

Guest article for *Economia* magazine - July 2019

Building trust

Public trust in the accounting profession has taken several knocks recently. Scandals such as BHS, Patisserie Valerie and Carillion have called into question how well the profession is serving the public interest as against the interests of its clients. There will always be some tension in maintaining this balance while clients are paying the bill. Law, self-regulation, governance and adherence to the ICAEW code of ethics all play a part in building public confidence and trust in the accounting profession.

But more is needed to maintain trust than governance and codes of practice. Trust is something that develops between individuals over time. It arises from shared experience and our judgements of each other's behaviour.

What can we learn from how trust develops between people, and what insights might we apply to strengthening the client-practitioner relationship and public trust?

Most of us would say that we trust people whom we regard as reliable and predictable – people who do what they say they will do. The Google dictionary defines trust as a: “firm belief in the reliability, truth or ability of someone or something”. Reliability is a key component of trust. There is an element of fact and logic here – weighing up the evidence of experience and predicting what people will do.

Trust between individuals is built by what they do and say, but behaviours can be misleading - after meeting Hitler in 1938, Neville Chamberlain wrote to his sister that “I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word”. Behaviours must be underpinned by values – values such as integrity, openness, honesty. It's not just about doing what you have said you will do, but also about acting with positive intent for others and taking account of their needs and perspectives.

Getting to know people on a personal level develops trust. Much of our communication at work is at the level of ritual, facts and perhaps ideasⁱ. We tend to be more cautious about sharing our opinions and judgements and it's even more rare that we share our feelings. As people move from talking about facts and ideas to revealing more about their own feelings and values, the level of risk increases, but so does the level of trust and commitment. Taking the risk of revealing more about your own feelings, values and beliefs will encourage people to trust you.

Working with others in a collaborative way builds trust – identifying common goals and shared purpose, setting clear expectations, agreeing requirements, providing accurate information, being willing to support and challenge each other, showing commitment to achieving outcomes that work for all parties, being mutually accountable for resultsⁱⁱ. How often can we honestly say we work in that way, even with people in our own organisations, let alone people outside?

Trust has an emotional dimension. To trust other people, you need to feel positive emotions about them, rather than negative emotions like fear, uncertainty and doubt. You need to be able to acknowledge your concerns and own up to mistakes without fear of reprisals or that people will take advantage of you. Lencioniⁱⁱⁱ identifies an absence of trust as one of the five dysfunctions of teams. Without trust, team members are afraid to speak up, lack commitment and avoid responsibility. A no-blame culture, where people feel ok with being vulnerable, creates trust.

What lessons can we draw for the accounting profession from how trust is built between individuals?

Here are some suggestions:

- Take time to build rapport and get to know people
- Take the risk of being honest about mistakes
- Be open about your actions to put them right
- Build collaborative relationships rather than competing ones
- Acknowledge potential conflicts of interest
- Show the courage to speak truth to power

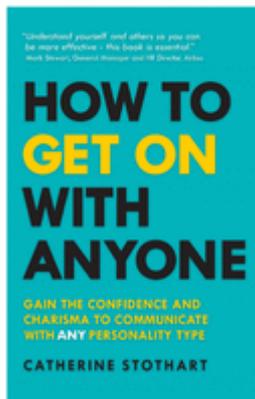
ⁱ Powel J (1999) *Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?*

ⁱⁱ Katzenbach J. R. and Smith D. K. (1993) *The Wisdom of Teams*

ⁱⁱⁱ Lencioni (2002) *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

© Essenwood Consulting

Catherine Stothart MSc, CFCIPD, is a Leadership Coach and the author of *How to Get On with Anyone: Gain the Confidence and Charisma to Communicate with any Personality Type*, published by Pearson at £12.99. Available from all good bookshops.



@CatherineStoth1 <http://www.linkedin.com/in/catherinestothart>