

The Chemistry of Trust

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In my work to guide labor and management representatives toward effective relationships, I made an unexpected discovery: people do not experience trust as a universal definition, but according to their interpretation. Most agree that trust creates the foundation for productive relationships. On the other hand, if developing trust is prolonged, frequent misunderstandings occur. This article describes how to build lasting trust between labor and management advocates.

When intractability develops in a negotiation, typically the parties identify the presenting facts as the problem. In some instances, the representatives worked effectively together for years but then became mistrustful of each other. Even after the parties established a trusted relationship, its fragility frequently surfaced. Without understanding how they lost trust, it seemed difficult or impossible to restore. Their interdependent professional relationships appeared forever tenuous, but why?

To understand this, in a negotiation, I asked deadlocked parties to take a deep dive into their relationship and describe when, if ever, their trust existed, and when it failed. They described the incidents that led to their differences, with facts, hurt feelings, and anger. Each thought they understood why the parties' trust failed. Yet their different reasons did not provide a logical explanation. I eventually found the missing link in a high-stakes grievance case. There, I discovered the chemistry of trust.

A hospital hired me to work with a department where dysfunctional labor-management interactions and conflict led to an untenable work environment. The union leader and her members deeply distrusted the department head, and he held the same view of his employees and their leader. The parties wanted to resolve a series of potentially high-cost sick leave grievances. After reviewing the complaints with the parties, I asked each to identify when trust first became a source of conflict. Their answers left the group startled. I heard confusion — how did that action destroy trust?

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As the parties discussed the specific interaction when their relationship broke down, they learned how different each perceived the effects of the same interaction. However, their behaviors were not dissimilar: both parties didn't engage in meaningful problem-solving with the other. Employees who were denied sick leave filed one grievance after another, and the manager rejected their every complaint. There was no visible path to resolve the dispute. Mistrust cemented the parties apart.

In the mediation session, the parties were asked to listen to each other as they each described the sources of conflict that generated the series of grievances. These were not just the stubborn presenting facts, but the underlying issues that led to their distrust. When each person was asked to think of one word that represented trust to them, the variety of their individual trust words surprised everyone in the room.

Written on a chart, we saw the words *honesty, integrity, communication, timeliness, punctuality, caring*, and more. Each group member shared what their trust word meant to them. Repeatedly, people described how their trust word was the platform on which they built relationships. For example, one manager who defined trust as honesty, was challenged to ever feel real trust for a person who demonstrated dishonesty about the smallest issue. For one union steward who characterized trust as caring, a person need not always be honest but must demonstrate care to be trustworthy. Their definition of trust was a deeply held, indelible belief. We learned that trust is not universal, but a personal interpretation and experience.

In the end, the parties successfully mediated a settlement agreement for their sick leave grievances. While in dispute resolution settings, I tell their story to teach the chemistry of trust. Once you know the presenting facts and underlying reasons intractable conflict exists in a labor-management relationship, move to resolve the dispute by first helping the parties to establish trust. While it can be elusive and fleeting, you build trust for a lifetime by being responsive to the question, "Which word defines trust for you?"

About the author: Renée Mayne is an arbitrator and mediator exclusively for labor and employment disputes. For more information: www.reneemayne.com.

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