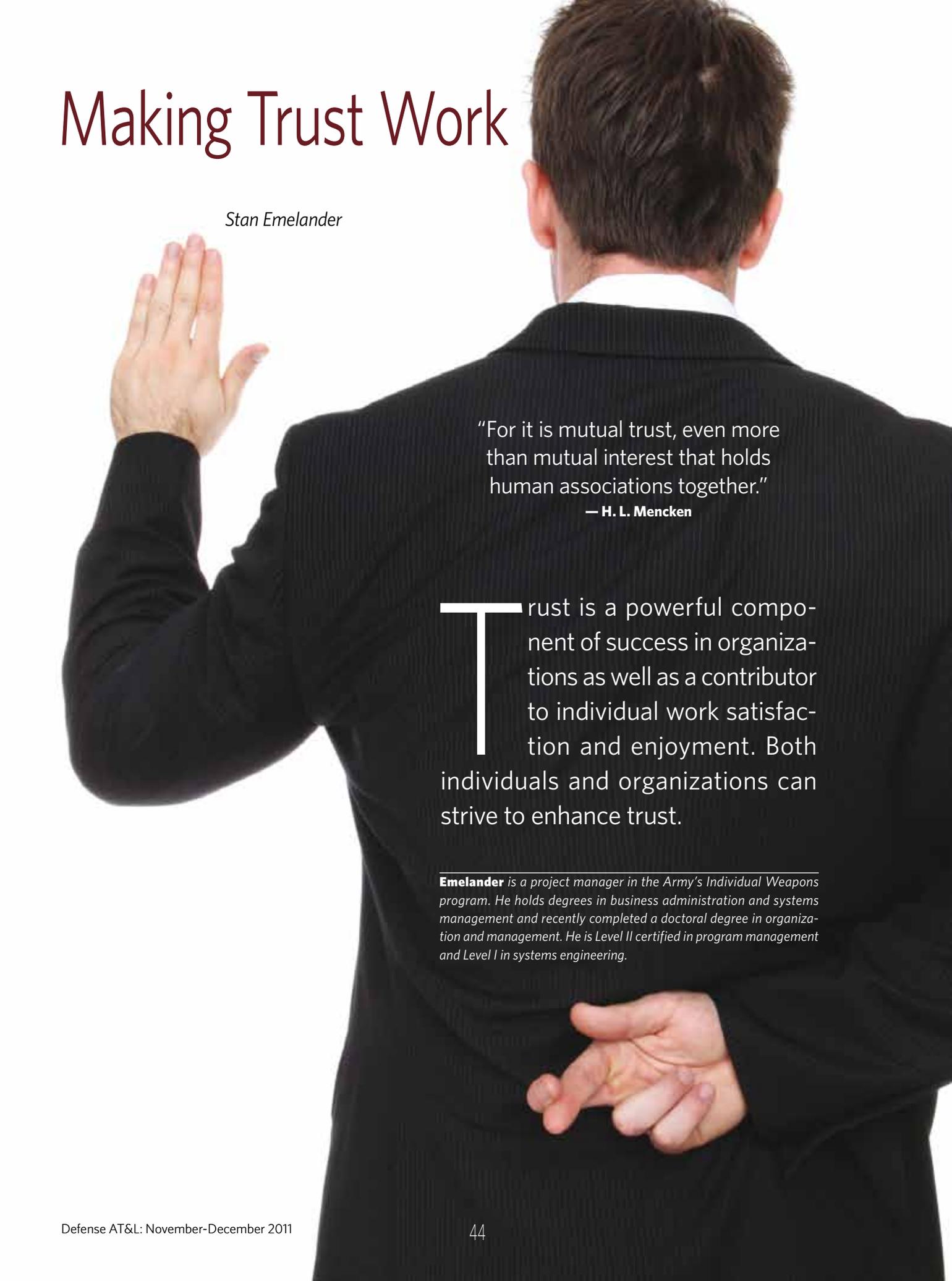


Making Trust Work



Stan Emelander

“For it is mutual trust, even more than mutual interest that holds human associations together.”

— H. L. Mencken

Trust is a powerful component of success in organizations as well as a contributor to individual work satisfaction and enjoyment. Both individuals and organizations can strive to enhance trust.

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Imagine working in an organization where workers and supervisors have strong bonds of trust. Next consider an atmosphere of nonchalance or even distrust. The visceral difference between the two scenes underscores the importance of trust as factor in the workplace. Trust is both the glue that binds successful organizations together and the lubricant that frees workers to be creative and productive. This article describes the benefits of trust, discusses barriers to its formation, and identifies behaviors that build a trusting climate and relationships with special focus on program and project teams and their leaders.

Trust Defined

Trust is a belief that others, including both people and organizations, will behave in a way that does no harm when they are unobserved. Trust varies by degree in two dimensions: interest alignment and competence. Interest alignment can vary from aligned—implying intentional benefit from the object, to neutral—an assumption that the object at least has no harmful intentions, to hostility. Assessments of competence can range from effective to ineffective. Thus, even closely aligned agents will lose trust if their behavior is inconsistent or ineffective.

Importance of Trust

Trust benefits individuals, teams, and whole organizations because it builds a positive social climate, enhancing motivation and productivity. Employees build motivation by identifying with and valuing both their work and the people they work with. Identification with work grows when employees are trusted to make autonomous decisions about their approach to job tasks. When workers identify with their work they also come to value it more highly. Identification and valuing are components of job engagement, which is in turn linked to productivity. Engaged, productive workers are perhaps the most vital component for organizational success and they are also more likely to practice organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), actions outside the bounds of their job description that benefit the organization.

The need for exhaustive monitoring and control is lowered when we trust the values and performance of business partners. Contracting is a recognized area where trust matters to project managers. When parties to a contract trust each other fewer detailed clauses and specifications need to be spelled out in print or be inspected on-site because standards of performance can be relied upon. When a contractor delivers faulty goods or services, trust in their performance is

eroded resulting in the need for increased oversight, a burden to all parties.

Trust is an important factor in teams, especially those that are permanent or semi-permanent. Because of the time spans involved in DoD acquisitions, both project teams and work groups within organizations fit this criterion. Individuals, and the teams they comprise, possess finite amounts of energy to expend on job demands. Trust makes teamwork more efficient by reducing the energy spent speculating about others' motives and capabilities. When team members trust each other, suggestions are less likely to be viewed with suspicion and competition can be replaced with cooperation.

Team creativity and innovation are two other areas related to trust. Innovation always entails a degree of risk, including the threat that the innovator will be attacked or criticized. When team members trust each other their inhibitions are lowered, leading to a freer exchange of ideas. Such exchanges lead to better solutions than any individual could have arrived at alone, a synergy that is one of the major advantages of teamwork.

A leader's trustworthiness is also related to the types of power they can employ. According to the classic French and Raven model, power is built upon five aspects labeled Coercive, Reward, Legitimate, Referent, and Expert. The power a leader may access varies in different circumstances, and it is advantageous to build power in each aspect to enhance effectiveness and flexibility. While coercive power is linked to negative management styles, conditions that erode trust, and legitimate power is trust-neutral, trust enhances the effectiveness of the other three aspects. We tend to trust those who have expert knowledge, are consistent in delivering rewards, and with whom we identify personally (the referent aspect). Leaders and managers at every level, including project managers, can build their power base by being trustworthy.

Barriers to Trust

The differences between people are one of the major sources of mistrust. Overt differences between groups, including race, age, gender and ethnicity, are well-researched barriers to trust formation. We tend to trust in-group individuals more than those from out-groups. While the debate about whether mistrust of this kind is instinctive or learned continues, there is no argument about it being commonplace. More subtle differences, including belonging to different divisions within an organization, also affect trust. Matrix teaming arrangements are pervasive in project management work, and project managers must work with team members representing numerous organizations, such as contracting, test and evaluation, logistics, and budget offices. Opinions about the trustworthiness of the organizations they represent can raise or lower the initial levels of trust such team members are afforded.

Inconsistent behavior towards others impacts trust formation. We build opinions about the character and trustworthiness of people by observing how they behave towards others. When

colleagues act in a Machiavellian, manipulative way towards others in an out-group, team members assume that those same standards could apply to in-group behavior if the conditions are right.

We also carry the seeds of mistrust through our inability to communicate perfectly. Communications are vulnerable to error from both the sender and receiver. Consider the supervisor who states "I do not want be harsh about this." While the supervisor may intend to express empathy, followers may interpret the statement to mean the supervisor considers harsh behavior a realistic option, eroding trust. On the receiving end, people may make use of cognitive shortcuts, called heuristics, to interpret communications without really understanding the content. Heuristics lead us to think that because current events appear similar to the past we know what will happen next, sometimes leading to jaded "been there, done that" attitudes. This thinking can be a barrier to leaders trying to establish credentials as trustworthy change agents in the firm.

All of these factors and more can combine in project teams. Larger projects are often multi-national in scope, including team members with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Matrix management arrangements are the norm in project teams, potentially raising questions about the focus of many team members.

Trust is facilitated by personal contact, but many project teams meet virtually most of the time, reducing the richness of communications and hindering formation of trusting ties.

Building Trust

Efforts to earn trust should flow both ways between leaders and followers. Individual workers must be aware of how co-workers and supervisors form positive opinions of trustworthiness: observation of behavior that is consistent and supportive. An awareness of common barriers to trust, such as out-group

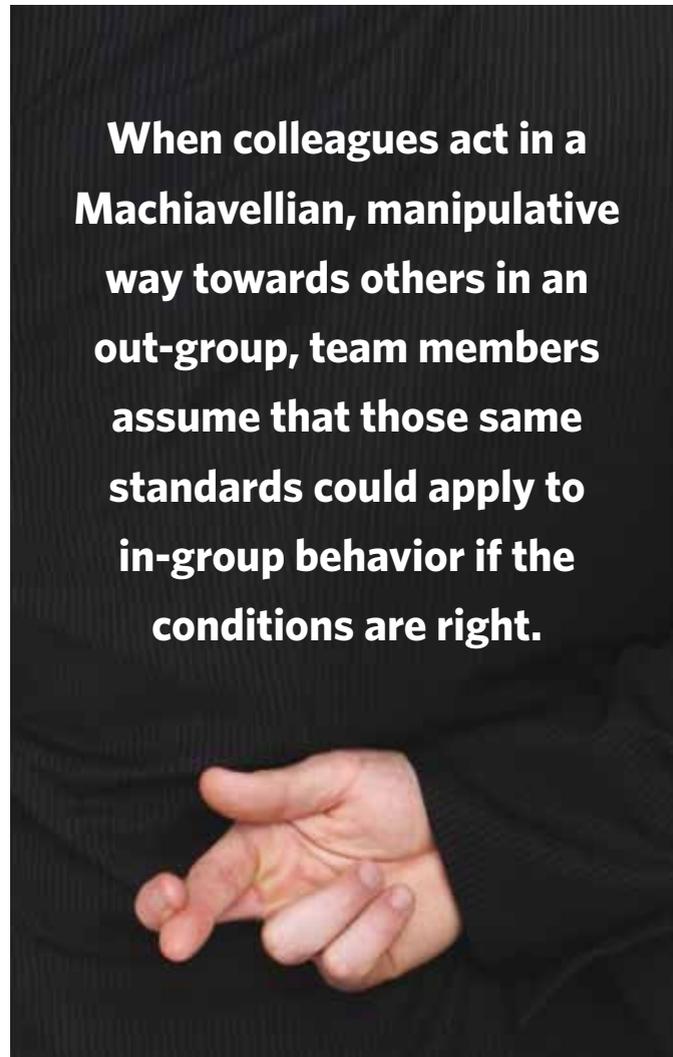
prejudice and heuristics, is a first step in working to become more trusting oneself. Avoiding emotional confrontation and behavior that could be interpreted as backstabbing establishes a foundation of trustworthiness. It is also important for employees to communicate frequently and honestly, keeping supervisors and team members abreast of information they need to perform effectively.

Interactions with other team members deserve special mention. Teams make their best decisions by comparing ideas,

a process that inevitably involves individual members proposing different plans or points of view. Hurt feelings and resentment can result if the subsequent discussions turn personal, detracting from trust between team members. Individuals, as well as team leaders, have a responsibility for keeping discussions and disagreements at a cognitive level, dealing with facts, rather than degenerating into attacks on persons. Supportive, positive attitudes are also linked to trust, cooperation, and higher performance in work teams.

Supervisors can work to both build trust in themselves and develop followers into trustworthy members of the organization. Trust building for supervisors consists of both do's and don'ts. The don'ts include behaviors that contribute to an overly controlling environment. Specific behaviors to avoid include berating, giving negatively charged feedback, micro managing,

and controlling the conversational agenda. The do's include behaviors that encourage worker autonomy, including provision of non-judgmental informational feedback, ensuring that employees have the resources needed to be effective, and delivering on promised rewards. Supervisors are always under observation by followers, and being aware that behavior towards out-group persons will influence in-group opinions can help establish the needed level of consistency. For some supervisors, trusting employees may involve an



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uncomfortable leap of faith, especially in organizations that have developed a culture of control and secretiveness.

Organizational policies and processes also play a role in establishing a culture that supports trust.

Transparency is an important consideration at the organizational level related to trust. The opposite of the consistency component of trust is uncertainty, and transparency reduces uncertainty about organizational processes. Transparency affects the effectiveness of rewards, including promotions and monetary rewards. When the processes for distributing rewards are secret or opaque to employees they may respond with mistrust. Transparency in communications and decision making are other well-recognized factors, with application at all levels in the organization. Project managers as well as executive leaders build confidence when their decision processes are communicated and understood.

Organizations can also take action to reduce the barriers between in- and out-groups. Human resource professionals may work to establish a pro-diversity workplace through

awareness and education programs. Outreach through sponsorship of events, such as multi-cultural social gatherings, and recognition of the contributions of minority groups are other recommended activities. Human resource departments can also be vigilant for incidents of unfairness and conflict, both resulting from in-out group conflict and related to organizational processes. On project teams, the PM usually wears the human resources hat, along with their other responsibilities. As a team leader they should be conscious of the need to lower barriers by respecting and encouraging out-group members to play an active role in planning, decision making and strategy execution.

Trust is important because it has a real impact on organizational performance in terms of both efficiency and effectiveness. It also dovetails with other areas of importance to organizations such as leadership and high-performance human resource development. It is an expression of values with application at the individual, supervisory, and organizational levels and helps allow project teams to rise to their potential.

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