The Interaction of Trust, Controls and the Disposition to Trust in Virtual Teams

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As work becomes increasingly more collaborative (Townsend, et al, 1998; Larsen & McInerney, 2002), virtual, cross-functional teams have become essential to organizations (Pinto, et al, 1993). Virtual team performance is affected by levels of trust (Larsen & McInerney, 2002). High performing teams are grounded in trust (Furst, et al, 1999) which is based on superordinate goals (Pinto, et al, 1993; Handy, 1995) – “goals that are urgent and compelling for all groups involved but whose attainment requires the resources and efforts of more than one group” (Sherif 1962, p. 19). Trust in virtual teams is solidified by actions that foster group goals (Butler, et al, 1999; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999). Along with rules and procedures, trust is the most important and significant predictor of success in teams (Pinto, et al, 1993; Guinan, et al, 1998). Low performing teams have low levels of trust as shown by low levels of involvement (Furst, et al, 1999), insufficient commitment to the goals (Jarvenpaa, et al, 1998), and low rates of communication initiation and response (Jarvenpaa, et al, 1998).

A recent study about trust in virtual teams argues that controls affect the formation of trust. This study asserts that traditional control methods caused a drop in trust by increasing vigilance of the team members, increasing the salience of reneging behaviors, and increasing the salience of incongruence (Piccoli & Ives, 2003). We think that the interplay of controls with trust is more complicated. Team performance interacts with controls to affect trust. Because controls shape behavior and behavior influences trust, controls make all behavior more salient. In functional teams – teams in which members communicate well, complete tasks on time, and accomplish goals – controls increase trust. In dysfunctional teams – teams in which members do not communicate effectively, do not complete tasks, and do not accomplish goals – controls decrease trust.

A total of 200 undergraduate level business students at a large U.S. public state university participated in this study. Their participation was voluntary and they received course credit for their participation. The average age of the participants was 19.8 years old and 33% were female. The tasks were implemented through the use of vignettes. The experiment was a 2 x 2 factorial design, varying trust behaviors (higher trust, lower trust) and behavioral controls (controls, no controls). Participants were randomly assigned into one of the four conditions, with 48-51 subjects in each condition.

| H1 | One’s disposition to trust will directly affect one’s trust belief. | Supported |
| H2 | Individuals will form a higher trust belief about team members who exhibit more ability, benevolence and integrity in their behaviors. | Supported |
| H3 | The presence of post-task evaluation behavioral controls will increase the strength of the impact of trust behaviors on trust belief. | Not Supported |
| H4 | The presence of post-task evaluation behavioral controls will increase the strength of the impact of disposition to trust on trust belief. | Supported |
Dispositional trust, the general predisposition to trust or distrust other people, seems to be the most influential factor in trust belief. People who are predisposed to trust perceived most behavior as trusting behavior. In general, controls lower trust for all team members. Any action taken by management to gather status or fix problems may lower trust for all team members. Not only does the predisposition to trust affect trust belief within teams, it also directly affects one’s perceptions of controls. The impact of trust disposition on trust belief was stronger in the presence of behavioral controls.

References


