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ILR Impact Brief - Building Trust and Cooperation in Boundary-Spanning Teams

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ILR Impact Brief - Building Trust and Cooperation in Boundary-Spanning Teams

Abstract
[Excerpt] Knowledge workers engaged in interorganizational collaborative initiatives (i.e., boundary spanners) can actively build and maintain interpersonal trust through a multi-step "threat regulation" process. Designed to mitigate counterparts' fears that harm will arise out of the cooperative effort, threat regulation involves 1) *perspective-taking* (understanding how others might perceive and experience the risks of cooperation); 2) *threat-reducing behavior* (intentional efforts to influence others' negative emotions); and 3) *reflection* (self-assessment leading to self-corrective actions). When hierarchical authority is absent, which is common in collaborative projects, boundary-spanners can adopt these behaviors to influence others' emotions so as to gain the requisite trust and cooperation.

Keywords
knowledge workers, collaborations, trust, organizational boundaries, threat

Comments

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For a more in-depth analysis, please see: Williams, M. (2007). "Building genuine trust through interpersonal emotion management: A threat regulation model of trust and collaboration across boundaries". *Academy of Management Review, 32*(2).

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IMPACT BRIEF

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Building Trust and Cooperation in Boundary-Spanning Teams

Research question: How does trust develop among knowledge workers involved in collaborative projects that cross, or span, organizational boundaries?

Conclusion: Knowledge workers engaged in inter-organizational collaborative initiatives (i.e., boundary spanners) can actively build and maintain interpersonal trust through a multi-step "threat regulation" process. Designed to mitigate counterparts' fears that harm will arise out of the cooperative effort, threat regulation involves 1) *perspective-taking* (understanding how others might perceive and experience the risks of cooperation); 2) *threat-reducing behavior* (intentional efforts to influence others' negative emotions); and 3) *reflection* (self-assessment leading to self-corrective actions). When hierarchical authority is absent, which is common in collaborative projects, boundary-spanners can adopt these behaviors to influence others' emotions so as to gain the requisite trust and cooperation.

Workplace implications: Boundary-spanning collaboration is increasingly common in the workplace, especially on projects involving knowledge workers. The chances of success are greatly enhanced when team members sufficiently trust one another to engage in cooperative behavior. Although some individuals are innately capable of using the psychological and behavioral components of threat regulation—and organizations may purposely seek out such people for boundary-spanning teams—all collaborative team members would benefit from training in the threat regulation processes of perspective-taking and interpersonal emotion management. Training and practice facilitate the ease of using these intuitive and learned skills when individuals are under pressure. Threat regulation is also an essential element of leadership.

Abstract: Interpersonal trust across organizational boundaries is critical to the success of collaborative projects involving knowledge workers (i.e., highly trained professionals) who lack hierarchical control over their counterparts. Research has shown, however, that people often perceive "outsiders" as likely to interfere with, or threaten, their identity, values, aspirations, and goals. Such doubts about others' trustworthiness can sabotage a project by prompting workers to withhold information and otherwise defy norms of cooperation. Still, individuals may eventually come to trust one another and researchers traditionally describe this evolution as passive; that is, people evaluate others' trustworthiness by observing their behavior over time.

The model explored here takes a different approach and conceives of trust development as an active and intentional interpersonal process. It suggests that behavioral and psychological strategies, in combination, are the building blocks of trust. In other words, individuals can make strategic choices about their own actions in order to influence the negative emotions of others, particularly the suspicions, defensiveness, and anticipation of harm that preclude interpersonal trust. To achieve

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this end, individuals avoid behaviors that might be interpreted as opportunistic, damaging to others' identity, and/or unintentionally harmful. Instead, they adopt behaviors that reduce others' sense of threat while simultaneously inducing positive emotions in their counterparts, such as feelings of being at ease and of being "understood." These threat-reducing behaviors build trust by signaling benevolence, demonstrating concern, and providing emotional support.

The deliberate process of threat regulation fosters and sustains cooperation between boundary-spanning collaborative teams, especially those involving knowledge workers, no clear lines of authority, and ambiguous, nonroutine tasks. It enables team members to better understand and manage the thoughts and emotions surrounding the potential harm their counterparts associate with cooperation. Step one in the process involves *perspective-taking*, or understanding the emotions, motivations, and thoughts of others regarding perceived threats to identity, values, and the sense of well-being. Step two calls for *threat-reducing behavior*, which seeks to induce interpersonal responsiveness that is more cooperative and trusting and less tinged with anxiety. This step itself comprises four strategies: altering the situation, deflecting attention from the emotion-provoking elements, reframing the situation to seem less harmful, and directly modulating counterparts' emotional responses to the situation. The third and last step entails *reflection*, an iterative process that requires boundary spanners to assess the impact of their words and deeds and then adjust their behavior to better alleviate others' negative emotions and perceptions. As the process unfolds, interpersonal affective bonds strengthen, perceptions of trustworthiness grow, and people's willingness to cooperate expands.

The model delineates the trust-building process through 10 interconnected hypotheses, each taking off from its antecedent and advancing the overall thesis toward its conclusion. It begins with the supposition that increases in threat-reducing behavior lead to increases in affective attachment and perceptions of trustworthiness, which in turn induce trust and cooperative behavior. The model then discusses the organizational and task contexts that increase team members' power to interrupt others' ability to achieve their goals and further postulates that greater power coincides with greater threat regulation, which is positively related to trust. And finally, the model contends that stronger affective bonds among project members prompt self-reinforcing threat regulation.

Field testing of the model is currently underway.

Methodology: This model was developed using both deductive and inductive methods. It is based on psychological and sociological theories of emotion management and social cognition. Inductive elements of the theory derive from interviews with 30 senior-level consultants and quantitative survey data collected from more than 200 executives. Data collected to test the model comes from two surveys co-developed by this author for use in leadership development courses.

Source publication: "Building Genuine Trust Through Interpersonal Emotion Management: A Threat Regulation Model of Trust and Collaboration Across Boundaries" appeared in *Academy of Management Review*, 2007, Vol. 32, No. 2.

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