



## Building Trust in Global Technical Teams – The Not-So-Secret Sauce for Success

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### Global Teams are Challenged to Create Trust

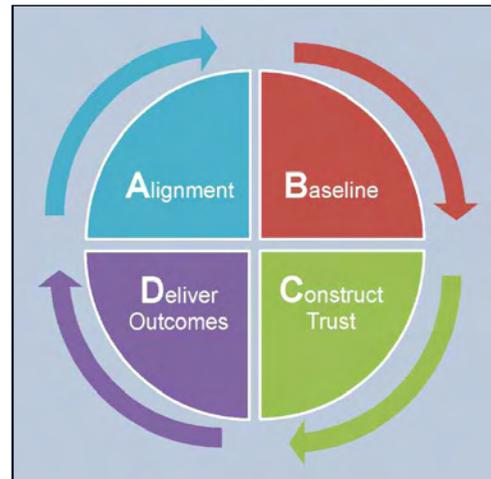
*Birgit, a German engineer, upon meeting her team for the first time, spends the first 10 minutes of her presentation delineating her education and professional background, plus her awards.*

*Mian-ze (face) is critical to the Chinese. It is a sign of respect. Bo's mian-ze was damaged as she sat in the impromptu meeting with her Dutch colleagues who articulated the reasons why they felt the Chinese team's mistakes caused the denial of approval.*

*Mauricio, a Colombian geologist, was pleasantly surprised when his U.S. American manager not only spent the time to listen to Mauricio's ideas, but delineated the next steps he would take to share Mauricio's idea with senior management.*

These scenarios contain a common critical value – trust – that is required of all teams, and vital to dispersed teams.

In our work with global managers, we frequently see genuine displays of trust being misinterpreted or going unacknowledged, resulting in the erosion of this critical value. Team members can tell that trust is lacking, but may not want to address it directly, or make matters worse through misinterpretation across language and culture differences. To help teams, especially groups of technical people (engineering, R&D, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, etc.), survey data can “speak” to provide an acceptable entree to identify trust needs, gaps, and pathways to stronger trust. We have researched instruments that will assess trust in organizations and teams; one that specifically addresses trust within teams of many cultures, and examines 10 dimensions of trust. We have built a four-step process that includes *Alignment* around the purpose and goals of the team, measuring a *Baseline* of trust with online survey data, followed by a face-to-face *Construct Trust* workshop, that produces commitments and *Deliverables* to reach team goals with higher trust. This article will share how two teams have used this process and how organizations can benefit.



### The Impact of Trust in Businesses

Roughly half of all managers don't trust their leaders.<sup>1</sup> Levels of trust across industries have been steadily decreasing in the past decade, and took a precipitous downturn in 2009 with the economic crisis.<sup>2</sup> Uncertainty fueled by downsizing, and complexity resulting from outsourcing and mergers creates a breeding ground for distrust. Yet, as we move to a more transparent interdependent global reality, trust is more essential than ever.

Trust gives leaders an advantage, because it leads to loyalty and stability in a turbulent world; it is the foundation of empowering relationships between leaders and their employees.<sup>3</sup> Trust takes time to build, but will produce speed<sup>4</sup> in achieving results. Global companies

must bridge distance, language and culture with cross-border collaboration. Employees' readiness to trust one another is critical to sharing information, taking calculated risks, surfacing innovative ideas, or bringing problems to light as soon as they occur.

Research<sup>5</sup> makes it clear that trust is a pivotal value that can significantly improve a company's performance in the global market. Higher levels of trust are linked to cooperation and collaboration, competitive performance, higher knowledge transfer, increased levels of productivity, three times *higher* total return to shareholders, innovative thinking, leadership effectiveness, and achieving engagement and retention of our greatest resource – human capital.

## The 10 Trust Criteria

*From the International Trust in Teams Indicator (ITTI)*

1. <b>Competence</b> – Trust based on a perception that group members are competent, and so will not let me down			6. <b>Well-being</b> – Trust arising from the feeling that I have nothing to fear from the other members of the group
2. <b>Compatibility</b> – Trust based on background, values, approaches, interests and objectives held in common			7. <b>Inclusion</b> – Trust based on the observation that other group members actively include me in their social and work activities
3. <b>Goodwill</b> – Trust based on the belief that other group members are concerned about my overall welfare			8. <b>Open with information</b> – Trust based on the fact that team members share information important to the team proactively and clearly
4. <b>Integrity</b> – Trust based on the fact that other group members maintain promises and behave towards me in accordance with a moral code			9. <b>Accessibility</b> – Trust based on the fact that other group members share their true feelings and I can relate to them at a personal level
5. <b>Predictability</b> – Trust based on the observation that the behavior of group members is consistent over time and in different contexts			10. <b>Reciprocal</b> – Trust based on the observation that other group members are trusting and co-operative towards me

Birgit wants her team to trust her so she spends 10 minutes extolling her accomplishments. She does this because for Germans, high on their list of “10 Trust Criteria”<sup>6</sup> is “Competence – trust based on a person’s skills, expertise, experience, and reputation.” In Bo’s case, Chinese culture holds “Integrity – trust based on a person maintaining promises and behaving toward me in accordance with a moral code” – as important to team success. The fact that the Dutch contingent shared this embarrassing perspective in a group setting – with no warning – was reprehensible to Bo. Mauricio’s pleasure with his American boss was palpable as Colombians stress “Openness with Information – trust based on the fact that other team members share information important to the team proactively and clearly.” When his boss shared Mauricio’s contributions, the trust and personal bonds increased.

These 10 Trust Criteria form the foundation upon which people are willing to trust. We define trust as, “The personal risk I take by expecting the people I depend on to act in a positive way toward me, especially if I cannot control the result of their actions.”<sup>7</sup> Trust influences how we make decisions, include (or exclude) others and decide how much information we disclose. Trust can create the difference between low- and high-performing teams.

In this article, we will focus on three trust criteria – *Competence, Integrity* and *Openness with Information* (the remainder can be seen in the table on this page). Teams we have assessed have cited these three trust criteria most frequently as priorities for trusting their team members. We will show how companies with high levels of trust experience increased speed, higher morale, and higher total return to shareholders. Then, we will show how culture influences the way people tend to behave when they are acting in concert with these three trust criteria.

## Trust Data Can Break the Logjam of Distrust

A Brazilian manufacturing group had been acquired by a U.S. company and now had to take design orders from R&D and Engineering in Seoul. Communication between the Koreans and Brazilians was difficult, delays and errors occurred, mistakes were hidden, the “inner circle” was getting rewards that others thought were not fair, and attempts at problem-solving were interpreted as blaming. Distrust was palpable! To get the team collaborating, a face-to-face meeting was planned. The 35 team members identified the three most critical short-term goals (Alignment). Next, they all took the ITTI trust survey (Baseline) prior to flying to their team summit. The team was presented with their trust data; the numbers spoke clearly and focused the team’s priorities on the three highest trust gap items. These were *Integrity* (be honest and truthful and ready to admit their own mistakes); *Openness with Information* (exchange information in a proactive, transparent and unambiguous way) and *Competence* (work within clearly defined and realistic roles and responsibilities). Through facilitated dialogue, they discussed how these applied to current work processes and past misunderstandings. However, what was most powerful was the clarity with which the team now saw their situation, enabling them to ask each other for what they needed to build trust, e.g., “I need you to tell me in our meetings when calibrations and yields are wrong.” Coming out of this meeting, there was enthusiastic optimism that they had moved into a new era for the team, as several Koreans and Brazilians said: “We never had communications like this;” “I believe we can work together;” “Things are going to be much better;” “Thank you!”

## Trust can be Measured and Repaired: The US-Japan Regulatory Team

Recently, we worked with a U.S.-Japan team where trust had eroded and milestones weren’t being met. This team was charged with a critical project that relied on multifunctional teams of scientists and lawyers in both countries to get Japanese government approval for a new product. Speed was important to beat global competitors, and the company knew that if they failed at this first attempt, it would take years to recoup.

### Trust Criteria – Top-4 Priority “Want”

JAPAN	U.S.
Openness with Information	Competence
Integrity	Openness with Information
Inclusion	Integrity
Competence	Predictability

The 52 team members took the ITTI to measure the team’s 10 Trust Criteria. Both groups agreed that *Openness with Information*, with honest full disclosure, good news or bad news was critical to the success of the project, but they needed to work around the issue of saving face. The U.S. group, which prioritized *Competence*, recognized that only the Japanese group really had the linguistic, political, and scientific ability to drive the project through the Japanese government approval process; however, the team in Japan had not done this before, and the concerns (and lack of trust) of the U.S. side were soon identified. From discussions with the team, specific examples of behaviors arose that became tangible ways to build trust. The Japanese group said *Inclusion* would increase if the U.S. group held meetings during times that Japanese could attend (4:00 to 5:00 p.m. PST), invited more team members to meetings, and cc’d more Japanese team members on e-mails. The Americans said *Integrity* would increase if the Japanese would clearly disagree or say “no.” *Predictability* would increase if the Japanese team didn’t escalate issues, going over the head of their U.S. counterpart to an executive. Both groups reported improved processes, increased trust, and began meeting their project goals three months after their team trust-building summit meeting.

### Team Trust Charter Moves the Team to Build Trust

We encourage our clients to develop their Team Trust Charter, an action plan that defines specific strategies that team members will take to increase trust. Included in the plan is “expected results,” which create a goal to aim for.

There are three steps involved in the design and implementation of the Team Trust Charter. First, as a team, decide which three trust criteria are most critical to the team’s success. This can be done by taking an informal poll, or by having the teams take the ITTI. Second, create an action plan that individual team members complete. Third, share your plan with your team members to arrive at agreed specific team norms that will become the Team Trust Charter and will support the expected results. It can be helpful to establish informal mentoring pairs as a way for team members to support, guide and challenge each

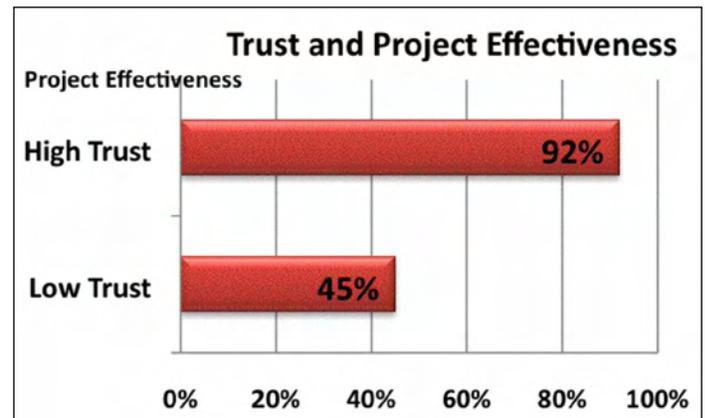
other to attain their goal. As each goal is accomplished, share the accomplishment in a team repository so that all members, particularly those in remote geographic sites, can share in the success.

### Are Some Cultures More Trusting than Others?

People from High Collectivist societies may lack trust for those outside the family or in-group, e.g., team or site, and give higher levels of trust to people they know. High collectivist cultures have greater self-disclosure, more perceived similarity, more shared networks, and greater confidence in members of their in-group than members outside their group. This is corroborated in Fukuyama’s studies of non-kinship trust. The indication for global teams is clear: members from Asia, Mediterranean regions and Latin America (High Collectivist) need to meet face-to-face to build trust; conversely, Northern European and Anglo cultures (Low Collectivist) are inclined to trust others using communication links (phone, video) with less need to meet in person.

### Aim for the Results of High Trust Teams

If you could achieve 92% or 45% project success, which would you choose? The 92%, of course, and the key can be trust. A study<sup>8</sup> conducted with 453 business executives from around the world found that of those who had complete trust in a key individual with whom they had recently collaborated, 92% reported success in meeting the goals of their collaborative venture, compared to only 45% among those who reported little trust.



These results show that individuals are in a strong position to imbue confidence and trust in a collaborative effort, and suggest that companies should invest in building trust to allow people to lead and enable their collaboration efforts. As we saw with the Brazilian/Korean team and the U.S./Japan team, meeting face-to-face accelerates trust building and trust repair. When virtual team members are working with people they may never meet face-to-face, it is challenging but not impossible to identify trust priorities, describe the behaviors that increase trust, enable and support these behaviors, and experience the

speed and enjoyment of a higher trust environment.

When will your team start building trust? A Chinese proverb offers timely advice:

*“The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is today.”*

## Endnotes

- 1 Robert F. Hurley, “The Decision to Trust,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2006.
- 2 World Economic Forum, 2005; and Edelman Trust Barometer 2009-2010.
- 3 Marshall Goldsmith, et al., *Global Leadership, The Next Generation*, Prentice-Hall, 2003.
- 4 Stephen M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 2006.
- 5 Why Projects Fail, NASA 2009; “WorkUSA – A Study of Employee Attitudes and Opinions,” Watson Wyatt, 2002.
- 6 The 10 Trust Criteria are assessed using the International Trust in Teams Indicator (ITTI). The instrument is based on over 10 years of research on trust in global business settings, conducted by WorldWork, Ltd., London, U.K.
- 7 Definition of trust by David Trickey, a founding partner of TCO International Diversity Management and a director at WorldWork. Mr. Trickey designs and conducts a number of psychometric cross-cultural assessments.
- 8 “The Role of Trust in Business Collaboration,” Economist Intelligence Unit, May 2008.

## About the Authors



Marian Stetson-Rodriguez, president of Charis Intercultural Training Corporation, a global leadership development and intercultural communication and consulting firm, has served high-tech clients for more than 20 years. She has consulted to companies with international

acquisitions and international startups, growing and downsizing international operations, managing a culturally diverse workforce, building sales and managing global distribution to customers overseas, and managing global teams in over 20 countries. Charis’ staff of 25 consultants in 11 countries delivers cross-cultural training for leaders and employees with global projects. She is adjunct faculty at Santa Clara University Graduate Engineering and MBA programs, where she teaches how to work in global teams. She has a M.S. in Organizational Development, is fluent in Spanish and English, and conversant in French and Italian. She and her Venezuelan husband have three bilingual children. She can be reached at [m.s.rodriquez@chariscorp.com](mailto:m.s.rodriquez@chariscorp.com).



Jacqueline Oliveira, director of the Global Teams Practice at Charis Intercultural Training Corporation, brings 18 years of extensive experience as a leader in the field of training and development in global management. Her work in global and cross-cultural communication uniquely qualifies her to address the challenges of working in today’s global workplace. She has trained global teams in many companies and industries, including Abbott, Intel, and Toyota, assisting in building trust across their differences, improving virtual communication, maintaining a strategic advantage, and creating and applying best practices in global business projects. She teaches courses at the University of California Santa Barbara Extension and Antioch University on global business and management and has delivered training globally for *Fortune* 100 companies. She received her B.A. from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and her M.A. in Intercultural Management from the School of International Training in Vermont. She can be reached at [j.oliveira@chariscorp.com](mailto:j.oliveira@chariscorp.com).