

How to Build Trust with Colleagues You Rarely See

- Tsedal Neeley

When you exchange pleasantries with a co-worker in the elevator, the two of you are building trust. When you stop by a colleague's office and see their family photographs on a desk, you learn about that person's life outside the office and, as a result, usually feel closer. Face-to-face meetings, office parties, and opportunities to socialize together after working hours can all contribute to the feeling that your fellow employees will be reliable in what they say and do and that they will act for the good of the team and the organization. You believe they are *trustworthy* because you've developed this feeling over time.

So how do you trust a co-worker you barely see in person? This is a particular challenge for global teams, where employees may only be in contact with one another over email at different times of the day and night.

With this in mind, there are two types of trust— *swift trust* and *passable trust*—that are useful to understand for people who work in global organizations. In addition, there are two types of knowledge — *direct knowledge* and *reflected knowledge* — employees must possess to make up for inevitable cultural and language differences that can hinder trust. Here's how these categories break down, and how they work together.

Swift Trust. *Swift trust* is the notion that team members or co-workers can learn to swiftly trust one another from their very first interaction. People decide to trust one another immediately until proven otherwise — often because they have no other choice. Swift trust was first identified in flight teams and law enforcement teams who were brought together in crisis situations and expected to be working together for a limited amount of time. To effectively handle the nose-diving airplane or the threatening person wielding a gun, the team needed to trust one another immediately.

In addition to crisis situations, swift trust can be crucial for global teams, whose members are likely to originate from diverse cultures and countries, and who must immediately begin collaborating and coordinating. Swift trust can develop early when managers endorse virtual team members during introductions by highlighting relevant or important experiences, or when team leaders explicitly set rules requiring frequent communication to reduce uncertainty and foster trust.

Passable Trust. *Passable trust* is a category that my colleague Paul Leonardi and I identified by looking at how employees behave online, especially on social media at work. Take, for example, a biologist named Marie. She sent a chat message to her colleague, Harry, about a new movie release, and then scrolling down his social media page, found that Harry had sent a message to Bruno about a new clinical trial. This piqued Marie's interest. When she asked Harry about Bruno, Harry said Bruno was an expert on the subject. Next, Marie examined Bruno's wall and spent time reading the messages that Bruno had exchanged with other company employees. From these conversations she deduced that Bruno was helpful and polite and most of all, trustworthy enough to contact with her questions. In other words, she had developed passable trust and felt comfortable reaching out to him.

Passable trust does not have to be complete or perfect. In contrast to swift trust, which is quickly established and may just as quickly evaporate when the job is done, passable trust can exist as a permanent state without anyone expecting that it must deepen or develop. The transparency of interactions on social media (work-related and non-work related) and the time spent messaging about personal information is enough. For global teams who communicate largely via electronic technology, passable trust is especially useful.

Both types of trust have their limits, however. For global teams, there are other factors besides geographical distance that complicate establishing and building trust with co-workers. Can you trust someone who, in addition to living in a far-away continent, speaks a language you can't understand and sometimes behaves in ways that feel, to you, awkward or inappropriate? It's easy to develop cultural stereotypes about your colleagues who originate in a different culture. Yet stereotyping handicaps trust building and instead leads to misunderstanding, resentment, and an unproductive "us versus them" dynamic.

To counter those tendencies, two additional means for building trust — *direct knowledge* and *reflected knowledge* — are especially relevant for global teams. Direct knowledge enhances your understanding of distant co-workers, be they geographically distant, culturally distant, or both, while reflected knowledge leads to feeling understood by distant co-workers.

Direct Knowledge. Direct knowledge is defined as learning about the personal characteristics and behavioral norms of distant colleagues. Learning that your teammate in France prefers to work uninterrupted when under pressure, or that your teammates in India use their tea breaks to actively collaborate are two examples of direct knowledge. One way to uncover this information is by allowing for unstructured structured time at the beginning or end of conference calls to encourage casual conversation. Another is to encourage your employees to travel to a distant collaborators' site for a period of time.

Reflected Knowledge. Less obvious, but equally important for building trust among global teams is reflected knowledge, which is achieved by seeing the norms and behaviors of one's *own site* through the lens of distant collaborators. My colleague Mark Mortenson and I identified reflected knowledge as a means for building understanding and trust. Here's how this could play out:

Leah, a marketing manager from Tel Aviv, had always felt what she perceived as coldness from her colleagues who worked in the Danish office. At times, her direct questions over the phone were met with silence, which Leah found frustrating. In the Tel Aviv office, communication norms included a rough-and-tumble banter. If she said, "my four-year old daughter could do a better job than this!" to express dissatisfaction with a colleague's subpar work, she knew her colleague would not be insulted.

However, Leah's perceptions about communication norms changed after she spent time with her colleagues in the Danish office. There, she noticed that people spoke to each other quietly and politely. Interacting formally, to show respect for others, seemed to take priority. She saw an employee perform a shallow bow upon entering a supervisor's office. In comparison, Leah felt loud and argumentative. She was able to see how her direct questions must have seemed aggressive or inappropriate to her Danish counterparts. She began to reflect on the norms of her home site: maybe they were too harsh with one another. Maybe they could treat each other with a little more respect. In any case, by the end of her visit, Leah felt closer and more able to trust her Danish colleagues — and had new ideas about how to run her own office to boot.

Trust is paramount for global teams, but it's something you can't force on people. It's a feeling that develops in various ways over time. That's why it's necessary to understand how different types of trust and knowledge can serve as the essential glue for global teams. This can not only improve teamwork and morale, but can deliver better results for organizations.

Question: What advice would you give to an inpatriate who comes to work in France? According to you what are the rules to respect to build confidence with French people?