TRUST ME ON THIS

PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q4: RELATIONAL TRUST

No matter how well managed, well intended and well organized we may be, we are nothing without trust.

Trust Me on This

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Over a career that has now spanned seven decades, I've learned one thing: No matter how many schedules, lists, plans, budgets and to-do lists we may arm ourselves with, none of them matter if we don't have trust. Relational trust, that is. The kind that exists between two or more people. Trust me on this. More than an ironic musing, it's a fact. But what is trust, really?

Trust Deconstructed

For many of us, trust is like art: We can't quite describe its qualities, but we know it when we have it. We can see it in one another's eyes. We have a feeling. But do we really understand what trust is?

Trust is an agreement, often a tacit understanding between two parties (or possibly between yourself and one of the other voices in your head if you're trusting yourself). It's an earned belief, endorsement or willingness to base your own future outcome on a shared intention or action by another person. Trust is based on judgment, experience, context or past performance. Trusting someone requires that you assume potential risk, real or reputational, but less so if your trust has been confirmed in the past.

Like a credit card, trust is the granting of current credit based on a belief or faith in a future action, outcome or state. It's an

affirmation or validation of character. I trust you'll do it. I believe you will. Like viewing a movie or theatrical performance, trust requires the suspension of question or disbelief that what someone's says or will do, their words or actions, will align with what they say they will. Trust is an implied or inferred assurance of a future condition.

Trust is based on the promise, belief or expectation of accountability or delivery. Like religious faith, trust may exist in the absence of evidence to inform it. Trust involves the sense between the parties — an intuition — that the right thing, the promised proper thing, will in fact be done. At its core, trust is always relational and contextual. Trust is a form of implied contract, entailing the performance of a duty, the consideration for which may be little more than the continuation of that same trust having been already established.

Trust can be looked upon as an investment between two people. It may exist in one direction or be mutual. A trust relationship, once broken, is hard to regain. Often long in gestation and hard earned, trust can be breached in an instant. In most of us, trust has parallels with the American justice system in its implicit nature. Just as the accused are innocent until proven guilty under the law, in most cases, we grant trust until our collaborator gives us a reason to take it away.

Conflict Is Inevitable

By now we have learned that none of us can design or build much by ourselves. That's why we do it in teams. We have also learned that the disciplines of design and building are highly subjective. While both a science and a business, creating built environments is more notably an art. As such, by intention, we give ourselves license to do almost anything in pursuit of our projects in teams. And that's where the conflict comes in: With

free rein to create, and with team members of different minds and experiences, values and goals, conflict is inevitable and is where trust enters the picture. In managing such endeavors, our challenge is to establish common goals, set limits and use proven management guiderails to keep us moving in a common direction and between our self-set lines.

Trust Required: An Admission

To explore the mysteries and powers of trust, let's look at a spectrum of cases ranging from intrapersonal and intradisciplinary trust to larger-scaled trust among teams, and then, to extradisciplinary trust — that is, the kind that exists between us and those outside our clans.

Over the years I've learned the hard way to deploy management tools in leading creatives. Without a budget or schedule, how is the team to know when our work is due, our plan to accomplish it or how much we can spend? Answer: We can't. But on too many occasions, even after creating and sharing these management tools, the real shock came when I discovered they still didn't work. The question is: Why?

In each case I shared them with my teammates, the team of architects and engineers working with me to produce our design and documents. Or perhaps our contractor teammate had shared their budget and schedule with us, the design team. Then, we promptly ignored it, didn't understand it or the tool simply failed us. Why did we slip into disarray so often? Because we lacked relational trust.

Let's dig deeper to understand. In our excavation, let's take the case where the contractor gives the design team a cost model to design to. We receive it in the meeting, publicly, with the owner. We even agree and commit to designing within said budget. And then we don't. What happens? First, it's likely that we will

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enter the exchange with an inherent mistrust of our construction management partner. Why? Possibilities abound. One might be that we were educated and accultured to nurture a healthy dislike for them in school. To wit, the stereotypical image and rhetoric of almost any modernist master architect and the accompanying sentiment about contractors as "foxes in henhouses" trying to "line their pockets" at the expense of quality or design. Another reason might be based on personal experience. Perhaps we had worked with them before and failed to meet one of their budgets. Either we had been responsible for over-scoping or over-designing or they had prepared an inadequate, underfunded project budget. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice: mistrust.

In the mistrusting team, and having been burned before, I, as lead architect, didn't trust the contractor nor their cost model. As a result, I chose to spend significant time checking their estimates, quantity takeoffs and unit costs looking for hidden contingencies, challenging them in public and pointing out their errors. The by-products of this mistrust and my duplicative efforts were not just a waste of effort (mine) but also a perpetuation of a spirit of mistrust among the team and movements that countered forward progress. This doesn't yet consider the time taken by the entire team to hear, backcheck and reconcile our challenges — a habitual time-waster in countless projects. Moreover, an equally hurtful outcome was the opportunity cost. Such efforts directed the labor of the design team away from our primary duties to design the building. Instead, we spent our fee doing tasks someone else was hired to do while getting further behind in our own work. The result of it all was to create additional mistrust and accelerate the tumultuous budget vertigo spiral. Our unwillingness to trust our partners was not an infrequent exercise. Rather, in our blind quest to achieve high design, we deployed maladaptive strategies on an ongoing basis. We architects — who fancied ourselves as aesthetic bons vivants — acted predictably in putting on the design dog, knowing full well in the thrall of design's allure we would again soon face the blasphemy of being

over budget. With seeming malice aforethought, we continued to subvert the process and ignored the duty of developing a trust relationship with the party fully able and responsible for keeping us in budget: the construction manager. Our sole strategy was to expect that some peripeteia, miraculous turning point or reversal of fortune would appear while we waited and hoped for some resolution or transformation. It never did.

Then and only then, after failing, we confronted our vulnerability hangovers as we pled with them to tell us what to do and how to return to budget.

Contrast that with those projects in which we trusted the contractor. We knew them or had experienced their stellar service in keeping us within budget in prior projects. We knew them to be honest, hard-working, similarly motivated to achieve excellence and to be open-book, clear communicators. In those instances, we trusted their work. They explained that they had solicited proposals from multiple qualified subcontractor bidders, shared their scope and variances. Their words and actions demonstrated their clear intentions to put the project first. What was the outcome of these projects? We trusted them. We didn't spend time redoing their work. We believed it. We took the time to ask questions in areas we didn't understand. When we found small, honest errors, we thanked one another for the discoveries, quickly fixed them together and moved forward. We refused to let errors fester or worsen, even shading and masking them on occasion to protect our teammates — because it was good for both of us to correct them. We had trust, relational trust, because we had earned it in mutually respectful and beneficial ways. What a difference it made. The simple existence of trust (enabled by our willing mindsets and motivations and backed by evidence, data and experience) made the difference in activating the effectiveness of our management tools. We believed and trusted in them. They worked! At least to the degree pos-

sible in the AEC context. These redemptive examples of trust stand as fond memories and shining examples. The projects that lacked trust retain their malodorous qualities in the dark, dank cellars of our minds.

Recurring Scenes: Internal "Professional" Culture and Trust

Let's take another example, the kind of trust that exists among the design team themselves. There's a recurring scene in many design studios. It happens when the team is floundering to find a synthesis, when their design is just not coming together. That's when black-turtleneck-extreme-haircut-round-Corbu-glasses design woman comes in and says something deep and abstract. Something Peter Sellers might've said in the film "Being There." Something koan-like. Something like, "The materiality is real. Only when we do not see can we see clearly."

At this point, having received what they delude themselves to believe is clear direction from their spiritual leader, the architectural team — ever the design magpies — return to their studio with renewed vigor, intent on finding the next Louis Kahn-inspired, again-over-budget design solution. Why? Because they trust their leader implicitly.

In another similar studio elsewhere across town, in comes frumpy, rumpled-coat, smudged-glasses, mussed-up-hair guy. The person so intent on their work that they habitually neglect to tuck in their shirt, comb their hair or clean their spectacles. The result? They see the world through a professional-discipline-tinged, nonreality distortion field. Lost in the work they love, they have chosen to be incapable of performing life's common duties. Things like letting the dog out, being on time or remembering to put air in their tires, even after countless reminders from their spouses.

I know this latter type well because I had one as my colleague and mentor for three decades. His name was Terry Sargent. He was the most talented, capable architect I ever knew, and he classically exhibited the qualities described above. On one trip to visit him and tour one of his award-winning projects, we had to pull into a service station for air when I pointed out that his tires were nearly flat. "Yes, I know. Jean has been telling me that for weeks," he confided. The difference was, as a colleague who had fought alongside him in many architectural wars and a professionally respected voice, I was someone he trusted. He listened to me. Based on our trust, respect and long-established relationship, he broke his pattern of intentionally neglecting his duties at my request, because he knew I cared about him and had his best interest at heart. Then, we put air in his tires and within a few minutes willingly returned to being lost in our work.

These kinds of absent-minded professors and geniuses often rely on their trusted colleagues to get them through the day's practical aspects. I was one such ally for Mr. Sargent, and he was for me. He was my spiritual leader, the person I relied upon, whose judgment I put faith in even when it might entail more personal risk or work. Trust, indeed.

When it comes to the professions, we practitioners often value their core tenets more than we do our own well-being. In disciplines referred to as abstract truths or pursuits such as "law, medicine or architecture," it seems that trust is hard won and seen relative to its context among "the work." That is, if Joe tells me to put air in my tires and is only a lowly intern, real estate developer or, perhaps, merely my spouse, I can dismiss that advice due to Joe's low professional stature — as I value it. But if a discipline-trusted colleague makes that same suggestion, I'm more likely to heed it. I'm not saying this behavior is beneficial, merely that it demonstrates the power and depth of trust that

can result from shared, deeply held values. In fact, in many cases, by masking deep biases, such trust can be detrimental.

Plenty of other kinds of trust relationships don't enjoy the depth of the ones just described, but they must be nurtured nonetheless. Trust between peers, supervisors and subordinates, or any two people attempting to work together, is equally essential. While perhaps not as deep as the trust between close friends and colleagues, these other trust types operate with commensurate effectiveness.

Trust Types

The demonstrable power of trust can be witnessed in many realms. These include the trust of our team, mission, vision, organization, clients, partners, individuals and selves. Before we can trust others, we must believe in — and have predictability and faith in — ourselves. Will we (and can we) do what we say we will to elicit and engender trust?

Beyond the myriad trust types, we can deploy the principle of relational trust at multiple scales. The process of building trust can begin with our next small action. When we say, "I'll have that drawing to you by noon," to earn trust, we don't send at it 3 p.m. We honor our small promise or communicate why we may not if something changes. Small things count. Starting now.

Small World

Now that we have become global citizens in a small, connected world, our need for trust has grown to heretofore unimaginable reaches. In a time when our actions on one small, local project can have implications across the world — on supply networks, economies, political relations and natural and man-made systems — we need trust more than ever. But it remains hard to come by.

The Intangibles

In the worlds of design and construction, change is implicit. We seek to bring about new realities by designing and managing projects. We design, procure resources and construct. Clearly these are tasks rooted in the physical world that can be managed by tangible tools. Any good project manager has a budget, a schedule, a to-do list and goals and objectives that define success. Simply manage these tangible project aspects, and life is good, right? Hardly. Experienced tacticians soon find that no matter how buttoned-up their tangible management tools are, when they lack trust and understanding among the humans that use them, said tools aren't worth the pixels they're printed on. Without these soft, human, relational factors we know as trust in place, none of the tangible physical things matter, and they certainly won't work for their intended purpose.[1]

Building Trust

We've established how trust is built: over time, with effort and with a certain amount of blind faith, trial and error. With shared experiences and values. With time and work. Even more than mere time, a more valuable commodity to give another person is your attention. To care about and focus on them, to listen to their needs and seek your mutual interests. Attention is the most valuable thing any of us can ever give. Certainly, it's the most meaningful gift, in instances where you want to nurture a relationship with someone — and if you are interacting with them in any way — you should.

We can draw a distinction between interactions that are merely transactional and those that are more significant. That is: I need this from you (perhaps a newspaper from a sidewalk vendor in New York City), you need that from me (perhaps financial compensation for the morning paper) and we're done. Compare

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[1] *For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see my book, "Managing Design: Conversations, Project Controls and Best Practices for Commercial Design and Construction Projects" (Wiley, 2019.)*
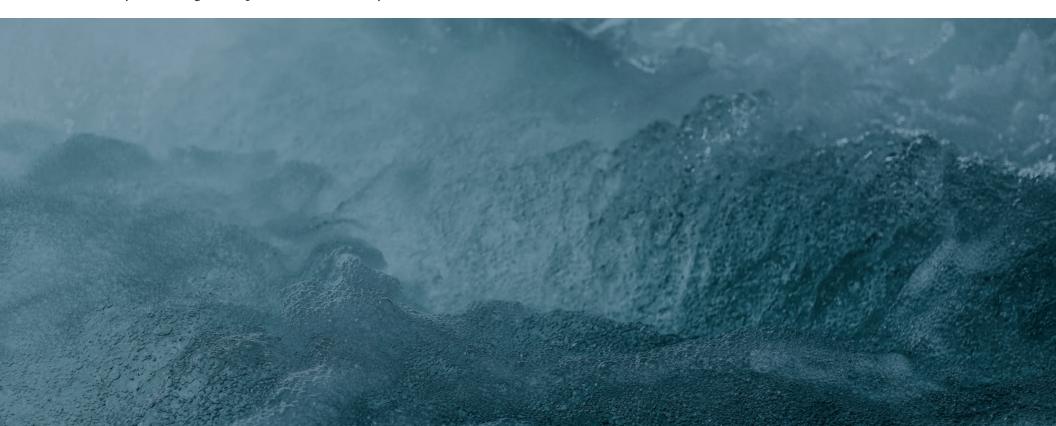
this to a relational interaction intended to last over time, with enduring mutual benefit. But even in the newspaper example, how much richer is the transaction when it can be made to transcend the mere exchange of a commodity? Isn't it better when you know the vendor by name and when they remember you? You say good morning, you smile and you share a story or give energy to one another in some way. Perhaps an upbeat, human or even a sarcastic comment about the day. Simply better. Not all interactions need such humanity, but answer this: Where's the harm?

When it comes to trust, you don't know it until you have it. And the way to get trust is to give it — or give it a try. You take the small, courageous leap to give and establish a relationship with somebody and you hope they will reciprocate and act consistently, according to the patterns of behavior you'll establish now

or have in the past. If they fail, trust has been lost and must be restored. Mark Twain reminded us that "courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear — not absence of fear." We should remember his advice when it comes to building trust.

Trust Techniques: Common Data and Seeking to Understand Differences

Many tactical tools and techniques are now at our disposal to help us build trust — simple foundational concepts such as taking the time to set up shared common data and information exchange protocols upfront. When we do that, we build a platform to share the lifeblood of our knowledge and communication systems, our common data. This is a far cry from keeping two sets of books done in different breakdowns or hoarding two data sets because we don't trust our partners. What better way to enable

trust? Share your data. What a signal it sends. Beyond data, on the interpersonal side, we can invest time in trying to understand our teammates' motives and processes and acknowledge and understand their differences. Take engineers, for example. Understand their why, their process and what's important to them. Why is calculating things to six decimal points important to them? Seek to understand, then honor their needs, then do the same for clients, constituents and the countless others on our teams. Celebrate that differences make us better and build and talk about trust.

Earning Trust

How do we earn trust? It's simple. Do what you say you will. Have the other parties' and your collective interests at heart. Perhaps give more than you get. Act with good intention, as if you are trying to create and nurture a lasting relationship. Get and give something more than the perfunctory exchange of a commodity. "Star Trek" actor Leonard Nimoy famously said, paraphrasing:

"There's got be more to life than: 'I did what you asked, our transaction is complete. Now give me my dollar.'"

What about service, learning, growth and mutual investment over the longer term? Deriving joy or some other important feeling from the experience? Giving back or offering kindness to another? Even failure or some other valuable lesson to be learned? Your exchange could have been so much better if seen in a longer-term light and mined more deeply.

Right now, some of you — the hardened, grizzled, battle-scarred types who believe it's a dog-eat-dog world out there — are skeptical. "Bull hockey!" you exclaim. "Just get your dollar and leave." Fine. Given a choice, I don't want you on my team.

Increasingly, as I cross the thresholds of more decades, I'm finding that I'm the oldest person in the room. One benefit that brings is perspective. And that perspective teaches me that "it" is indeed about the people. "It" always has been. Despite my early beliefs that "it" was about design or business, "it" remains about the people — those who do the work, use the building and who are the connected constituents to the families and friends of those who do the work and use the buildings. Why? Because it's built into our DNA to connect.

Connecting

How do I know we're built to connect? Try this test. What is the first thing we do when we're done with a project? We share it! We reach out to connect! Although many of us design and construction types are introverts with codependent relationships to our projects, when we finally finish one, I'd guess few of us return to our homes to quietly isolate ourselves. Hardly. We long to share the news. We seek connection. "Mom, Dad, honey, kids, roommates, my project is done! It got published in Architectural Record! It improved the lives of those who work there! It just achieved LEED Platinum Certification! I'm proud! I need to share my feelings with somebody! Let's go out to dinner and celebrate!"

Fixed Pies and Zero Sums

Like love, trust is not a fixed-pie, zero-sum game. In fact, the more trust you give, the more that can be generated. It's a wonderful thing when a force like trust multiplies. Teams get built. Relationships thrive. Transcendent outcomes and miracles occur. But why and how? Because of trust. In trusting relationships, all our energy is directed to the same cause or goal. Toward positive ends. Forward, not sideways or backward. We want the same thing, and we trust one another to continue to do the right thing to achieve it. We don't micromanage. We don't question one another, except as helpful mentors, collabo-

rators and challengers to keep focus — and our collective bar of achievement — high. The best designers I ever knew developed a sublime ambidexterity: the ability to design and trust at the same time.

Who Do You Love?

Bo Diddley's rock and roll song from the 1950s asked: "Who do you love?" In the working world, the more appropriate question might be: "Who do you trust?" As you move forward with your life's work, I hope you will learn to trust your clients, partners and colleagues and that you will start by trusting yourselves. With intention, you can learn to trust the process and the system— and along the way develop a keener sense of judgment and experience and a more practiced skill set when it comes to trust.

I hope you do.

Odds are, if you try it, no one will get hurt, eaten by jackals or swept away by large condors.

Trust me on this.

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> The best designers I ever knew developed a sublime ambidexterity: the ability to design and trust at the same time.
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