

# The Emotional Constructs of Trust: A Practical Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to add to the existing body of knowledge about trust; but more specifically, it attempts to increase a leader's self-awareness by examining a seldom considered aspect of trust - the emotional construct. We assert that it is the emotional aspects of trust that are the most difficult to build; but it is also the emotional aspects of trust that have the greatest impact on mission, organization, and leader-follower relationships. To make our case, we will define trust, consider the link between truth and trust, delve more deeply into the emotional constructs of trust, and finally offer leaders some practical actions for trust-building and trust maintenance with followers.

Anyone who has led, followed, or been part of a cohesive team intuitively understands the importance of trust. What most of us lack, however, is the ability to concisely define what trust is and state with clarity how it works (Solomon, Flores, 2001). In fact, while observing a recent Air War College focus group on the subject of trust, the senior leader participants had difficulty framing the notion of trust. One student actually stated that he could not define it, but “knew it when he saw it.”

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## Trust Defined

To help leaders move past the “I’ll know it when I see it” understanding of trust, the following definitions are offered as a benchmark.

- *Trust is the belief that others act in the interest of fairness and social welfare rather than their own self-interest* (Martinez and Zeelenberg, 2015).
- *Trust is the willingness to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations about another’s behavior* (Dunn, Schweitzer, 2005).
- *Trust is an expectancy held by an individual or group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon* (Gurbuz, 2009).

Unfortunately, there are too many definitions of trust for our list to be exhaustive. These definitions discuss the essence of trust, but leave a gap as how is it built. We also propose that trust is built upon “truth.” Borrowing heavily from philosophy’s Correspondence Theory, they establish a working meaning for the trust-truth relationship. Correspondence Theory states that, “what makes a statement true is that it corresponds or maps on to certain things in the world; if those things are indeed the way the statement says they are, then the statement is deemed true” (Pearce, McDaniel, 2005). To make this theory useful for leaders and followers, we will expand this theory to include both statements and physical action. Thus, for a leader’s actions and statements to be true, they must correspond or map to events that actually have occurred, or will occur. Simply: a leader’s words and deeds must align.

## Emotional Constructs of Trust

There is a significant emotional contribution to trust-building. It is critically important for military leaders to understand this, because broken trust within the military

is difficult to repair. Service members are told from the first day of service to trust their training, equipment, and leaders. As new service members transition from civilian life to the military, they begin to change old supports, such as friends, family, coaches, and teachers, for new supports within the military community, like peers, leaders, and chain-of-command. In most cases, service members do not choose their leaders; however, they *do* choose to give them trust. Leaders should not take this transition for granted. General Odierno, former Army Chief of Staff, makes this very point.

*“Whether you’re a Lieutenant, Captain, or a 4-star, you have to constantly earn trust, and they [soldiers] don’t ask for much; what they want you to do is be true to your word. They want to know you’ll fight for them if necessary. They want to know that you’ll make the hard tough decisions if necessary”* (Odierno, 2013).

In “*Building Trust*,” Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores describe trust as a “mood,” a profound way of defining our relation to the world. It is something we can cultivate and often control. The authors further suggest that like other emotions, trusting someone is a choice; therefore, the leader must create the environment for the subordinate to be willing to offer trust. Getting to one’s followers and also knowing the history of the organization one is leading,

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will provide valuable insight into whether building trust will be easy or difficult. Trust is a skill learned over time. The goal is that trust behaviors become automatic to the leader, invisible, put in the background, and no longer occupying the leader’s attention. This then gives rise to substance and innovation, allowing leaders and followers to focus on mission demands keeping trust as the silent foundation. Trust is like air; when it is not present, you

notice and choke (Solomon, Flores, 2001). Trust cannot be compartmentalized. It is the total leader that is taken into consideration by the follower in order for them to determine trustworthiness. A leader's true reputation, personality, temperament, family life, and off duty behaviors cannot be hidden. There is also no set recipe for trust-building. It depends on leader self-confidence, character, genuineness, and truth.

The unique relationship between military leaders and followers is based on trust. It is rooted in the institution and built through a common purpose and mission. Trust is the bond upon which service members bet their lives. The moral purpose of an organization and of personal commitment is the soil in which trust can take root and grow (Christenson, 2007). If the military leader loses that trust, they have lost the ability to lead (Sones, 2013). Furthermore, developing mutual trust-based relationships between leaders and followers is critical for the organization and effective leadership. The follower's trust is what sustains the leader's real authority (Monzani, Ripoll, Peiro, 2015). Trust in an organization depends on the reasonable assumptions, by followers, that leaders can be depended on to do the right thing (Christenson, 2007). Leaders are always on stage, watched by their followers. If leaders panic, a sense of worry can spread. If leaders erupt in anger, that reaction can create a culture of fear. Leader words and actions set the tone for the organization. Leaders must know what pushes their buttons and how they react to different situations (Combs, Harris, Edmonson, 2015). Trust is built from the bottom up based on the leader's emotions and behaviors. Leaders need to be aware of how their attitudes and behaviors build up or tear down trust (Combs, Harris, Edmonson, 2015). The leader must take the time for a critical analysis of the self. Earlier this year, RAND (2015) concluded that, "The [military] services clearly value good leadership behaviors and tools that can help develop good leaders, and the 360 [assessment] is one tool that has value in developing leaders."

In fact, a leader's incidental emotions (emotions not related to the follower) can have a severe impact in trust of the leader. Incidental emotions, like displays of anger, panic, regret, or using derogatory and hurtful words in an open forum are quick ways to tear down trust with followers. These actions will likely create negative and cynical attitudes, leading to increased conflict and decreased productivity. Eventually lost profits or mission failure will result.

Research shows that leaders who recognize the impact of their incidental emotions on followers can actually change the way the follower judges their trustworthiness. Maurice Schweitzer and Jennifer Dunn (2005) describe trustworthiness by the following attributes: "ability, integrity, and benevolence." Leaders can learn to use their emotions as trust-building tools. Leaders should take the steps necessary to curtail the influence that negative incidental emotions have on their followers' perceptions. Successful leaders increase their knowledge of the sources of their own emotions and blind spots (Dunn, Schweitzer, 2005). They are self-aware. For example, if a leader treats people in an open and just way, as well as, displays certain traits such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness, this will likely provide a psychologically secure environment for followers, allowing for a foundation of trust to be built (Lu, 2014).

Siat Gurbuz further explained this concept within his article, "Some Possible Antecedents of Military Personnel Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)." He hypothesized that OCB is a major result of a leader's trust-building efforts. OCB refers to followers that are willing to go above and beyond their prescribed job roles. Some of these traits are commonly known as altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue (Gurbuz, 2009). Followers behave in this manner to gain a "connection of affective trust" with the leader and foster a mutual relationship based on this trust (Lu, 2014). A leader's trust-building efforts directly result in promoting

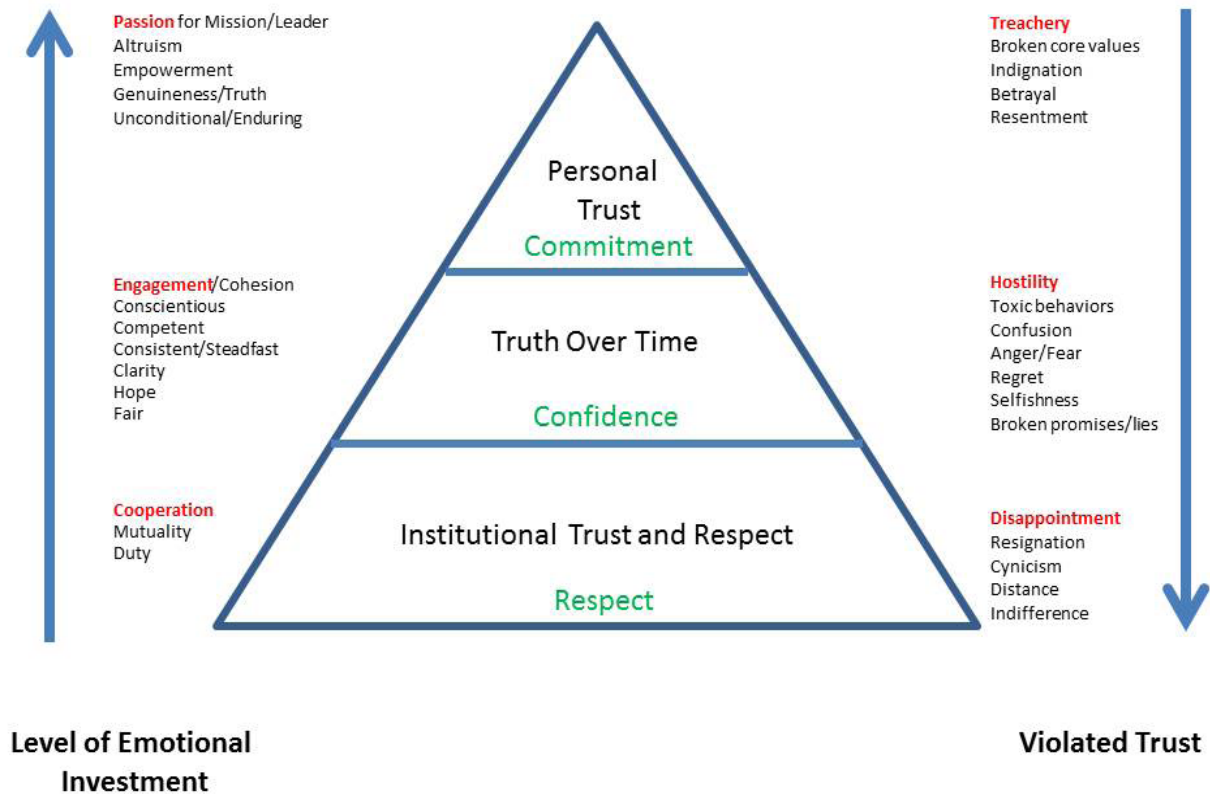
these traits in followers. In an era of do-more-with-less, followers high in OCB are critical for success. This makes leadership trust-building skills that much more important for mission accomplishment. Therefore, investing in these efforts is time well spent for both the leader and the organization.

### Hierarchy of Trust

Building trust and maintaining trust is tricky. Leaders must have it in order to lead, and organizations run more smoothly with it, but when trust is broken, real or perceived, there is an emotional price to pay. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between levels of emotional investment and violated trust.

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Figure 1: Trust Triangle



An individual joining the military usually begins with some imbedded “Institutional Trust and Respect.” This is the basic trust that exists based on our preconceived notions of our military leaders. These are largely engrained by our cultural perspectives. For example, if the follower grew up in a patriotic culture, it is likely that Institutional Trust and Respect is inherent from the first day he/she joins, with some initial trust in his/her military leaders from the start. This “Institutional Trust and Respect” is largely based on cooperation, mutuality, and sense of duty. It can open the door to the emotional aspects of trust-building as the individual moves up the “Trust Triangle” with their leaders. If trust is broken at this level, the follower may become cynical, indifferent, and disappointed with the organization and its leaders. However, broken trust at this level can be repaired.

The intermediate section of the “Trust Triangle” is “Truth Over Time” gained by the follower by seeing the military leader as competent, fair, consistent, and conscientious. These traits displayed over time generate hope and increased engagement for the follower building confidence, cohesion, and increased morale within the organization. Trust broken at this level is difficult to repair. Toxic leader behaviors like selfishness, outbursts of anger, and broken promises create confusion for followers and often lead to a hostile work

environment for them. It will take a consistent, deliberate effort by the leader, over time, to restore trust at this level.

The pinnacle level of the “Trust Triangle” is “Personal Trust.” This occurs when the leader moves the follower toward passion. When a follower becomes passionate, the emotional connection is strong between the follower and the mission and/or leader. It can be described as altruistic, an unconditional and unwavering truth that is tremendously empowering for the follower. This is largely developed by the leader’s genuineness, care, and commitment to the follower and unit. This maximizes mission success through high-level emotional trust. If trust is broken at this level, it is likely unrepairable. The leader may never reach this level of trust with the follower again. Actions like broken core values, betrayal, and treachery will most likely lead to resentment and indignation for the follower.

These two questions are good ones to ask for leaders who are concerned about building lasting trust: 1) What is the best way to invest in these trust-building efforts with followers? and 2) How do I take my organization from the “Institutional Trust and Respect” level to the “Personal Trust” level? Current research offers practical approaches to building trust and helps to answer these questions. Table I shows some of these approaches.

**Table 1: Practical Approaches for Building Trust**

Approach	Reference
Take everyone seriously.	Christianson, 2007
Translate personal integrity into organizational fidelity.	Christianson, 2007
Keep your promises.	Christianson, 2007
Hold the group or subordinate accountable.	Christianson, 2007
Demonstrate competence in your job.	Christianson, 2007
Set clear and compelling directions.	Combs, Harris, Edmonson, 2015
Express concern and appreciation for others well-being.	Combs, Harris, Edmonson, 2015

*(table continues on next page)*

(continued) **Table 1: Practical Approaches for Building Trust**

<p>Know and implement Covey's 13 behaviors for high-trust leaders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Straight talk</li> <li>-Demonstrate respect</li> <li>-Create transparency</li> <li>-Right wrongs</li> <li>-Show loyalty</li> <li>-Deliver results</li> <li>-Get better</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Confront reality</li> <li>-Clarify expectations</li> <li>-Practice accountability</li> <li>-Listen first</li> <li>-Keep commitments</li> <li>-Extend trust</li> </ul>	Covey, 2006
Avoid making quick trust decisions. Make trust judgments over time and on the basis of interactions across multiple contexts.		Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005
Interact, socialize, and develop familiarity with subordinates.		Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005
Show that you care about your subordinates.		Lu, 2014
Provide a psychologically secure environment.		Lu, 2014
Build high-quality relationships.		Lu, 2014
Act as a role model and take responsibility for the organization.		Lu, 2014
Infuse the organization with ethics and stable principles .		Lu, 2014
Explore emotional competence through feedback.		Lucas, Pilar, Jose, 2015
Be open and look to the future, especially when facing challenging situations.		Solomon, Flores, 2001
Cultivate self-trust (trust in one's own abilities, emotions, moods, impulses) - required for building trust with others.		Solomon, Flores, 2001
Practice human leadership. Ensure employees know you are aware of, sensitive to, and understand their individual feelings, thoughts, and experiences.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Handle sensitive information judiciously.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Be honest by saying what will be done, act with integrity by doing what was said will be done, and be credible by following through with commitments.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Determine if organizational policies, procedures, and rules are applied consistently and equitably, and send the message that employees can be trusted.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Build a culture of openness and transparency.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Delegate as much as possible.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Determine what went wrong and why when problems arise, rather than who was responsible.		Starns, Truhon, and McCarthy, 2009
Use strategic emotional displays.		Tortosa, Strizhko, Capizzi, & Ruz, 2013

Applying these practical approaches for trust-building can help leaders transform their relationships with followers. Using Table 1 can improve leader-follower trust and work toward the top of the “Trust Triangle,” see Chart 1. Many of these approaches will directly assist with developing and preserving the emotional constructs of trust described in this article.

Lastly, leaders should remember that followers build trust at different rates. For some, trust-building is slow, for others it is fast. Followers with higher levels of emotional competence typically report higher levels of trust in leaders. Emotional competence can be defined as the capacity to clearly perceive, assimilate, understand, and manage self and other’s emotions. In terms of trust formation, a leader’s ability to understand and manage others’ emotions elicits positive affective states in followers, which is essential for the formation of a followers’ trust (Monzani, Ripoll, Peiro, 2015). Leaders may benefit from choosing followers that are higher in emotional competence to build quick trust-based relationships (Monzani, Ripoll, Peiro, 2015). Staffing an organization with many followers high in emotional competence can help create a healthy environment for all.

### Summary and Conclusion

Definitions of trust can fall short in describing how trust is built, as well as its emotional constructs. In this article, we proposed that it is the emotional aspects of trust that are the most difficult to build; however, it is also the emotional aspects of trust that have the greatest impact on mission, organization, and leader-follower relationships. It is critically important for military leaders to understand the emotional constructs of trust and the connection between trust and truth. Leaders who ignore this understanding will not be as effective, nor will they be able to bring their followers to the pinnacle, “Personal Trust Level,” as described by the “Trust Triangle” in Figure 1. Therefore, the better leaders

understand the emotional constructs of trust, the more effective they will be at establishing and maintaining the trust of others, as well as repairing the damage caused by broken trust if it occurs.

There is an emotional component in every trust relationship. How big and how strong that component actually is depends on many factors including: longevity, specific circumstances and, of course, the track record established by the leader for telling the truth. The longer and more deeply followers trust a leader, the more emotionally vested that person becomes. Figure 1 conceptually depicts the relationship between trust and emotion. The higher the level of emotional investment (left side of the Pyramid) the more significant, and possibly more damaging to the emotional bond, that a breach of trust will have on a

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relationship (right side of the Pyramid.) To this end, Table 1 provides leaders tangible actions to accomplish and keep trust and its emotional constructs strong. Those leaders who wish to enhance their trust with those they lead would be well advised to use it as a reminder of the importance that emotions play in trust-building.

Finally, trust is built upon truth. “You can say all of these things, but unless you actually do them, your words will not build trust; in fact, they will destroy it” (Covey, 2004).

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