

TRUST AND A “CERTAIN TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP”

Patricia Davis & Jeffrey McLean

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of trust within workplace relationships, from the perspective of the ideas of Carl Rogers. While Rogers was originally focused upon therapeutic or helping relationships, the characteristics of effective relationships are considered generic and can be easily applied to any set of relationships within the wider workplace. It is maintained that the essential ingredient, the glue if you will, to enable workplace relationships to be effective is the trust that exists between self and others within the relationship. Trust is integral to Rogers' "helping relationship", enabling each individual to "*find their inner wisdom and confidence*" to make "*increasingly healthier and more constructive choices*" (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990). As it could be suggested that any system, including an organization, is nothing but a set of relationships, it is imperative that the process of helping others to learn and operate through the medium of trusting relationship (Rogers' "certain type of relationship") is seen as mandatory for success. The interesting dichotomy is that abounding within the workplace today is control, high competition and individuality; a culture within which the "certain type of relationship" as suggested by Rogers is unlikely to flourish.

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INTRODUCTION

The most famous proponent of the humanistic approach to psychology, Carl Rogers, believed that people's perceptions of the world and their innate tendency toward growth within that world were essential to successfully shape human behaviour. To this end, according to this approach, each person has an innate tendency to grow toward their own potential despite the possibility of the environment, or other people, blocking their path. The key to success is the degree of *choice* which is exercised before thinking, or acting, determined by each person's unique perception of their world. Thus, if one perceives the world as friendly, one will feel happy and secure. Conversely, if the world is viewed as being dangerous and hostile a sense of anxiety and defensiveness will be the result. Inherent in both situations, of course, is the degree of *trust* that the environment between a person and their world engenders, based on perceptions firstly, followed by past experiences and expectations. In the workplace, however, Roger's message is clear:

The answer to most of our problems lies not in technology but in relationships. What really matters is trust in ourselves and others, in communication, in how we handle our feelings and our conflicts, in how we find meaning in our lives. In the twentieth century we have learned an enormous amount about how to get along with ourselves and with others. Put that knowledge to work and we may yet save the planet. Disregard it, as we focus our lives and fortunes on the next technological quick fix, and we may not survive. (Carl Rogers, 1967, in H. Kirschenbaum and V. Henderson, 1990)

M. Scott Peck in *The Road Less Travelled* (1985) suggests (in a slightly different context) that: "*The problem lies not in the complexity of the tools but in the will to use them*" and in terms of Rogers' quote above, this is a key consideration as the "will" is most likely aligned with the individual's trust in the relevant people within the relationship, the communication process and the repercussions of the outcome. Neither technology, communication, leadership or relationships will be successful unless there is a meaningful context present.

It has been said that to provide a meaningful context, the four basic factors needed to engender the required organizational trust are: open communication; decision making shared; critical information shared; perceptions and feelings shared. (Mishra & Morrissey, 1990) This "sharing" is integral to successful relationships as the trust engenders sufficient knowledge to support interdependence and the risk taking required for growth, both of the individual and organization.

In most organisations, however, effective relationships, whether they be informal or formalised through a team structure, are taken for granted. The dysfunctional issues of poor communication, poor team work, personality clashes, conflict and aggression, which may be in existence can also taken for granted as a by product of "*behaving like human beings*" (Drucker, 1999). The "quick fix" often employed to overcome these issues, that is externally focussed and imposed rules or punitive solutions, not only deepens the mistrust and lessens the quality of the relationships but also diminishes individual and organizational growth and learning for future problems. Drucker's statement that "*Organizations are no longer built on force but on trust*" may be precipitant at this point of time, however his claim that "*The existence of trust between people does not necessarily mean that they like one another. It means that they understand one another.*" (p72) is the key to making relationships more effective - a key that was formulated by Carl Rogers in his "certain type of relationship" proposal.

Although trained in psychodynamic treatment methods (during the 1930's) Rogers' questioned their value from the perspective of a detached observer who took control of the client. Convinced that a formal and distanced approach was not the answer, he used what he called *nondirective therapy*, (Berstein, 1991) the essence of which was to harness the client's own decisions and drive without direction, judgement or outside interpretations. It is this *person-centred* (Rogers, 1958) approach, which formed the foundation of Roger's relationship with his clients, based on three important and inter-related attitudes: unconditional positive

regard, empathy, and congruence. (Berstein, 1991) It is through these attitudes that this paper views the impact of trust on relationships in the workplace.

UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

This is an attitude that says one cares about and accepts another as a person and trusts their ability to change, grow and act. To achieve this goal, the therapist listens to the client, without interrupting, and accepts what is said, without evaluating it. The therapist need not approve of everything the client says, but must accept it as part of a valued person. The therapist must also trust clients to solve their own problems; therefore the therapist does not give advice, which Rogers said "*carries the subtle message that clients are incompetent or inadequate, making them less confident and more dependent on help*" (1957)

From a workplace perspective, Rogers looked at positive regard as an acceptance of an individual as a separate, yet worthy person with

a basic trust – a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy. Whether we call it prizing, acceptance, trust, or by some other term, it shows up in a variety of ways.
(Rogers, 1967, in Kirschenbaum, Henderson, 1990).

From a leadership perspective, this acceptance of trustworthiness aligns with a "designer" style, where it is the task of the leader, or the organization, to design the learning process, with the overriding belief that "*people learn what they need to learn, not what someone else thinks they need to learn*" (Senge, 1992).

Handy (1995) calls this confidence, both in competence and commitment to a goal, but within boundaries rather than unlimited. He supports Roger's "positive regard" concept in that

Freedom within boundaries works best, however, when the work unit is self contained, having the capability within it to solve its own problems.

Of course these "boundaries" must also include the values and beliefs of the workplace – the shared culture and goals of the leaders – if trust is to bond the relationships within. It is through relationships, formal, informal, intra-personal, inter-personal, intra-organizational or inter-organizational, that important personal and organizational goals are achieved. If these relationships are based on "positive regard" then the ability to operate, change, adapt or learn is improved, resulting in high survival and success of the individuals and the organization.

Throughout all of his work, Rogers was consistent in his belief that the innermost core of human beings is trustworthy, positive, life affirming, social, rational, and self regulating. (1957, 1958, 1965, 1967, 1977, 1980). How different is this to most workplace relationships today? Certainly the positive aspects of the workplace can be obscured by organizational structures and management, or leadership, "styles" which preclude recognition of the human worth and possibility, however if "unconditional positive regard" is inherent in the culture it is probable that this statement could be challenged, "*Once a clear bond of trust existed between dedicated employees and concerned employers. But what was is no more*" (Robert W. Rogers, 1994).

Carl Rogers articulates a need for "positive regard", referring to an expectation that "significant others" should provide the qualities of warmth, caring, respect and sympathy if motivation is to take place. (Rogers, 1959) Of course it is within this environment that the effective relationships can flourish, keeping in mind that each individual has the power over, and subsequent control of, their own skills, attitudes, needs and qualities. The reality is that relationships can be cultivated and nurtured simply to meet objectives and the "significant others" must prove that giving and obtaining trust is not misguided. In essence this could apply to the espoused culture or "positive regard" of the organization or the individuals within it, both of which need to prove their trustworthiness to be effective.

In a study in the healthcare industry the importance of such "trusting relationships" was identified as the "single most important factor that leads to learning". As the authors reiterate

When you trust your colleagues, you can be open about explaining not only your successes but also your failures. Within that context of support and mutual respect, a practitioner can take risks to learn... (DiBella and Nevis, 1998)

EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING

The client centred therapist is supposed to act not as an outsider who wants to pin a diagnostic label on the client but as someone who wants to appreciate how the world looks from the client's point of view. Thus this external frame of reference, looking at the client from the outside, is replaced with empathy, involving an emotional understanding of what a person might be thinking and feeling. The sharing of an internal frame of reference is not just through expressing words of understanding but also includes non-verbal communication, including the skill of active listening such as the use of eye contact and other signs of careful attention. Open and empathic communication plays an important role in generating trust and subsequently generating effective relationships within an organization.

Rogers also found reflection through paraphrasing to be useful in encouraging people to perceive their own thoughts and feelings without resorting to the potentially disruptive two way communication process. (1958) The crucial aspect of this element is that the objective is to take the time to truly understand an issue or problem from the other person's perspective – not to judge or evaluate – but to simply understand so as to help them be able to understand, take action and reflect more effectively. From an individual perspective, organizations need to be aware of the cultivation of a positive communication climate, "where relationships are built on openness, honesty and trust which comes from the goodwill felt towards one another" (Dwyer, 1999). However, an awareness of the importance of effective skills in communication must be inherent in the organization's culture in order for effectiveness to occur.

For Rogers, in therapy an empathic listener makes clients feel valued and worthy; thus they are more likely to be confident and motivated to try solving their problems themselves. He encapsulates this in his "great hypothesis":

If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur.
(Rogers, 1961)

Critics of teamwork (relationships) maintain that membership can be stressful rather than empowering, with extensive peer pressure to conform to group norms. (Sewell, 1998) This concertive control could be seen as a direct antithesis to Rogers' "certain type of relationship" in that the behaviour is externally constructed rather than resultant from the relationship itself. Perhaps if the norms of the team were based on the empathic skills of active listening and encouragement, with personal rapport and role modelling, the relationship would be more productive. Teams (relationships) are critical to the enhancement of information creation within an organization. However, unless the climate is one of trust, and empowerment based on valuing diversity and belief systems through empathic peer support and guidance, the "growth, change and personal development" through multiple interactions and information exchange will be negligible.

As Ryan and Oestreich (1994) claim, "entrenched negative assumptions maintain a cycle of mistrust" in workplace relationships. Instead of cynicism, mistrust and fear being the norm, the reverse can be encouraged through relationships which reflect the characteristics of Rogers' "certain type of relationship", that is empathic communication.

CONGRUENCE

Aligned with *genuineness*, the consistency between the non judgemental way the therapist feels and the way he or she acts toward the client is important. The unconditional positive regard and empathy must be real, not manufactured. Experiencing the congruence of others within a relationship allows one to see that relationships can be built on trust, openness and honesty, that the characteristics of interdependence, that is shared thoughts, emotions or behaviours, are not misplaced.

This climate also allows self-disclosure to develop, in both breadth and depth, to the extent where trust begins to develop, as each party accepts self-disclosures with understanding and caring. In other words, people need to come together on a 'person to person' basis without "falsity or facades" (Rogers, 1967).

Legare (1998) cites that Rogers found people's tendency to evaluate a main obstacle to effective communication, however he also found that people who learned to listen with understanding mitigated their evaluative impulses to improve their communication with others. The concept of active listening

referred to seeing the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, sensing how it feels to them, and trying to obtain their frame of reference toward the subject being discussed. (p36).

Whilst other thinkers, such as in Robert Rogers' (1994) *listening is the key to mending fences and healing wounds ...taking the time to hear another's point of view without becoming defensive*, articulate the importance of open communication, especially the skill of listening, to Carl Rogers, active listening involved congruence, that is being internally consistent through thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. A congruent person would encourage the climate of security and trust, thereby in turn encouraging more congruence in others. As Gopinath and Becker (2000) affirm, "*Employees can be expected to trust and become committed to organizations that treat them fairly*". Bill Adams (1994) also addresses the state of congruence with the statement

I have never had one CEO tell me they wanted people to lie to them. However, I have had many who establish a climate for distrust and dishonesty by their actions or lack of same.

On the other hand, Baum's statement that "*individuals must face the possibilities of closeness against the risks of vulnerability, exposure, and loss*" (1989) is a reality check against the congruence of trust in relationships. In his discourse on conventional politics and the problem of organizational loyalty, Baum also writes that an organization can encourage loyalty and identification through supporting unconscious requirements for intimacy in its workplace relationships. Among other suggestions for success, he includes the implementation of working conditions and incentive systems, which clearly provide congruence between "aggressive work with caring work" (p47). In other words, organizations could support a team (relationship) by encouraging collaborative and caring work whilst evaluating, and remunerating, individuals as team members. A performance-based reward system, with individual performance measures linked into team goals, encourages a team culture where "significant others" provide the trust and support necessary for all members to achieve individual growth. Also, within this climate of trust, organizations can encourage collective interests whilst recognising individual differences and the conflicts (both positive and negative) which may emanate, for

If managers and supervisors discuss issues, problems, and conflicts honestly and with concern about subordinates' welfare, subordinates may learn they can express differences and pursue interests without fear of destructive conflict or anxiety. (Baum, 1989)

Unless a "certain type of relationship" is in place, that is "person centred" rather than control centred, there cannot be an outcome that is fully owned by all parties.

It has traditionally been clear that "*power is an essential feature of a manager's role*" (Vecchio, 2000) as managerial effectiveness requires power as a tool of control. It is clear today, though, that subordinates possess what some may call a lesser, but nevertheless important, power, which can have an influence on

others. This power can be shown in the workplace through withholding, or misrepresenting, services, information or support, as well as through acceptance and compliance. Dr Simon Longstaff, executive director of the St James Ethics Centre, is quoted as saying "*We will see a greater decentralisation of power*" (Verrall, 2000) when discussing the future of work, with a further prediction that "*the workplace is going to be about relationships and powerful ideas as much as it will be about profits and productivity*" in the future. Of course power can be achieved through well known political tactics such as ingratiation, coalitions, line positions or even divide and conquer, but these are based on an antiquated concept of organizations (relationships) being warlike or mechanistic. There has been a movement away from the "heroic" leader towards a more balanced and social organization, however even if power and control is wielded ethically and with respect given to all parties, the relationship would not encourage the culture of trust necessary to enable members to adapt and grow. A culture, which encourages a bond of trust, also encourages an environment of shared power, or empowerment, within which all members can, through positive regard, reach their potential. The outcome is a leader who, after determining competency and with full and open communication, harnesses the knowledge and creativity of others in the relationship through devolving power within an environment of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence.

CONCLUSION

Workplace relationships exist, whether planned for or not. Their effectiveness, however, is the linchpin to the effectiveness and sustainability of the organization, therefore a significant component of managerial consideration.

The work of Carl Rogers provides a format centred on a trust that relationships based on acceptance, empathy and genuineness can engender a climate within which people can grow without the control or judgement of others. Thus, it is not only the role of management to ensure effectiveness through these three attitudes, but the responsibility of all within the relationship to seek to understand others, and communicate sufficiently in order to generate the "certain type of relationship" through trust rather than mistrust. As a role model, one could not do better. Rogers treated people with the positive affirmations of being trustworthy, life affirming, social, rational and self-regulating. He was known for his great capacity for empathic listening and his non-judgemental caring, his encouragement of the individual to grow and learn through openness and honest communication, and without external controls. The negative images of fear or blame, undermining or cynicism, do not have a place in his scheme of things, yet they are seen to be inherent within workplace relationships in many organizations today. The entrenched cycle of mistrust is the foundation of poor workplace relationships. Although not a "quick fix", Carl Rogers' focus on the positive aspects of people and relationships, and the critical importance of trust, may yet prove to be the only sustainable solution.

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