

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - STEP 1: BUILD THE RIGHT TYPE OF TRUST

While I am originally from California, I've lived in Europe for the last 15 years and, believe me, it was not a simple transition. I had serious growing pains when it came to building a network of friends. In America, I had moved from California to the East Coast and then eventually to the Midwest. And in all those moves I was able to quickly form a network of close friends and colleagues. But when I moved to Belgium, and then eventually to Denmark, I found that forming friendships and tight working relationships was significantly more difficult.

Over time, I learned that my way of forming relationships wasn't working with my local colleagues and neighbors. I was always kept at a more formal distance. It was like they didn't fully trust me. Only after a long time did I realize that I was missing a key component of their culture. I wasn't spending time building personal relationships. At work, I was trying to prove myself by being a super reliable and competent colleague. In my rugby team, I was always there for practice. But in both situations, I was trying to form relationships but only in a very professional manner. I wasn't letting them meet the "whole" me.

Eventually, I learned that this type of problem with forming relationships is very common with Americans moving to certain European countries. In fact, different cultures around the world form relationships and collaborate as colleagues in many different ways. We can differ on how we communicate, how we disagree with each other, and even what types of leaders are preferred. These types of differences are critical for us to understand as we work with people who are different from us. I especially want to highlight the importance of this skill for every people leader. But as I studied cultural differences more and more, I realized something important. I am not the stereotypical ambassador for America, and the people I meet do not always match their cultural stereotypes. So instead of trying to form relationships based on cultural stereotypes, I started to view people as individuals and try to form relationships based on their individual preferences. And now I want to share my lessons with you. Over a series of seven articles, I will share with you the different dimensions of collaboration, and how you can improve your relationships with your colleagues, your customers, and even in your personal life.

This is the first article of the seven, and it is focused on how different people build trust within their relationships.

The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

1. How do we build trust? - Task based vs Relationship based trust
2. How do we communicate with each other - Low Context vs High Context Communication
3. What is expected from leaders? - Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
4. How do we want decisions to be made? - Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
5. What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
6. How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
7. What is our approach to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? - Linear Timelines vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer's book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is a ton of value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences, you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

Dimension 1 - How Do We Build Trust?

Trust is all about vulnerability. Members of great teams trust one another on a fundamental, emotional level, and they are comfortable being vulnerable with each other about their weaknesses, mistakes, fears,

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and behaviors. They get to a point where they can be completely open with one another, without a filter. The same can be said about strong customer relationships. The more they trust you, the more they are willing to be in business with you.

But building is not easy, and how to build it can vary from person to person. Some people build trust through their head, while others build their heart, and others are a mixture of the two. People that primarily use their “heads” when building trust are said to prefer Task-Based Trust. This type of trust is built through business- related activities. Work relationships are built and dropped easily based on the practical needs of the situation, and trust grows when deadlines are met and goals are achieved. People with higher Task-Based Trust tend to prioritize efficiency and productivity over relationships.

On the other side of the spectrum, people that build trust through their “hearts” are said to prefer Relationship- Based Trust. In this type of trust, there is greater emphasis on building trust through sharing meals, engaging in meaningful conversations, sharing personal interests and concerns, etc. Work relationships build slowly over the long term. Someone with a relationship-based approach to trust building might think, “I’ve shared personal time with you, and I know others who trust you. Therefore, I trust you.”

While you might already have a good idea on which type of trust you prefer, there is an easy way to find out. Answer the below three questions, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for building trust.

1) It is better not to get too emotionally close to colleagues, suppliers, and clients.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2) I often invest time in sharing coffee, meals, or drinks with colleagues, suppliers, and clients—without discussing work much, just getting to know one another.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
3) I can't really trust a colleague, supplier, or client until I spend time getting to know her personally.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference to Building Trust.	High Task-Based Trust	Slight Task-Based Trust	Mixed	Slight Relationship-Based Trust	High Relationship-Based Trust

Building Trust with People Different Than You

It goes without saying that if your preference for trust matches the other person, then forming a trusting relationship will be quite easy for you. But what do you do if you are high Task-Based Trust and the other person is high Relationship-Based Trust? Or what about the reverse. Don’t worry ... forming relationships with people that have different collaboration styles than you is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

What you should do if you are higher Task-Based and the other person is more Relationship-Based:

- Schedule relationship time - Don’t just assume that delivering on your promises builds trust with the other person. Be willing to invest time in getting to know them personally. For people for whom this does not come naturally, we recommend putting relationship time on the agenda of your meetings and in your calendar. For example, don’t just start talking at work at the start of a meeting. Ask them about their weekend, and (most importantly) ask follow-up questions. Show that you are interested in them as a whole person and not just as a teammate or customer.
- Invite them for meals - One of the easiest ways to build Relationship Based Trust is to spend time with the person outside of the office. We recommend inviting the person to lunch or after work drinks. But the critical thing to remember when sharing a meal or drinks is to leave the work discussions back in the office.

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Talk about everything except work. While it might seem strange to people who prefer Task- Based Trust, talking about things outside of work is critical to build Relationship-Based Trust.

- Share your imperfections - Sometimes Task-Based Trust people want to present themselves as the most reliable, most trustworthy, or overall best colleague / customer partner. But Relationship-Based Trust is actually strengthened by sharing one's imperfections. Think about your close friends. Do you think they are perfect, or do you know that they have their own faults and issues. By sharing your own imperfections, you are demonstrating to the other person that you trust them and that you have nothing to hide.
- Call don't email - People with a preference for Task-Based Trust can come across as cold or superficial, especially in emails with people on the other side of the spectrum. This is due to Task-Based people focusing their communication on being efficient. They don't want to waste the other person's time, so their emails or phone calls jump straight to the issue at hand. While efficiency is a great way to build Task-Based Trust, it is a crap way to build Relationship-Based Trust. So instead of emailing the person, give them a call, or better yet, schedule a face-to-face meeting (in person or virtual).

What you should do if you are higher Relationship-Based and the other person is more Task-Based:

- **Demonstrate reliability** - Task-Based Trust people build trust through actions over time. If you say you are going to do X, then you should deliver X. But even when you can't demonstrate reliability yet (for example in the first meeting), make an effort to share stories of your past where you demonstrated the desired skills. For example, sharing with a new customer some stories about how you helped other customers. This kind of information helps the other person trust that you can do what you promise.
- **Communicate efficiently** - While getting to know the personal side of the person may be important to you as a Relationship-Based Trust person, you need to recognize it is not critical to the other person. That doesn't mean you can't talk about your personal lives or ask the other person questions about theirs. But instead of talking about those things in the beginning of the meeting, save those topics for the end of the meeting. In this manner you will prioritize the topics that will help build their Task-Based Trust, while not ignoring the need to build the relationship.
- **Keep inviting them to things** - Just because Task-Based Trust people don't prioritize social interactions (meals, drinks, karaoke, etc.), doesn't mean they don't enjoy them. They just don't always equate having dinner with building trust in a professional setting. So continue to invite them, but don't pressure them or get mad if they say no.
- **Don't get offended** - Task-Based Trust people can come across as all business and cold, never allowing you to get to know them. Or similarly, they can come across as very superficial and fake, as it might come across that they are just being polite and not really interested in your weekend plans. It is important in those moments to not get offended by their actions. Remember that they are trying to build trust in another way, and it isn't something they are consciously choosing because of you.

Are You a Peach or a Coconut?

I want to leave you with one key reminder when building trust. Do not equate friendliness with feelings of trust. Some people will give off the impression that they trust you, but it is just superficial friendliness. Erin Meyers refers to these kinds of people as Peach people. They will smile, be polite, share some information about themselves, and ask personal questions to people they just met. But when you dig a little deeper with these people you get to the hard shell of the peach pit. This is the shell that protects their real self, and it is something they only share with a few select others.

At the other end of the friendliness spectrum are the Coconut people. Initially, they are very closed (like the tough shell of the coconut). They don't smile at strangers, ask personal questions to people they just met, or offer personal information about themselves. When trying to form relationships with these people, it takes a long time to crack their hard shell, but once you do you are in. These kinds of people take a long time to form relationships, but the few relationships they have are very strong.



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It is important to understand what type of ‘fruit’ the other person is when trying to build trust with them, both Task-Based and Relationship-Based. The friendliness of the Peach person can give you the impression that they prefer Relationship-Based trust and that you already have a deep connection. In all likelihood, they could just as easily prefer Task-Based Trust, and you probably don’t have a deep connection yet. Similarly, a Coconut person gives the impression they aren’t looking for Relationship-Based Trust, when, in reality, it may be exactly what they are looking for.

If I could leave you with anything after reading this article, it is that everyone has their own individual approach to deciding who to trust. If you want to form more productive relationships with your colleagues or your customers, then you need to respect that individuality. You need to be willing to adapt your style to fit their perceptions of trust. The “Golden Rule” of treating others how you want to be treated is the wrong approach. Instead, you need to start following the “Platinum Rule” of treating others how they want to be treated. Only then will you consistently build the trust you need for healthy and productive relationships.

Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently the Talent Manager for SimCorp the world’s leading provider of integrated investment management solutions for investment and asset managers. He holds a Master’s degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master’s degree in Business Administration.

You can follow his blog at www.cavemaninasuit.com or download leadership and team development tools at (<https://highperformanceculture.org/>)