# To build trust, it can pay to stay humble

**How does one build trust within teams? A simple starting point is accurately assessing how trusted you actually are by others, Sebastien Brion finds.**



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Can overestimating yourself help you get ahead in business?

Not if you want to succeed in building trust among your colleagues. When it comes to gaining the trust of others, *under*estimating how much you are trusted by others is better than overestimating it, according to a study by **Sebastien Brion** of IESE, with co-authors Robert B. Lount, Jr. and Sarah Doyle.

For this research, published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, the authors ask 229 first-year MBAs to rate how much they trust their teammates and how much they think their teammates trust them over the course of two terms. Analyzing the results, the researchers find that a key factor in determining how much the students come to trust someone over time is the extent to which that someone accurately estimates how much he or she is trusted. A key building block of building trust is, simply, knowing how much you are trusted.

On the flip side, those who misjudged how much they were trusted tended to generate less trust over time. That said, some misjudgments mattered more than others. Specifically, those who *over*estimated how much they were trusted by others had a harder time building trust. Meanwhile, those who *under*estimated it were not as harmed by their misjudgment. This subgroup shows that while accurately assessing trust is a key determinant of trust development, staying humble can also pay off in the end.

# The chicken and the egg

"The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them," said Ernest Hemingway.

Previous research into trust has explored its paradoxical nature. Gaining trust is often perceived as a kind of chicken-and-egg situation because it seems necessary have trust in order to build it.

For example, studies have looked into how trust develops over time — documenting the impact of large initial displays of trust in others, as well as the use of contracts and apologies to help build trust incrementally.

In the business world, trust is clearly important for teamwork and working relationships. Higher levels of trust within teams have been shown to enhance cooperation and performance. Within organizations, high levels of trust are also linked to greater job commitment and satisfaction.

# A question of perception

In the current study, Brion and co-authors asked 272 first-year MBA students (74 percent of whom were male) to assess how trusted they considered themselves to be and how much they trusted fellow students that they worked with on teams. Of those, 229 submitted responses in the first and second terms of their MBA program that could be compared over time.

Each respondent rated their fellow teammates on how much they agreed with two statements: "I trust this person" and "I can rely on this team member to keep their word." The ratings were on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Each respondent also considered how much he or she was trusted by teammates, with "This person trusts me" and "This person relies on me to keep my word."

# A well-motivated group

The authors note that MBA coursework required team participation and accounted for between 30 percent and 60 percent of final grades. In other words, students had incentives to work well with their colleagues.

Using two different forms of statistical analysis, the authors found that students who more

accurately understood how much others trusted them in the first rounds of questions were trusted more in the second round.

Why was this accuracy helpful? In the authors' words: "Individuals who are able to accurately perceive how well they are trusted are better able to navigate personal relationships and display the right level of trust in their relationships which in turn helps develop trust among others."

## Stay humble and be trusted

The study also found that people who underestimated how trusted they were developed more trust over time than those who overestimated it. Perhaps that is because those who underestimate their trustworthiness worked harder to boost it. In contrast, those who overestimated trust likely failed to engage in important trust-building behaviors that may have been expected from their teammates.

Importantly, the authors' study waves a red flag when it comes to being overconfident in teams. While previous studies have pointed to benefits that stem from overconfidence in terms of gaining status and power, that's not true for trust. To gain trust, it pays to stay humble.

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