

Trust in the Workplace: Factors Affecting Trust Formation Between Team Members

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ABSTRACT. The authors used survey data from 127 professional-level employees working in 8 industries to assess the effects of respondent's trusting stance and (a) the trustee's organization membership (internal or external), (b) the hierarchical relationship (supervisor or peer), and (c) the gender of the trustee, on initial trust level for a new project team member. The authors found that trusting stance was positively related to initial trust level. The authors also found an interaction effect between respondent gender and trustee gender on initial trust. Specifically, male initial trust level was higher for a new male team member and lower for a new female team member. The present study provided additional understanding of the formation of initial trust levels and its importance for team functioning.

Key words: gender trust, team trust, workplace trust

KARL (2000) noted that trust among organizational members is at an all-time low, and Morris (1995) found that 56% of nonmanagement employees in 57 service and manufacturing organizations viewed a lack of trust as a problem in their respective organizations. A comprehensive review of the trust literature (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998) showed that personal trust is linked to cooperation, performance, and quality of communication in organizations. Working well together requires some degree of trust, and the type of work encounters that occur in today's organizations require trust to be formed rather quickly (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998).

Investigators can view trust as an attitude held by one individual, the truster, toward another individual, the trustee. Trust in individuals is an expectation or belief that actions from another party will be motivated by good intentions. Moreover, individuals take a risk in this belief because the other party may not

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act out of benevolence (Whitener et al., 1998). A critical time for the development of trust for another person in an organizational context is the beginning of the relationship. Models of trust levels (Creed & Miles, 1996) and initial trust (McKnight et al., 1998) among employees show that trust is based on an individual's propensity to trust (trusting stance) and on variables associated with the situation. The present study empirically tested initial trust formation antecedents, including a trust formation variable and several situational variables that are relatively common among the increasingly diverse composition of work-force teams.

Trusting Stance

Trusting stance is the degree to which an individual consistently deals with people as if they are well-meaning and reliable across situations and persons. It is a conscious choice to trust people until they prove untrustworthy (McKnight et al., 1998). The indications of empirical research have been mixed on whether trusting stance leads to the development of interpersonal trust, and a link has not yet been established. However, McKnight et al. asserted that in new relationships among organizational members, an individual's trusting stance will positively impact the degree of initial trust for another individual.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with a high trusting stance are more likely to have a higher initial trust for coworkers than are individuals with a low trusting stance.

Organizational Affiliation

Because of the burgeoning consultant workforce, it is becoming more and more prevalent that project workers may be composed of individuals who are either internal or external to the organization. The ability of an organization to effectively develop and maintain strategic partnerships between internal employees and external employees has become a critical competence (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). Yet little research has been done on initial trust levels between internal and external employees in the workplace. Investigators could speculate that an organization would give "insiders" a greater degree of initial trust because the organization assumes that they operate under their rules and norms but that the organization would consider "outsiders" as more unknown and therefore possibly less trustworthy.

Kramer (1999) called this type of trust that the organization gives to insiders *category-based trust*, which occurs when individuals from a specific group of an organization might place high trust on each other simply because of their shared membership within this group.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals will exhibit higher initial levels of trust for employees from their own organization than for employees from a different organization.

Hierarchical Relationship

The hierarchical position that a person possesses within an organization can influence the initial trust levels that a coworker has for that person. Kramer (1999) stated that *role-based trust* is influenced by the knowledge that a person's occupation of a specific role can determine the trust level that one has for various employees within organizations because knowledge of the role can substitute for personalized knowledge of the individual. Some researchers (e.g., Butler, Cantrell, & Flick, 1999; Wells & Kipnis, 2001; Whitener et al., 1998) have studied the behaviors that enable coworkers and supervisors to earn each other's trust, but no researcher has experimentally tested initial differences between trusting a supervisor and trusting a coworker. Wells and Kipnis reported a statistically significant relationship between dependency and trust. Often there is more dependency on a supervisor (e.g., for performance reviews, promotions, skill development, task assignments, etc.) than on a coworker, supporting the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals will exhibit higher levels of initial trust for employees who are superiors than for employees who are peers.

Trustee Gender

The present study examined whether the gender of the trustee plays a role in initial trust. With the advancement of women into professional positions, work teams are more likely to include both male and female employees. Two studies (Keller, 2001; Williams, 2001) have asserted that trust levels are higher within the same gender, while another study (Wells & Kipnis, 2001) did not report a gender difference. Tyler and Kramer (1996) discussed the idea that ethics and morals are highly related to trust, and Kipnis (1996) noted that the terms *ethical* and *moral* are used to describe trusting behaviors. Some research in the area of ethics indicates that survey respondents perceived women to be more ethical or trustworthy than men (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Paterson & Kim, 1991).

Hypothesis 4: Individuals will have higher levels of trust for employees who are women than employees who are men.

Method

Participants

Participants were professional employees ($N = 127$) who were working regularly in an office environment of 19 major corporations in the northeast United States. According to self-reported demographics, the mean age of respondents was 34 years ($SD = 9.19$). They had a mean of 12 years of work experience ($SD = 9.87$). Of all participants, 46% were men, and 54% were women. Of all

participants, 76% were white, 11% were Asian, 8% were African American, 2% were Hispanic, and 3% were of other ethnic origins. Participants represented a variety of industries, including—in order of descending percentage—the pharmaceutical industry (32.3%), information technology (20.5%), advertising (18.9%), and consulting (18.1%). The remaining 10.3% were from finance, publishing, and insurance. Of the 32% of the participants who were consultants, 88% had previously worked in a client-consultant relationship.

Procedure

Participation in the study was voluntary. We either approached participants in person in their offices or e-mailed them the survey on a one-on-one basis. We explained that the study was for research purposes only and involved the participant's attitudes and experiences regarding trust in the workplace. Study materials with instructions were distributed to consenting participants with random assignment to experimental conditions. Participants were told that their surveys would be collected on a particular future date and that they could complete them at their own leisure before that time.

The survey consisted of three sections. First, we asked participants to read and sign a consent agreement explaining the study and assuring anonymity. Second, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire assessing their trusting stance and to then play the role of an employee in a hypothetical work scenario while reading one of eight organizational scenarios depicting trust issues. Third, we asked participants to complete a questionnaire that we had designed to assess reactions to the scenario, manipulation checks, and biographical information. Once the surveys had been completed and collected, the participants were thanked and debriefed regarding the purpose of the study.

Manipulations

General. The appendix shows the full text of the scenario. All participants were asked to play the role of a coworker and read a scenario depicting the situation of a new member of their project. The first paragraph of the scenario described the organization. The second paragraph described a critical project that the respondent (truster) had been asked to participate in. The deadline for the project was fixed, and the current number of resources that was assigned to this project prevented them from meeting the deadline. So, the organization brought in an additional team member to assist the team with getting the project completed on time. Finally, the new team member was described in the scenario as a real "take charge" employee who felt that the critical deadline was no problem.

We embedded the three manipulations in the scenario. We manipulated *organizational affiliation* by stating whether the new employee was from the same organization (internal condition) or came from an outside organization (external

condition). We depicted *hierarchical relationship* in the scenario by stating whether the new employee was a coworker or a supervisor on the project team. We manipulated *trustee gender* in the scenario by stating whether the new employee was a man or a woman and by using the corresponding gender-based pronouns (either “he” and “him” or “she” and “her”) throughout the scenario.

Manipulation checks. We used three items to check the manipulated variables. The items were in multiple-choice form, including the correct response and two distracters. The majority of respondents endorsed their correct manipulations for the three variables: for organizational affiliation, 94% were correct, for hierarchical relationship, 93% were correct, and for trustee gender, 83% were correct.

Measures

Trusting stance. We measured trusting stance using the Interpersonal Mistrust-Trust Measure (IMTM) that McLennan and Omodei (2000) had developed. Participants rated 18 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Through the items, we asked, for example, whether the participant believed that a stranger had sinister motives, believed that his or her workmate had a headache, and believed that an attendant’s recommendations in a department store was accurate.

The present researchers scored items in such a way that the higher scores indicated a more trusting stance. McLennan and Omodei (2000) showed that the measure exhibits reliability and construct validity. Cronbach’s coefficient alpha reliability estimate for the scale in the present study was .76.

Initial trust level. We measured initial trust level in the workplace, the dependent variable, using a 15-item scale in response to the workplace scenario presented. We developed this scale for the present study. Participants rated the items on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

We scored items in such a way that the higher scores indicated a higher initial trust level. Examples of items are “Your first impression of this person is of low trust,” “You could confide in everyone except this new person,” and “You could depend on this new person for getting the job done.” Cronbach’s coefficient alpha reliability estimate for this scale was .93.

Design

We used a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ experimental design to examine the effects of trusting stance and the three manipulated variables on the participant’s initial trust level for the new project team member. The three manipulated variables were (a) the trustee’s organization membership (internal or external), (b) the hierarchical relationship to the participant (supervisor or peer), and (c) the gender of the trustee.

Results

The mean score for trusting stance was $M = 5.04$ ($SD = .68$), indicating that, on average, this sample was toward the trusting end of the continuum. The mean score for the dependent variable, initial trust level, was $M = 3.82$ ($SD = 1.06$), which is just below the midpoint of the 7-point scale. The correlation between the two was $r = .35$ ($p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for initial trust across the manipulated variables. We did a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test Hypotheses 2–4 as shown in Table 1. We found no main effects for trustee's organizational membership, participant's hierarchical relationship, or gender of the trustee, thus demonstrating no support for Hypotheses 2–4.

We found an interaction effect between respondent gender and trustee gender. Trust levels varied among male respondents, who indicated low initial trust levels

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Initial Trust Across Levels of the Manipulated Variables (Summated Scales), Univariate $F(15, 111)$ Statistics, and Effect Sizes

Independent variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	Univariate <i>F</i> test	<i>p</i>	Effect size (η^2)
Organization				.72	.20	.01
Internal	58.62	16.59	63			
External	56.03	15.18	64			
Relationship				.33	.29	.00
Peer	56.17	13.72	63			
Superior	58.44	17.80	64			
Trustee gender				1.66	.10	.01
Male	59.37	15.15	64			
Female	55.22	16.45	63			
Respondent gender				.40	.27	.00
Male	58.86	16.35	58			
Female	55.48	15.24	69			
Respondent gender $\times$ Trustee gender				4.04	.02	.04
Respondent gender–male				6.42	.01	.10
Trustee gender–male	61.25	15.43	24			
Trustee gender–female	51.41	13.93	34			
Respondent gender–female				.13	.36	.00
Trustee gender–male	58.25	15.06	40			
Trustee gender–female	59.69	18.23	29			

Note. $R = 399$. Higher (summated scale) means indicate higher levels of trust.

for a new female employee on the team and higher initial trust levels for a new male employee on the team. There were no effects among female respondents.

Discussion

Our results indicate that trusting stance is positively related to initial trust level in the workplace, thus supporting prior theory (McKnight et al., 1998). Hence, the more an individual has a propensity toward trusting others, the more likely he or she will attribute trustworthiness to a new work associate.

We found no main effects for the manipulated variables. However, one interaction among the variables was found: that men possess a higher initial trust level for other men than they do for women. Women, however, showed no differences in trust level across gender. Finding higher trust levels for members of an individual's own demographic group is consistent with prior theory (Creed & Miles, 1996; Keller, 2001; Williams, 2001). Williams asserted that social categorizations are the mechanisms through which group membership influences trust development and that perceptions of trustworthiness are based on cognitive shortcuts such as stereotyping. In studies of cross-functional groups (by age, gender, and ethnicity), Keller found that demographic similarities among group members tend to increase the formation of interpersonal trust and relations. Both Keller and Williams have asserted that future research is needed on what particular mix of functional backgrounds and demographics specifically affects trust development. Although prior research supports an interaction effect—in that men will trust men, and women will trust women, more than they will people of the opposite gender—the present study found this difference to be the case for men only, yielding a main effect for one gender only.

Interestingly, we found no effects for two of the manipulated variables, organizational affiliation and hierarchical relationship. These results indicate that whether the new team member is from another, external organization or from within the organization does not affect the initial trust level. Moreover, trust is not affected by whether the new team member is a peer or a superior. Possibly the reasons for attributing trust to an external team member are different from those to an internal team member, and possibly the reasons for attributing trust to a peer are different from those to a supervisor. For example, one might trust an internal team member because of kinship or camaraderie but also trust an external team member because of the attribution of higher (specialized) expertise and competence. Investigators need further research to examine these possible differences.

Limitations of the present study exist. Although data were collected from adults working in a variety of organizations, the participants were reacting to a simulated role-play rather than to a real situation. Investigators have accepted role-play as a surrogate in experimental research (Greenberg & Folger, 1988) on attitudes of sensitive topics such as relationship situations in the workplace (e.g., Jones, 1999). Moreover, the participants' lack of actual involvement

in the situation most likely lessens the effects that investigators would find in a real witnessed situation (Stone & Kotch, 1989). Investigators who add more realism while still manipulating and controlling experimental variables, possibly using videotape or virtual-reality technology, could observe more accurately the causal relationships that the present study indicates (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997). Very promising but technically sophisticated tools for the future study of trust are Microworlds (DiFonzo, Hantula, & Bordia, 1998), which are computer-generated environments that simulate real-world conditions.

An additional limitation of the present study, which is associated with its nature and methodology, is due to possible demand characteristics or social desirability. These might have caused errors in our measures of any main effects that we found, such as those for trusting stance, but are less likely to have caused errors in our measures of interaction effects.

Finally, although the sample of the present study included adults working in a variety of industries, all were in white-collar jobs in the northeastern part of the United States. Generalizability of these results is limited to this population.

Understanding initial trust levels is important for the improvement of team functioning. Work groups are more commonly composed of both genders than before, and team members of each gender need to be aware of a possible tendency to be less trusting of the opposite gender, so that they can overcome these biases. While investigators can argue that some degree of skepticism is healthy, Keller (2001) has found that trust levels tend to stay in their initial direction, either upward or downward. Thus, initial trust levels are highly important because they may start a negative trend.

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APPENDIX

Scenario Text

The text of the scenario that we used in the present study follows. The terms “AND,” “OR,” “<,” and “>” indicate the alternatives that we used to vary the scenario.

Please read the following carefully and picture yourself in the situation described.

Ace Inc. is a typical mid-size corporation where you have been working for over 4 years. Your department consists of 20 individuals with diverse and varied backgrounds. The competition is fierce and fast-paced, therefore, the team must be highly creative, competent, and work together well.

Earlier in the week, you and eight other coworkers were selected to work on a new project with a critical deadline. A memo went out yesterday stating officially that this project must be completed by the end of this upcoming July, which is only three months from now. Yesterday, you and your new team members got together to discuss this new project. Your team felt that meeting this deadline with only eight people seemed impossible. Your team presented this information to your Project Sponsor to justify a request for two to three additional members on your team. The Project Sponsor said that he would see what he could do.

A few days pass, and you and your team are beginning to worry because you need the additional team members soon so they can be brought up to speed and begin working.

This morning, you were introduced to a man/woman that was selected to join you and your team on the project.

<This man/woman has been with your company for a few years, yet you have never worked with him/her>

OR

<This man/woman is from an outside firm and was brought in to work on this project>

AND

<You will be working with this man/woman on the project as coworkers both reporting to the same manager.>

OR

<You will be directly reporting to this man/woman on the project>

Later that afternoon, a kickoff meeting was held for the project team to discuss the project milestones and deadlines. The Project Sponsor opened up the meeting by having everyone in the room introduce themselves and say a few words.

The new man/woman that just joined the team today had a very take-charge attitude. He/She stated that his/her prior experiences should be a good asset to the success of the project. Furthermore, he/she emphasized that he/she felt that the deadline was no problem with the current total of nine team members. The Project Sponsor then thanked him/her for his/her insightful comments and opened up the floor to the rest of the team to get their

input. Nobody said anything to the contrary (although yesterday the general consensus from the team was that we needed two to three additional people—not just one person).

After the meeting, some of your team members gathered around the watercooler to discuss the meeting that they just attended. The team starting discussing their opinions of this new person and what that person said regarding that the deadline was “no problem.” You didn’t say anything and left the kitchen with your coffee in hand, and began thinking about your feelings about this new person. On your way out, you saw this new person whispering in a corner to the Project Sponsor and you wondered what they were talking about.

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