



RESEARCH REPORT

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TRUST

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Most of the studies on trust in organisations have taken a cross-sectional approach (snapshot view) and looked at it at a single point in time. However, trust is a dynamic phenomenon and cross-sectional studies of trust are inadequate to meaningfully capture changes in trust and understand how it fluctuates over time in response to events and interpersonal interactions.

We have taken a longitudinal approach and followed the working relationships of 17 individuals over a seven month period. By interviewing people at three month intervals we have gained a real insight into their lived experience of trust or the lack of it, how judgements about trust are formed and how trust changes over time. Our intention in doing this research was not to offer frameworks or prescriptions, but rather to explore how people really experience trust or a lack of it and the emotional impact of changes in trust in some of their most important relationships at work. We hope that this will serve to encourage leaders and managers to think about and reflect on their own relationships in order to build high trust, healthier and more productive ones.

From the stories of 17 individuals, we have selected five that seemed most interesting to us (because the level of trust fluctuated significantly over the seven month period). We have produced the five stories in abridged form in this report both to shed a light on the lived experience of trust and as a lens through which readers may consider their own relationships. We have also analysed all the interviews using thematic analysis and identified eight trust-building behaviours.

As an example, we present one of the five stories below and some questions related to it to aid reflection. The story illustrates that impact of a lack of trust, and indeed rising distrust, as the central figure decides to leave their organisation at the end of the story. Micromanagement, feelings of exclusion, and lack of perceived consistency all seem to play a part as the story unfolds.

Story 1: Rising distrust linked to inconsistency and micromanagement

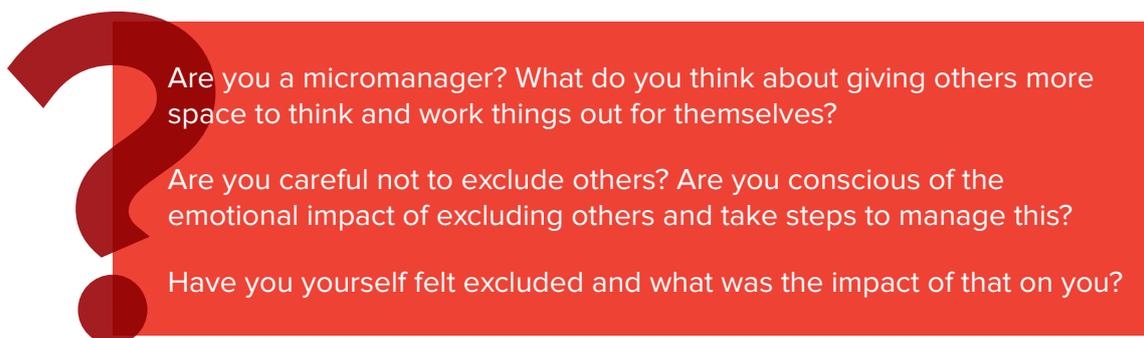
This story is about a senior manager, Kim, and her relationship with Sonia who is a manager in a more senior position. Kim and Sonia have been working on a number of projects together and Sonia was a key stakeholder in Kim's projects.

The first time we met Kim we found that she did not trust Sonia but the level of distrust was relatively low. This was mainly due to what Kim saw as Sonia's inconsistent messages and behaviours as well as micromanagement of Kim's work.

Three months later when we spoke to Kim for the second time she told us there had been fewer interactions between her and Sonia mainly because she did not trust Sonia nor find the relationship with her helpful. She had decided to get her line manager more involved in the relationship. We found that the level of distrust had gone up. Kim said that there had been a few key incidents (accusatory and demanding emails, feeling excluded from a meeting that mattered to her) over the past three months that influenced her level of distrust.

Six month after we first met Kim, she explained that her number of interactions with Sonia had diminished further mainly because Kim was not making the effort to work with her. A few weeks after the last interview Kim left the organisation.

Reflective Questions



Through our research, we have identified eight trust-building behaviours that seemed to us most prominent in the stories we heard. Whilst these behaviours and their contribution to trust may be of little surprise, their transformative power is startling in a number of the stories we present. The following figure represents the eight behaviours with some thought provoking questions.



We hope that in reading other people’s stories about trust and its emotional impact, you, the reader, will be encouraged to give pause for thought about the state of your own relationships and what you might do to build more meaningful and purposeful ones.

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