



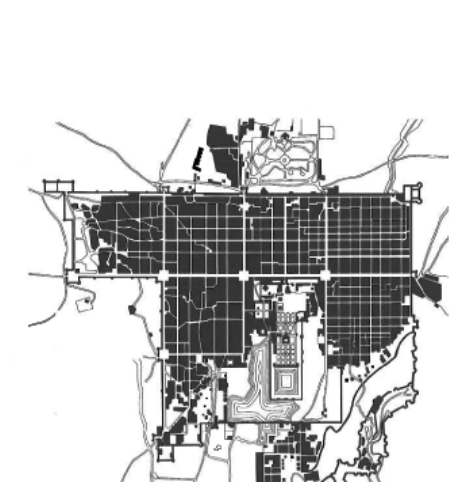
## The trust machine: linking trust with process success

By Ken Bishop

*A fool often fails because what he thinks is difficult is easy.  
A wise man thinks what is easy is difficult.*

John Churton Collins

There are those who maintain that the single most important factor for process success in construction administration is the level of trust existing between project constituents. Everything else that happens in foxhole society (1), both good and bad, springs from this simple axiom. Every syllable of Lean Construction or Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) jargon is premised upon this time honored tradition of trust. From a process standpoint, the truly exceptional building projects result from robust trust based relationships. It is no more complicated than that.



The really cool thing is that everyone knows what trust is; trust is a simple notion in theory. However, its application within a construction setting is an intricate issue as there are many factors that influence trust. Not everyone has the *experience* to know how to belong to and exploit a trust machine, the engine that drives project momentum. The uninitiated (and under-initiated) seldom know how to build and manage trust. Not everyone appreciates how volatile trust can be, what constraints are involved, and how its loss can undermine a project. Attempts to measure trust are generally futile because it is nuanced, defying reliable metrics. Reputation (individual or company) for trustworthiness seems to be the closest we can come to a yardstick for trust. This cannot be captured in a log or chart. Let's explore some of these ideas.

Consider this most basic of construction administration examples as we proceed. As design professionals, we depend upon the contracting team to provide us with timely and qualitative work product in the form of submittals and questions (RFI's) in order for us to perform our project duties. At the same time the contracting team relies upon us to provide timely and qualitative response to these work products to enable them to get the project built. The relationship is symbiotic. However, this symbiosis refers to the close relationship between two parties which can have differing results: mutualism (win-win), parasitism (win-lose), or commensalism (win-no harm). Trust plays a huge part in these assorted possible outcomes.

### Trust Mechanics

How is trust built and managed? There are at least five components to building and managing trust according to one study (2). Trust is constantly tested in the crucible of construction, especially when problems arise. Construction has a component of unpredictability. New or unforeseen information appears, and changes occur frequently. Trust is determined by how people respond when things are *not* going well as much as when they *are* going well.



First, communal *problem solving* builds trust. Accumulated *experience* of repeated fulfillment (reliability) through action and outcome, in good times and bad, creates trust. A profound acuity to get that everyone is *commonly yoked* in the struggle against schedule pressure promotes the understanding that one's job is not performed in isolation. There is empathy within the project ranks that allows them to appreciate the requirements and difficulties others experience. The interdependent team (3) concept allows us to feel each other's pain as well as understanding those moments when people become unequally yoked. *Reciprocity* or quid pro quo is a longstanding and vital currency well understood in the construction game. It is important to the trust machine that favors are returned when supporting and rewarding each other's reliable behavior. Putting oneself out or making sacrifices to make other's lives easier in difficult moments enhances trust. Lastly, *reasonable behavior* that demonstrates pulling one's weight is another way of managing trust. Reasonable behavior is not necessarily about being non-confrontational, but it is about understanding what the people that you work with accept as reasonable. In other words, 'reasonable' is not limited to conventional modes; it is a situational term whose acceptance is directly linked to outcomes. Unorthodox behavior that produces mutually beneficial results is very likely to be accepted for example. Conversely, conventional behavior that inhibits trust often will not be well received.

Trust is a bi-product of people working together and is perhaps the most important variable in the equation for success. Why? Future success as an individual or a company on a project depends on the assured reliability of the work of others. Trust directly influences reliability in the information exchange process. High reliability in work transactions produces beneficial forward momentum in the building process (4). Reliability in the work handoff is the foundational principle for Lean Constructionist salesmen. However, good behavior based upon trust cannot be codified or institutionalized in a manual, cookbook or manifesto. And lest you get the impression that trust is sentimental or ambiguous in the construction environment, be advised there is a very sharp edge to the trust machine. It is as real as cold hard cash. Anyone worth a tinker's damn needs and wants it so they can get their job done.

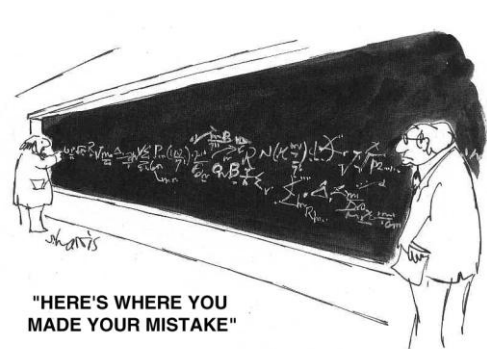
Most individuals start from a *baseline level of trust*, where they are prepared to put their faith in someone. Tapping this innate willingness to trust is a huge benefit, and is the easy part. Even if you have no experience working with someone, there is a trust, but it is a faith based trust, faith being the belief in things unseen. This initial trust is a gift, a benefit of the doubt, borne out of both human nature as well as necessity. This type of trust is freely given (mostly), it is not earned. Thereafter, trust is a commodity that is almost exclusively earned; it is bought and paid for with successful work transactions. When people trust, they are relying on the information that they are being given. They have to trust that the people they work with will deliver work product when they say they will and to an expected standard of quality. To sustain trust, requires continued proof of trustworthiness through performance. This is *demonstrated trust*. The trust meter moves up or down in accordance with deeds (not words). This movement is continuous according to the accumulation of work transactions.

Not everyone on a project can be trusted however. For these folks there is continually demonstrated a lack of trustworthiness through unreliable work and work transactions. To put a finer point on it, one's trustworthiness is directly proportional to the quantity and magnitude of their positive or negative work transactions delivered in a timely or untimely fashion. That means both trust and mistrust can be banked. Banked trust can be used as a hedge against periodic failures or negative work iterations. Trust makes possible exceptions to established rules of process protocol without penalty. Conversely, an accumulation of negative work iterations can be used as an affirmation of mistrust. Trust can also be commandeered or hijacked for ulterior purposes, but not for very long. The posers are quickly sorted out from the trustworthy through their actions. Deeds, not words, fuel the trust machine because the proof of the pudding is in the eating, rather than in a discussion of the pudding's pallet pleasing potential.



Volatility of Trust

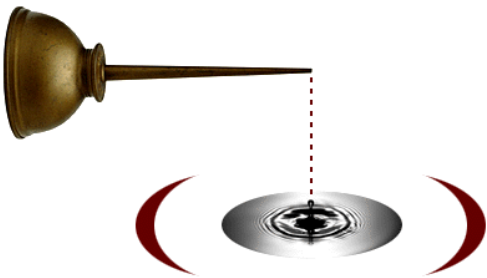
Trust is a volatile commodity requiring constant demonstration to survive and flourish. It can be built or destroyed. It is easily given but difficult to keep. Trust volatility is influenced by several factors including circumstances beyond our control, human fallibility, how mistakes are fixed and fair representation.



Reasonable people understand that outcomes are affected by external factors, things rarely happened in isolation and problems can often be an accumulation of things rather than any single individual’s fault there are circumstances beyond our control. Most folks are ready to be sympathetic. In these cases, degradation of trust can be mitigated if there is a perceived willingness to make people aware of the problem timely, clearly, without deception or malice of forethought. The notion that we are all human and individuals just plain make mistakes is widely acknowledged. So too is there capacity to forgive, without trust degradation, especially where the trust bank is full. It matters less that you make a mistake rather than what you do about fixing the mistake. Admitting to the problem and fixing it ASAP are mitigators of trust degradation. Conversely, not expeditiously correcting the problem or even denying the mistake degrades trust. A negative work iteration compounded by not remediating it is detrimental to the trust machine. Lastly, every project constituent wants fair representation, free and equitable access to enable communication about issues without fear of their message being distorted or misused. Breakdowns of trust occur where people believe there is no access to forums of fair representation to communicate important issues fairly. Overly rigid or biased communication protocols are but one example of this problem.



Trust is constrained by the temporary nature of projects where strangers are thrown together. This makes it harder to generate and maintain trust. Greater project size and complexity make the challenge of maintaining a trust machine easier said than done. Also, constant recourse and retreat to contractual obligation can be an inhibitor of trust. People with experience know their responsibilities and obligations without the need to constantly refer to the contract. Reliance on contractual legislation of trust is a sure sign of a trust deficit. It is not hard to know when your project is a quart low on trust.



The benefit of trust is that it breeds flexibility and agility between project constituents enabling them to cope with the unknown and unpredictable in construction. An accumulation of positive work iterations, once banked, greases the wheels of success – all wheels, not just the squeaky ones. Efficiency is increased through trusted interactions. Uncertainty, therefore risk, is reduced. At times a powerful trust machine can actually begin to re-align allegiances along lines other than contractual obligation – it causes folks to *collaborate treasonably* in the short term for the sake of an immediate and mutually beneficial gain. They will put themselves or their company at risk, if there is enough banked trust. They will take more chances to help others. While project potentates would be aghast at this notion, the project at large usually benefits from such behavior. Developing a trust machine at the front line of collaboration, at the coalface (5), is the most valuable commodity that is sought by all involved. There is no substitute for a well-running trust machine.

Three important facets of our work in construction administration that are heavily underpinned by this idea of trust will be examined in subsequent Foxhole articles. What is the nature of trade and exchange at the front line of collaboration? What influence does our proximity to this front line have on our perception and behavior? How does the character of process rules of engagement affect work transactions?

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Endnotes:

1. Foxhole society in the construction context refers to that group of people, implementers, with distinctive professional cultures, who are harnessed together in a common project environment and whose work is constrained by schedule pressure. The notion of a foxhole society is a term attributable to Paul Cruz.
2. Swan, W., Cooper, R., McDermott, P., and Wood, G., (2002) *Trust in Construction: Achieving Cultural Change*. Centre for Construction Innovation, www.ccinw.com
3. See Foxhole article 2: The Interdependent Team: Foxhole Etiquette
4. Beneficial forward momentum is required in order to overcome public enemy number one, schedule pressure. The adversary in our process is neither the design nor building professional. The common foe of collaboration in the construction environment is *time* in the form of schedule pressure. This is the common foxhole from which we all battle.
5. A British idiom:
  - Someone who is at the coalface is doing the work involved in a job, not talking about it, planning it, or controlling it. *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* © Cambridge University Press 1998
  - In UK business terminology being 'at the coal face' is used figuratively of any worker or manager who is in touch with the day to day processes of the business rather than having ceased to have involvement with the production.
  - It is a way of saying that the person is 'in touch' and appreciates the actualities of the business rather than being a 'bean-counter' (accountant) a 'paper pusher' (administrator) or a 'fat-cat' (overpaid manager).
  - Originally used with reference to miners i.e those who remove coal from the 'face' of the mine, it's now more commonly used to mean any work performed closest to the frontline. *Urban dictionary*