned not the prevention of expulsion, but rather cases in which the commander did not act to expel a cadet that the team thought should be expelled. In such cases, the cadets clearly acted as guardians of collective values and standards, and perceived themselves as better guardians of these values and standards than their commander.

The cadets are relatively veteran soldiers who have already been socialized to the military system. By the time they reach the officers' course they perceive themselves and are being perceived by others as legitimate stakeholders in the system, and as members of an 'occupational community' that includes both officers and aspiring officers who share a set ofvalues, norms, and perspectives that apply to the job (Van Maanen and Barley 1984). This is recognized by the organization, which gives them an official role in the expulsion process by taking their evaluations of each other into consideration in the expulsion decisions.

Given the aforementioned considerations and arrangements, no wonder the teams we studied felt they have a right to have a say in the expulsion process, or at least to have a satisfactory explanation for decisions regarding expulsion-related matters. These expectations were directed primarily toward the team commander who, as a trainer in an officers' training course, was expected to embody and transfer to the cadets the values, norms and standards of the organization. As legitimate stakeholders and custodians of system values and norms, the cadets passed a collegial judgement on the expulsion-related actions of the team commander, and based their collective trust in him on this judgement. It is their membership in the same organizational community both with other cadets and with their leaders, and the shared identity and values that this membership implies that provided the basis for their collective evaluations, the criteria they used in these evaluations, and occasionally their motivation and justification for collective action.

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