The Cross-Cultural Conditions of Trust

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Abstract: An important aspect of being an effective educator is gaining the trust of one’s students. Nowhere is this more critical, and more challenging, than for our military leaders whose jobs require them to teach and train the service members of our allies and coalition partners. Participants in this roundtable will be invited to share their experiences of building cross-cultural trust in their classrooms, and to engage in a learning activity that explores how they view the behaviors that lead to trust.

In his book, The Skillful Teacher, Stephen Brookfield (1990, p.163) said, “Underlying all significant learning is the element of trust. Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue binding educational relationships together”. Gary R. Howard (2007) asserts that the first step schools should take to ensure effective learning, especially when experiencing rapid shifts in the demographics of their student population, is to build trust between students and the staff and faculty. Although it is widely agreed that to be effective, educators must gain and maintain the trust of their students, they often find that it is difficult to do, especially in situations when their students come from different cultures. Nowhere is this more critical, and challenging, than for our military leaders who are assigned the duties of teaching and training the service members of our allies and strategic partners.

In his book, The Speed of Trust, Stephen M. R. Covey (2006) lists thirteen personal behaviors that will lead to trust relationships. Examples of these trust behaviors include:

- **Right wrongs**: be quick to admit mistakes and apologize. Make restitution when possible. Demonstrate personal humility and don’t cover things up.

- **Clarify expectations**: disclose and reveal your expectations. Don’t assume that your expectations are shared by others. Renegotiate them if required.

- **Listen first**: listen before you speak, and listen to understand. Don’t assume that you know how others feel or see the world.

In an effort to increase intra-team trust among our deployed military units, we developed a learning activity in which the students would be placed into small groups to discuss these thirteen trust behaviors. They would then, in their small groups, select the three behaviors that they collectively felt were the most important for team members to demonstrate for their team to be successful when deployed to a combat zone (as they each would be upon graduation from the program). In accordance with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), we sought to have the learners engage in discourse about Covey’s trust behaviors using their own personal experiences as analytical frameworks. The assignment to prioritize the behaviors was initially purely a mechanism to encourage deeper thought, consideration, and discourse.

However, over time, after conducting this activity with multiple classes, we noticed that a distinct pattern had emerged in which the student groups’ prioritization of the trust behaviors appeared to correlate very strongly with the positions that they would subsequently be holding on
their teams in combat. When viewed by team position, there was very little within group variance, but significant between group variance. These differences in priorities led to very rich and interesting group discussions when the small groups each briefed the class on their selections.

The patterns that emerged over time led the leadership to seek explanation and greater understanding regarding how experience, culture and organizational responsibilities shape the way people develop trust relationships. When we subsequently conducted this learning activity with the graduate students of a business school in a large university located in the American northeast, 60% of the student groups independently selected the exact same three behaviors as the most important out of thirteen possible behaviors. Additionally, 100% of them selected two of the same behaviors. It is of interest that their selections differed significantly from all of the groups of the students in the military training program.

As we continued to investigate the cross-cultural conditions of trust, we initiated a study with the culturally-diverse faculty at a large military language school. In this study, we are exploring the degree to which culture impacted how they evaluate the other person’s ability, benevolence, and integrity when making their decisions to trust or distrust (Dietz, 2011; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In this study we are using the Critical Incident Technique (Butler, 1991; Scott, 1980) as the method to explore their trust decisions. Preliminary results have continued to indicate that culture and experiences significantly impact the behaviors that people look for and the ways that they make decisions to trust or distrust another. In light of the importance of trust between student and teacher, the impact culture, experience, and organizational role appear to have upon how we assess behaviors when determining whether or not to trust, and the trend of increasing cultural diversity in our classrooms, it appears essential that educators understand how trust can be developed and maintained across cultures. People attending this roundtable will be invited to participate in the trust behavior learning activity, and to share their own thoughts and experiences at building cross-cultural trust in their classrooms.

References


