

# Relationships of Trust

## and the Reverse Double Standard

THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH (#2)

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~ *mostly a fatherly homily, looking back on my own trials and errors* ~

*Homo Sapiens* is a social animal.

Societies have customs and **morality**, which guide most transactions between people. And usually a legal system to back this up. But sometimes one seeks or grants **a special favour**, above and beyond the generally assumed social obligations. Then one seeks out a **trusted other**.

Sometimes, one has to reach out beyond one's daily circle of family and colleagues, and engage in an ancient code of human co-operation built on what has long been known as **honour**.<sup>1</sup> This is an inter-personal code of conduct that is enforced by personal conscience alone.

To make the point with a colourful example: back in the days of strong separation between cultures and tribes, traders and travellers sometimes established **trust relationships** with carefully chosen individuals of (what used to be called) an alien culture.

I am not suggesting that a **relationship of trust** can be formed with just anyone. There are exploiters. And the simply unreliable. But in any community, there are some individuals who have a sense of

honour, and who will promise only what they intend to deliver.

People who have more trust relationships have a fuller life. There is more they can achieve. They can give and receive more help. If they maintain their **reputation as trustworthy**, their circle of support continues and consolidates.

Trust relationships are special in that they are blind to social identity. They do not require that one or the other is particularly good-looking, or very clever, or rich, or powerful, or popular, or of a particular gender or race, or that one shares the same fashions, politics or religion. What is required then? How can one establish and maintain the precious bonds of trust with others? By **acting honourably** with them and enabling them to feel trusted by you.

What advice can I give, based on my own trial and error, for maximising trust relationships in one's life? Here goes. If asking for help, say very clearly what you are asking for. Reveal the true level of difficulty or hazard if known or suspected. Do not set the terms more severely than necessary. Maximise the other's chance of fulfilling the promise. And if the other fails despite an honest effort, be quick to show

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<sup>1</sup> Carefully distinguishing "honour" in the inter-personal sense of **earnestly attempting to fulfil one's promises** from other uses of the word "honour" (such as in

"honour killing" where someone is slaughtered for breaching some cultural or religious dictum).

gratitude and do not utter words or make gestures which impugn the other's honour.

***Respect the feelings of those you trust.***

Now, looking at the other end of the transaction: one may be a great giver, but if one consistently promises more than one delivers, the receiver will feel short-changed. Do not overstate the service one is offering: indeed, promise as little as will meet the need. Remarkably, any surfeit will only enhance one's reputation, even though what one has given is no more than what another has given – another who chronically disappoints by over-promising!

To trust someone is to believe that they will treat you well in some area of life – not all areas of life. One may have trust relationships with diverse characters, each trusted within a unique set of expectations. I might be able to trust Fred with all matters relating to my car, but not with my daughters. I might be able to trust Freda with all matters relating to my daughters, but not with my car! It is foolish to expect of any other human that they will behave wisely and carefully in **every** conceivable aspect of one's affairs. There is a great wealth of potential support out there, but you must **be discerning in what you expect from whom**. That way you can have more successful trust relationships.

If there is trust between two people in a defined realm, there is an implicit acknowledgement or "sense" between the two that the other is trustworthy. **Mutual trust** is delicate and precious. Therefore it is foolish to impetuously or pompously accuse the other of failing to fulfil their promise – over trivial or unavoidable breaches. For example, if there is a small discrepancy in the understanding of a

financial transaction, and no easy resolution, it is better to let it pass.

If you appear to withdraw your anointing of the other as a **trusted one**, they will recoil and withdraw from the trust. If you make a habit of showing distrust, you will run out of trust-relationships in your life.

If you believe that the other has seriously or repeatedly failed in undertakings without reasonable cause, that is a different matter. But even then, it is unwise to loudly broadcast your negative judgement; that will only frighten others away, out of fear of too-harsh judgement.

People try harder to treat a trusted person well. We behave more carefully with those with whom we have a **mutual trust bond**. This is virtue boosted by self-interest.

Normally, when we say that some party has a **double standard**, we mean that they judge others harshly for behaviour which they overlook in themselves. Let me coin another phrase – the **reverse double standard**. You see, we always know exactly how burdensome it is for us to keep our word, but we are far less aware of what difficulties others have in keeping their word for our benefit. So it's easy – and common – to imagine that one is getting a raw deal. People who don't see through this error more frequently feel short-changed – and are more prone to retreat from trust relationships. But the less one trusts, the more isolated one becomes.

The **reverse double standard** is to **fulfil** one's promise as best one can, and at the same time, **forgive** the other for apparent shortcomings as much as possible. This way, one will have more trusting and secure relationships in one's life.

The rewards of enjoying relationships of **trust** with more others are bountiful indeed. There are material, social, emotional and spiritual blessings. □