Putting Trust on the Table
By Jack Keogh

Trust It is probably the cheapest and most under explored lever for increased productivity available to organizations. At one of our international teambuilding projects we chose to explicitly put the issue of trust on the table. Why?

During our preparation for the event we saw how low levels of trust were affecting bottom-line productivity issues. We knew that team members, seeking to minimize their vulnerability, were hiding behind their "masks" and "game-faces". Instead of trusting each other, they had introduced time wasting procedures and complicated ways to hide the fact that they do not trust each other. Pre-workshop surveys indicated that offers of knowledge sharing and collaboration were being ignored by team members. Even more damaging, valuable information was being withheld from one department to another. What were the results of this behavior?

For starters, the team was suffering from on-gong communication breakdowns. Interpersonal and interdepartmental defensiveness had grown in direct proportion to the lack of team learning. The higher levels of anxiety engendered by lack of trust was affecting daily interactions. The energy of the team was being diverted away from the needs of the corporate customer – and , indeed, their objectives - towards second guessing the "real motives" of their colleagues. In this environment "hidden agendas:" were thriving. Even though a disinterested outsider might have perceived the team to be working in day-to-day harmony, the inner reality was quite different. So, as a team, we decided to place the trust issues fair and square on the table.

There is plenty of research evidence to show that high levels of trust can be linked to the successful management of some of today's key business challenges. Associate Vincent Higgins commented on the importance of trust in a recent article. Many business leaders, especially in the HR field, see high levels of trust as a competitive advantage in war to attract and retain the best talent, especially given the demographics of today's (younger) workforce. From our work with multicultural teams we know too that trust is the glue that helps bind people together across borders. So, if trust is the one of the cheapest and most obvious means to motivate teams, improve retention and increase productivity available to organizations why is it in such short supply?

Trust is one of those "deep" issues that people are very sensitive to. It is at the core of many cross-cultural issues because it relates to our sense of personal identity. Who do we trust? Why do we trust? Teams readily discover and accept that they trust family, friends and the people they know who share their personal ways of thinking and behaving. They soon learn that different cultures have different ways of defining

and expressing trust. That is why outsiders and foreigners are, initially, more difficult to trust. Different cultures and groups use different signals to convey trustworthiness. However, when we try to measure trust and to consider how this elusive quality can be developed, people tend to believe that trust is something very hard to define and – especially when there is a lack of it – better left unexamined in the context of a corporate training event.

In order to illustrate the fundamental importance of trust for teams, we used the pyramid devised by **Patrick Leoncini** in his book the "**Five Dysfunctions of a Team**". Once the group accepts the catastrophic effect that a lack of basic interpersonal trust can have on a team we find them open to examining the different meanings of the word "trust". We adopted Leoncini's slogan of "Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare."

From there, we needed to explore the basis on which we trust others in order to learn to trust our team members. To help us deepen our understanding, we used the ten trust criteria devised by **David Trickey** in his work on the **"International Team Trust Indicator"**. The definitions of each one of the criteria are powerful in terms of examining the deeper meaning of what we mean by trust in the workplace. The criteria include:

- Competence
- Shared values beliefs and objectives
- Concern for each other's welfare
- Integrity
- Consistent and predictable behavior over time
- Lack of fear
- Inclusion
- Openness to sharing information
- Sharing of true feelings
- Reciprocal trust with other group members

By the time we were through defining and applying the criteria to the specific work situation, trust was less elusive and intangible. The team now had a shared vocabulary to talk about the many meanings of trust. They understood how trust relates to shared values.

Finally, in terms of our module on "The Speed of Trust", we examined the concept of "vulnerability". The team, as a result of the theory and the interactive exercises we used, now understood and accepted that the fear to be vulnerable with team members

prevents the building of trust within the team. It also was apparent to them that when even one member of a team has a problem with trust it affects the whole team.

Once the team was able to bring the fundamental dimension of trust to the surface and deal with it openly and concretely, many buried issues and hidden agendas (real or perceived) came to the surface and were discussed. The team experienced the beginnings of what we hope will be a growing sense of liberation based on growing mutual trust and a readiness to deal with the inevitable and necessary conflict that arises in teams. Knowing how to manage conflict is a characteristic of a high performing team.

In further sessions we will expand on this first experience of trust and confidence building. When we attain the elusive – but measurable – ability to trust each other, we expect that the results for our client will include renewed competitive advantage, enhanced knowledge transfers, improved productivity and innovation. From a leadership perspective we will be expecting increased support for change initiatives together with effective team commitment to the organization's objectives.