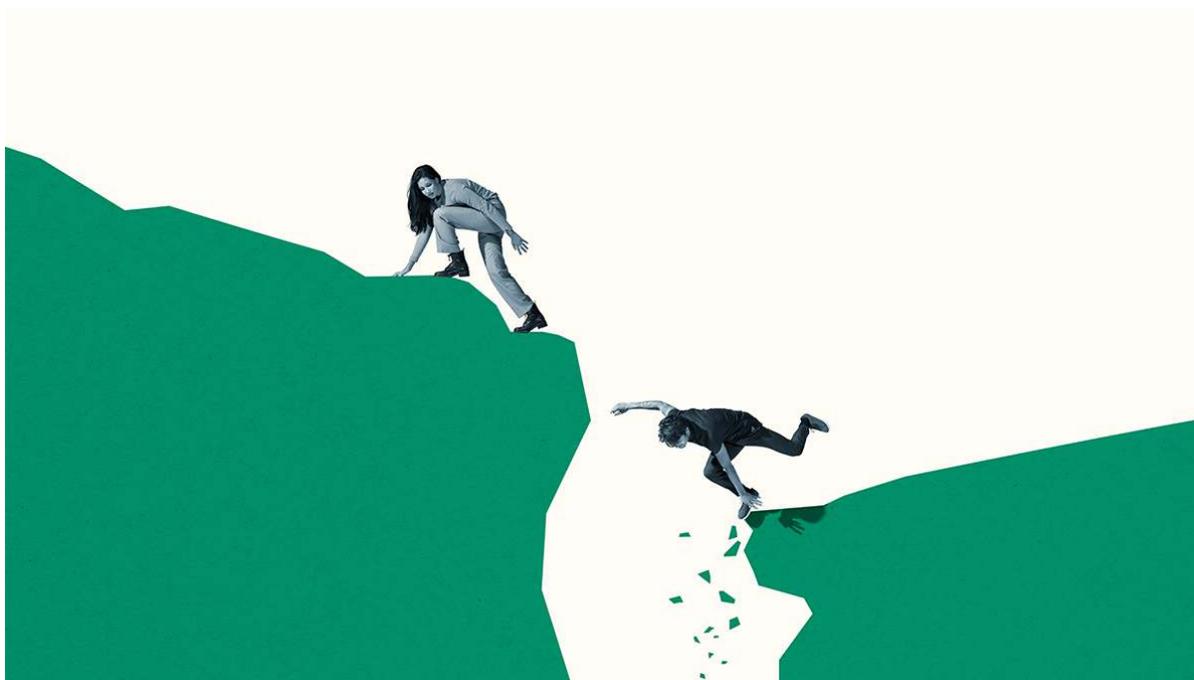**Harvard Business Review**

Collaboration And Teams

When Trust Takes Away from Effective Collaboration

by Per Hugander

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Summary.   Leaders should be aware of a counterintuitive risk of trust: A strong emphasis on trust can lead to inertia, as employees might prioritize appearing trustworthy over behavior necessary for good, collaborative decision making. For example, in order to maintain a... **more**

Research shows that it takes a long time to build interpersonal trust in organizations. When people from different groups come together to cross-collaborate on important strategic challenges, there will be low trust between the individuals who haven't worked together before. The same is true when a startup brings in new executives to help scale the business, or when an incumbent organization brings in new individuals with new competences into their decision-making processes and management team.

Heuristics like "collaboration is all about trust" would suggest that the examples above are doomed for failure, and the low success rate of inclusion and cross-collaboration we see in organizations might, at first sight, appear to be the proof. Fortunately, contrary to common belief, trust is not a prerequisite for teamwork and collaboration. Research on teaming and collective intelligence suggests that if we focus on getting a few things right, new constellations of people can collaborate effectively *before* they've had time to build trust.

Successful transformation depends on the organization's ability to bring people with diverse competencies together to make high-quality decisions. In such situations, shifting attention away from creating trust toward information sharing, perspective taking, and effective turn taking can help organizations make progress on and speed up change and transformation.

Building trust vs. proving trustworthiness

Leaders should be aware of a counterintuitive risk of trust: A strong emphasis on trust can lead to inertia, as employees might prioritize *appearing* trustworthy over behavior necessary for good, collaborative decision making. For example, in order to

maintain a perception of being competent and trustworthy, an individual might withhold information or share inaccurate information when things aren't going well.

I've spent over a decade making research on collaboration useable for organizations ranging from scaleups becoming unicorns to incumbents embracing transformation. Below I will explain how overemphasizing trust can hinder collaborative decision making and cause inertia — and how leaders can strike the right balance between trust and progress.

How trust and distrust interfere with decision making

Two things stand out as critical to collaborative decision making on complex challenges.

First, in a fast-changing environment, you need access to accurate and updated data in order to make good decisions. The data for simple decisions is relatively easy to come by. For example, most organizations I've helped can access real-time customer data that they can analyze and base quick, smart decisions on. But most complex strategic challenges — for example, cross collaboration to meet a changing customer demand — require humans to bring in most of the important information.

When industries transform, organizations need new competencies. Most often, those competencies come attached to a person, who may differ from established employees in terms of background, values, demographic characteristics, etc. Thus, being able to include new individuals and their information into teams and decision-making processes is the second requirement for collaborative decision making.

Trust is a vague term and has a vast number of definitions. To understand trust in regard to collective decision making, keep these two definitions in mind:

1. In the organizational context, trust is most often defined as an interpersonal relationship that forms when a person shows consistent proof of competence, benevolence, and integrity. This kind of trust takes a long time to build and is easily broken.

2. More broadly, trust describes the intuitive and immediate feeling we get when we interact with another person, especially new individuals. This feeling is based on past experience: If the new person looks, sounds, and acts like people we've had a positive experience of, we intuitively feel trust. If the new person is different, we feel distrust. The greater the difference, the more distrust. This kind of trust is closely linked to unconscious bias and has nothing to do with the new person's competence or the quality of the information they bring to the table.

Problems arise when our intuitive feeling of distrust makes us more doubtful of the information brought by new individuals who haven't had time to prove their trustworthiness. This puts us at risk of undervaluing important information that's communicated by someone new and overvaluing other information. Since new individuals often possess crucial information, this can be detrimental to transformation and strategic progress.

Another problem is when feelings of distrust cause established individuals to challenge a new person in ways that they don't challenge other established collaborators. This can trigger

feelings of exclusion and defensive and provocative behavior between the parties, which in turn harms the productive exchange of information that collaborative decision making depends on. Excluding behavior often comes from individuals who believe they're safeguarding and protecting their organization. Unfortunately, they fail to realize that their behavior is keeping the organization from accessing the information needed for strategic progress, transformation, and long-term survival.

Organizations that overemphasize trust risk triggering this kind of unproductive behavior. Of course, it's important to know that people in the organization are trustworthy, but management meetings and strategic collaboration efforts are not the right time to perform such evaluations.

How our focus on trust drives inertia and poor decision making

Individuals naturally want to establish themselves as competent and trustworthy in the eyes of their peers and leaders. But it's much harder for people to work together on high-impact, complex transformation challenges if they're more concerned with appearing trustworthy than with effective exchange of information and ideas. Here's what that can look like in practice:

1. New individuals hold back information, challenging questions, and out-of-the-box ideas in order to establish themselves as competent, benevolent, and trustworthy.
2. Individuals representing the old norm who are not experts in the area of transformation hold back questions and hide ignorance and knowledge gaps because they're afraid to appear less competent and trustworthy.

3. When things don't go according to plan, individuals hide information or share an inaccurate picture of the situation to avoid looking incompetent or like a failure.
4. In cross-collaborative settings, individuals withhold information, questions, and ideas because there's a history of distrust between different departments.
5. Individuals refrain from openly changing their mind, as they're afraid of appearing inconsistent and unpredictable.

The more an organization emphasizes the importance of trust, the more the behaviors above amplify.

How to keep trust from getting in the way

To maximize productive behavior and strategic progress when gathering diverse groups to solve important, complex challenges, leaders are wise to communicate that:

- Trust is important to many aspects of organizational success, but interpersonal trust is *not* a prerequisite for collaboration. This is important, as the inaccurate notion that "collaboration is all about trust" is deeply rooted.
- Feelings of trust and distrust are natural when collaborating with new individuals. However, they're intuitive biases and should be set aside. Consider the advice of Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman: "Delay forming an intuition too quickly. Instead, focus on the separate points, and when you have the full profile, then you can develop an intuition."
- It's vital to get the most accurate data on the table, even when that data is unpleasant to share. Everyone involved is responsible for creating an atmosphere where others can act with both candor and vulnerability when sharing their

perspective.

- Our individual willingness to explore and take each other's perspectives is key to progress and effective decision making on complex challenges.

When leaders focus on getting the conversations right, groups often improve decisions and progress quite quickly. The experience of shared progress often strengthens trust between collaborators. It might sound counterintuitive, but shifting attention away from trust might be one effective way to quickly build trust in new constellations.

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