# TRUST IN MANAGERS REVISITED - ANTECEDENTS, MEDIATING FACTORS, AND CONSEQUENCES

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## Abstract

*The first purpose of this paper is to find the reasons why subordinates trust their managers in private organizations. The second purpose is related to whether there are national differences in the degree of subordinates' trust in their managers. Studies from two European countries are presented which were based on the same instrument for measuring subordinates' trust. These studies concluded that managers' actions are the antecedent to trust. Managers are, however, trusted to different degrees. It appears that managers need to show by their actions that they trust their subordinates, offer help and guidance, show appreciation to the subordinates, and solve problems adequately. The antecedent was the managers' proximity to the subordinates. Other studies found more antecedents. Additionally, a number of positive consequences of trust in managers – reported in other studies – are work performance, job satisfaction, and subordinates' motivation. Some questions regarding trust in managers still need answers. They are formulated but not answered in this paper.*

*Keywords: trust, definitions, managers, subordinates, proximity, cultural values, national characteristics*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Trust is a key concept in leadership scholarship (Marturano & Gosling, 2008). The importance of trust related to human actions is generally acknowledged. Organizations are confronted by rapid changes that imply uncertainty for people at work. Uncertainty about the future makes trust important. However, there is no agreement on how to define it. Some definitions, however, are widely used. Rotter (1971:444) defined trust as "a generalised expectancy held by any individual or group that the word, promise, verbal, or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on." Rotter regarded trust as a relatively stable personality trait, whereas psychologists view trust as an expectation that is specific to a transaction and the person with whom one is transacting. Sabel (1993:1133) defined trust as "the mutual confidence that no party in the interaction will exploit the vulnerability of others." Gambetta (1988:217) defined trust as "a specific

level of subjective probability that an agent or group will do a specific action before he (she) can monitor such an act … and in a situation where this action influences his own action."

Trust is important and useful in a range of organisational activities. It is co-related to good (non-negative) outcomes, and appears to be a crucial component of leadership (Andersen, 2008). Without trust, it may be difficult to communicate a vision to subordinates and to maintain cohesion when visions, objectives, threats, and opportunities are unclear. Rotter (1967) claimed that the effectiveness of organizations to a large extent depends on people in the organizations being prepared to trust others. Fukuyama (1995) emphasized how the degree of trust within nations impacts the national welfare. The higher the level of trust, the more easily employees will accept decisions by managers. Trust can explain the outcome of many organizational activities, such as leadership, ethical behavior, teamwork, goal setting, performance appraisal, development of

labor relations, and negotiations. Conditions leading to changes in organizations increase the importance of trust because organizational performance and the well-being of the employees are affected by trust.

A number of scholars have insisted on the need to appreciate the importance of actions and behaviors in order to understand the phenomenon of trust (Sitkin & Roth, 1993; Gambetta, 1988; Luhmann, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Whitener *et al.*, 1998; Sheppard and Sherman, 1998). Bhattacharya *et al.* (1998) concluded that trust is dependent not only on actions but also on outcomes and consequences. Trust, then, is a condition for interaction between individuals (Seligman, 1997).

A few studies have addressed the question of trust between subordinates and managers. Empirical studies of this relationship are still scant. Additionally, globalization introduces a need to understand the role of sociocultural contexts of trust in workplaces. With this consideration in mind, a number of studies have investigated subordinates' trust in managers and examined whether subordinate–manager relationships vary with societal context.

The role of trust between managers and their subordinates has been the subject of research in different disciplines. Trust is a crucial element in effective leader behavior (Fleishman & Harris, 1962; Bass, 2008). Other researchers have shown that managers' efforts to build trust comprise key mechanisms which enhance organizational effectiveness (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Dirks, 2000; Morgan & Zeffane, 2003; Bijlsma *et al.*, 2008). Drawing from these observations, it may be concluded that trust in superiors is advantageous for both individuals and organizations.

Whitener *et al.* (1998) identified a series of managerial behaviors that may affect employees' trust in managers. Dirks (2000) also studied how trust can be built through the actions of the managers. Bijlsma and van de Bunt (2003) found that monitoring performance, guidance to improve individual performance, support in case of trouble with others, openness to ideas of subordinates, and cooperation-related problem solving were relevant trust-related behaviors of managers. Appreciation of good work was not significantly related to trust in managers (ibid.).

## 2. TRUST IN MANAGERS – ONE COMPANY AND ONE COUNTRY

### 2.1 Introduction

It is reasonable to assume that the conditions for acting in a leadership position have changed. They may change even more in the future. Some of the new theoretical suggestions emphasize the relationship between leaders and subordinates. This relationship may be seen as a process in which influences are constituted and developed mutually. Interdependence and mutuality become vital for leaders. Trust in management may determine ethical behavior and organizational effectiveness.

Andersen (2005) investigated trust in an organization during a period of change. The importance of trust in periods of change also was addressed by Bijlsma-Frankema (2002), who studied trust in a hospital during a period of organizational change. The very fact that organizations went through transitions may have an impact on the degree of trust in management. Conditions leading to changes in the organization increase the importance of trust because organizational performance and the well-being of the employees are affected in a positive way (Gilkey 1991; Mishra 1996; Bijlsma-Frankema 2000, 2002; Schein 2004).

Andersen (2005) studied a Swedish manufacturing company, examining trust in eight managers (all the production managers, the marketing manager, and the managing director) during 2002 and 2003. The company had 590 employees. The company surveyed was chosen because major changes in market strategy were implemented at the time, possibly the most fundamental changes in the company over the last 20 years. The new strategy implied in essence that the six production units all specialized in a smaller number of products. The marketing and sales personnel, who previously were part of the production units, now belonged to the new marketing department reporting to the marketing manager. This strategy and reorganization made it possible to handle a smaller number of considerably larger customers abroad.

## 2.2 Measurement and sample

The performed factor analysis revealed both discriminant and convergent validity. The study by Andersen (2005) was based on a questionnaire with 38 items, which were hypothesized to explain the degree of trust (independent variables). The Likert questionnaire contained only one item measuring the degree of trust. The study by Bijlsma-Frankema (2000) provided the theoretical basis for each statement on the questionnaire. The questionnaire items were generated from interviews with managers and subordinates. Bijlsma-Frankema (2000) suggested 38 explanations for subordinates' trust in their managers.

This instrument was distributed to the closest subordinates to eight managers. An exploratory factor analysis showed that the 38 items formed three factors with a total of 20 items. The items formed three main groups: (1) the manager has confidence in me; (2) manager's actions and support, and (3) the manager shows me appreciation. "The manager solves problems" had a high degree of internal consistency. The research by Andersen (2005) was based on the shorter (21 items) versions of the questionnaire.

## 2.3 Conclusions

Managers enjoy different degrees of trust from their subordinates. The analyses performed confirmed the hypothesis that trust is created through actions, because factor 2 (Manager's actions and support) mainly captures the manager and his actions. This factor alone explains 76% of the subordinates' trust in their managers.

The hypothesis that trust in managers differs between the closest subordinates and other employees also received support from this study. It was, however, impossible to establish the causality of trust based on these analyses because there may be causes of trust other than the factors investigated. It may be that a high degree of trust makes the subordinates perceive that the manager trusts them when the manager offers help, shows appreciation, and solves problems. On the other hand, the causality may be in the other direction: trust may be the independent variable. Luo (2002) made this point by saying that some theorists have used the concept of trust as an independent, a dependent, or a moderating variable.

There are some important implications for management from the study of Andersen (2005). It may give managers guidance for how to work in order to establish, maintain, or increase their subordinates' trust. Manager need to show by their actions that they trusts their subordinates, offer help and guidance, show appreciation to their subordinates, and solve problems adequately.

There are also some implications for trust theory, because the objective of empirical studies is not primarily the results they give, but to what degree the results contribute to strengthening or challenging the theory on which the investigation is based. Andersen (2005) concluded that trust in managers was higher in their closest subordinates than in other employees. This is an empirical finding, not a theoretical conclusion. Being able to work closely with and observe the manager daily may just as well create personal experience, causing a low degree of trust. A strong association was found between the actions of managers and the degree of trust in managers. Trust-creating leadership is action or is perceived as action. Trust among individuals in organizations appears to be a crucial component of the new leadership context.

## 3. TRUST IN MANAGERS – TWO COMPANIES AND TWO COUNTRIES

### 3.1 Introduction

Andersen and Kovac (2012) addressed subordinates' trust in managers and investigated whether subordinate–manager relationships vary with societal and national characteristics. Several studies of managerial behavior across nations have shown significant differences even between managers in European countries (Smith *et al.,* 2002, Smith *et al.* 2003, Smith & Peterson, 2005). All in all, these studies have shown that the national cultures and cultural values explain differences in managers' behavioral patterns across nations. With this in mind, this study concentrated on subordinates' trust in managers and investigated whether subordinate–manager relationships varied with national characteristics.

The intention was to compare the data from the Swedish study (Andersen, 2005) with data from another country, and preferably one with markedly different sociocultural characteristics, to test the ro-

bustness of the conclusions. Data from a Slovenian organization, therefore, appeared to be appropriate for this comparative study.

The Swedish study showed that managers enjoyed different degrees of trust. Additionally, the managers' actions and support created trust, and explained the subordinates' trust in them. Two specific problems were addressed in the study by Andersen and Kovac (2012): (1) whether the conclusions on trust in managers based on the Swedish study were valid for Slovenian managers, and (2) whether aspects of trust are dependent on societal characteristics.

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## 3.2 Sample

The Slovenian and the Swedish companies were almost identical with respect to such parameters as the number of hierarchical levels and the number of organizational units.

Additionally, the position of the managers in this study was virtually identical, most being production managers. The number of respondents in the Swedish study was 138, and in the Slovenian study, 108 subordinates responded. In Sweden, 44 people were in a directly subordinate position (closest subordinates of the managers), and 94 were classified as other employees. In Slovenia, 51 of the surveyed people were directly subordinate (25 of those were close coworkers), and 57 were other employees. The study by Andersen and Kovac (2012) used the same refined version of the questionnaire with 21 items (including the dependent-variable item) as used by Andersen (2005).

## 3.3 Factor analyses

The factor analyses included all 20 independent variables from the Swedish study and the same items from the Slovenian study. The results of the factor anal-

yses of both studies showed that both the Swedish and Slovenian factor analyses yielded three factors: (1) improvements, working conditions, and atmosphere; (2) managers' actions and support; and (3) goals, development, and achievements. A $t$-test of the two samples informed that the difference between the average trust was significant, with $t = 4.633$, $p < 0.05$.

## 3.4 Reliability – Cronbach's alpha

To assess the reliability of the respondents' choice of individual statements, the Andersen and Kovac (2012) study contained a Cronbach's alpha test. The answers of the 44 respondents directly subordinate to all managers and the 94 other employees in the Swedish study, and the 51 respondents directly subordinate to all managers (of which 25 were close coworkers), and the 57 other employees in the Slovenian study. In the Swedish and Slovenian studies, all three factors, which emerged from the factor analysis, had a very high degree of internal consistency according to Cronbach's alpha. In general, a value higher than 0.70 is necessary to affirm reliability with Cronbach's alpha. Trust vested in Slovenian managers was higher than trust given to Swedish managers by their subordinates. A $t$-test of the two samples showed that the difference between the average trust was significant, with $t = 4.633$, $p < 0.05$. Trust vested in Slovenian managers was higher than trust given to the Swedish managers.

## 3.5 Conclusions

Both the studies by Andersen (2005) and Andersen and Kovac (2012) showed that managers enjoyed different degrees of trust from their subordinates, as hypothesized. The level of trust vested in Slovenian managers by their subordinates was significantly higher than that vested in Swedish managers. The study by Andersen and Kovac (2012) did not explore the reasons for this difference, but the difference may be due to the greater remoteness to power in Sweden. The analysis revealed a degree of similarity regarding the managers' actions and support between the Swedish and the Slovenian samples, because five out of eight items were identical. Sociocultural contexts may explain why the items in the factor "Managers' actions and support" were not identical. The actions of managers were decisive for the development of trust.

The actions and support of Swedish managers explained 76% of the degree of trust that the subordinates had in them (Andersen, 2005). This result is also in agreement with the findings of the Slovenian study (Andersen & Kovac, 2012), in which managerial actions explained 82% of the degree of subordinates' trust. These results may imply that both Swedish and Slovenian subordinates perceived leadership through managerial actions. Trust was strongly associated with such terms as "the manager has confidence in me," "the manager promotes our interests," "the manager shows me appreciation," "the manager supports me," and "the manager solves problems." In both these national samples, the other two factors were insignificantly related to trust. Trust in managers differed between the closest subordinates and other employees. The Swedish study found that the closest subordinates had a significantly higher degree of trust in their manager than did more remote subordinates. The Slovenian data also supported this finding. The Swedish and Slovenian studies addressed only subordinates' trust in their managers, and not managers' trust in their subordinates (e.g., Erdem & Özen-Aytemur, 2014), nor trust in organizational arrangements (e.g., Sitkin & Roth, 1993).

## 4. ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF TRUST

Rich (1997) developed a conceptual framework that related role-modeling behavior of sales managers to trust in sales managers, overall performance, and job satisfaction. A set of key outcome variables assessed the validity of the framework using a cross-sectional sample of salespeople and sales managers drawn from a variety of business-to-business sales organizations. The findings indicated that salespeople's perceptions of their managers' role-modeling behavior related positively to trust in the sales manager. Trust was measured by a five item Likert-scale questionnaire. Salespeople's trust in sales managers was related to both job satisfaction and overall performance of sales people. The argument here is that role modeling explains the degree of trust in managers, which in turn leads to subordinates' overall performance and job satisfaction.

Bijlsma and van de Bunt (2003) combined an interview and survey data, but the questionnaire by Bijlsma-Frankema (2000) was not used. Main reasons for building subordinates' trust in their managers were identical to the main findings in study of Andersen (2005) and Andersen and Kovac (2012), that is that the manager solves problems.

Other researchers have shown that managers' efforts to build trust involve key mechanisms for enhancing organizational effectiveness. Bijlsma-Frankema *et al.* (2008) concluded that trust in supervisors is an important factor in promoting team performance. Drawing from these observations, we may conclude that trust in superiors is advantageous for both individuals and organizations. The longitudinal study by Bijlsma-Frankema *et al.* (2008) aimed to explain performance differences of knowledge intensive project teams. The questionnaire used in the study by Bijlsma-Frankema (2000) was not used, and the respondents were students. Team-level data were gathered on three different occasions. Antecedents of performance studied were (1) trust in team members, (2) trust in supervisors, and (3) monitoring by team members and monitoring by supervisors. Correlation analysis and structural equation modelling were used to analyze the data. The results showed that heedful interrelating of team members, built on a combination of trust and monitoring by team members and trust in supervisors, was an important factor in promoting team performance.

Warnock et al. (2011) showed a direct and significant relationship between the level of employees' trust toward management and desirable outcomes (e.g., organizational effectiveness, continuous and collaborative improvement, organizational citizenship behaviors, and favorable leader–member exchange).

Erdem and Özen-Aytemur (2014) addressed the question of trust in managers, trust in coworkers, and trust in subordinates, and the meaning of trust in a cultural context. The purpose of their study was to determine the dimensions of trust relationships among managers, subordinates, and coworkers in organizations. The research consisted of a qualitative analysis exploring the dimensions and meanings of trust in the framework of varying organizational relationships. Open-ended questionnaires were developed. Subsequently, a questionnaire containing 109 items for three sub-scales (63 items for trust in managers, 24 items for trust in coworkers, 22 items for trust in subordinates) was designed according to a five-point Likert scale. A trust questionnaire was used and data were collected from 550 middle-level managers from

organizations operating in different regions of Turkey. Results from both qualitative and quantitative research methods indicated that the dimensions of trust varied in organizational relationships between managers and subordinates and between coworkers. Erdem and Özen-Aytemur (2014) argued that a culture-specific meaning is attributed to trust. Their study contributed to trust literature by developing three original sub-scales and by indicating that the meaning of trust in organizational relationships is influenced by cultural context. Erdem and Özen-Aytemur (2014) also included the managers' trust in their subordinates, whereas a number of previous studies studied only the subordinates' trust in their managers.

Crews (2015) referred to a meta-analysis on trust in leadership by Dirks and Ferrin (2002) which found that the proximity of leaders to employees was more strongly associated with employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction and performance, compared with leaders who were distant. This finding supported the research by Andersen (2005), which focused on why Swedish subordinates trusted their managers. Andersen (2005) found the level of trust to be high among employees who had a close relationship with their manager and among those who could observe the manager's behavior more directly than could other employees. The concepts of proximity and trustworthiness also were evident in the research. Senior executives tended to consider ethical formal leaders (managers) to be individuals with whom they had a close working relationship. Many respondents regarded ethical leaders to be those who had influenced their careers before they became senior executives themselves. They were individuals in whom the respondents placed trust and sought guidance during the development of their careers, according to Crews (2015).

Håvold and Håvold (2019) studied how different kinds of power influenced trust and motivation in hospitals. The links between power, trust, and motivation were analyzed. Trust was measured based on the work of Rich (1997). Quantitative data from 137 respondents were collected. Legitimate, referent, and reward power had a positive influence on trust, whereas coercive power had a negative influence on trust. In total, 41.8% of the variation in trust in managers was explained by power. Trust, reward power, and expert power explained 30.9% of the variation in motivation.

## 5. RESEARCH ON TRUST REVISITED

Table 1 presents antecedents, mediating factors, and consequences of the study object, trust in managers. Six of the nine studies focused on the an-

*Table 1: Overview of studies – antecedents, mediating factors, and consequences of trust*

| Studies | Antecedents to trust | Mediating factors | Study object: Trust | Consequences of trust |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Andersen (2005) | Manager's actions and support | Proximity to subordinates | Degree of trust differs | |
| Bijlsma & van de Bunt (2003) | Managers' actions | | Degree of trust differs | |
| Bijlsma-Frankema et al. (2008) | | | Trust in managers | Team performance |
| Andersen & Kovac (2012) | Manager's actions and support | Societal and national characteristics | Degree of trust differs | |
| Rich (1997) | Role modeling | | Trust in managers | Overall performance Job satisfaction |
| Warnock et al. (2011) | The level of employees' trust in management | | | Organizational outcomes |
| Erdem and Özen-Aytemur (2014) | Managers' trust in subordinates; subordinates' trust in managers | Cultural context | | |
| Crews (2015) | Trust | Proximity to subordinates | | Job satisfaction Performance |
| Håvold & Håvold (2019) | Power | | Degree of trust | Motivation |

tecedents or reasons for subordinates' trust in their managers. Two studies focused on the mediating factors of proximity, whereas two studies addressed the mediating factor of national and societal factors. Five studies were concerned with the consequences of subordinates' trust in managers, mainly regarding the performance of teams or organizational performance. Two studies addressed the relationship between trust and job satisfaction and motivation, factors which may be have a positive impact on group and organizational performance.

When revisiting the scholarship on trust, it is evident that some questions remain unanswered. Yukl (2010) pointed out that much of the literature on leadership focuses on the relationship between leaders and subordinates even though research has found that managers typically spend considerable time with persons other than direct subordinates or the manager's superiors. Kotter (1986), Kanter (1983), and Kaplan (1988) addressed the number of individual contacts with whom managers spend time, as well as the networks needed for managers to achieve organizational goals. A manager's network of contacts contains no fewer than 12 groups of people (lateral superiors, peers, lateral juniors, higher executives, boss, direct subordinates, indirect subordinates, officials in government agencies, clients, suppliers, colleagues in the same profession, and important people in the community). The trust that individuals in these groups have in corporate managers needs to be investigated, because this may have dramatic consequences on the performance of their enterprises. Additionally, we need to appreciate the public–private distinction (Rainey, Backoff & Levine, 1976), which urges us ask whether public managers are more or less trusted by their subordinates than are corporate managers.

### SUMMARY IN SLOVENE / IZVLEČEK

Namen članka je določiti razloge, na podlagi katerih podrejeni zaupajo svojim vodjem v zasebnih organizacijah. Avtorji so želeli ugotoviti, ali obstajajo nacionalne razlike v stopnji zaupanja podrejenih v njihove vodje. Predstavljene so študije iz dveh evropskih držav, ki so temeljile na istem instrumentu za merjenje zaupanja podrejenih. V obeh študijah je bilo ugotovljeno, da zaupanje temelji na dejanjih vodje ter da se stopnje zaupanja v vodjo razlikujejo. Dokazano je bilo, da morajo vodje s svojimi dejanji pokazati, da zaupajo svojim podrejenim, ponuditi pomoč in smernice ter ustrezno rešiti težave. Omenjena raziskava je predstavila en dejavnik, in sicer razdaljo med podrejenimi in vodjem. Druge študije so pokazale več dejavnikov. Zaupanje v vodjo prinese številne pozitivne posledice, kar je bilo dokazano v drugih študijah. Te so: delovna uspešnost, zadovoljstvo z delom in motivacija podrejenih. Kljub temu vprašanja v povezavi z zaupanjem podrejenih v vodje še vedno ostajajo odprta.

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