Assessing Trust
A pivotal leadership element

by Julia Hengstler

“Leadership is getting results in a way that inspires trust. Anything else is management and administration, but these are not leadership . . . [and] Trust is a discipline.”

Steven M. R. Covey (telephone conference, March 30, 2007)

“Trust is a discipline”

Trust — it’s something that all too often leaders take for granted, but take a moment to ask yourself: how much does your staff trust you as a leader?; how much do you trust your staff?; are your perceptions of trust levels accurate? These are the pivotal questions that are the very roots and foundation of leadership and organizational functionality. Trust is one of the values Kidder (1996) found universal across cultures. Despite the vital nature of trust, as late as 2002, Bryk and Schneider wrote, “Although social trust in school communities has emerged in a few studies as a key element in improving schools, little systematic research existed on this topic as we began our work. Little attention has been focused on the nature of trust as a substantive property of the social organization of schools, on how much trust levels actually vary among schools, and how this may relate to their effectiveness.” (2002, p. 12)

More recently, in Sustainable Leadership, Hargreaves & Fink wrote, “Trust in schools is essential” (2006, p. 215). In establishing oneself in a new leadership position, developing trust is a critical task. Yet even for established leaders, trust remains critical; trust must be maintained or in certain circumstances regained (if possible).

Bryk and Schneider’s (2002, 2003) research in more than 400 schools found that social trust among teachers, parents and school leaders “improves much of the routine work of schools” (2003, p. 41) and “reduces the sense of risk associated with change” (2003, p. 43). Similarly, Bolam et al. (2005) found that mutual trust is among the eight characteristics of an effective pro-
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Fessional learning community. For Hargreaves and Fink (2006), trust is an important segment of leadership knowledge and most specifically insider knowledge. They define the three critical types of leadership knowledge necessary for succession as:

**Inbound:** the knowledge that can change, shift or make a mark on a school.

**Insider:** the knowledge gained from and exercised with other members of the community to improve the school after becoming known, trusted and accepted by them.

**Outbound:** the knowledge that reflects over time to maintain previous improvements and continue them past an administration. (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 73)

Additionally, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) state that, regrettably schools “are mainly preoccupied with inbound knowledge” (p. 73). Consequently, schools place less value on aspects such as insider knowledge and by extension, trust.

Another important recent work on trust is S.M.R. Covey’s (2006c) *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything.* Although not geared for the educational leadership or academic research market per se, the book makes some unique practical contributions to the study of trust. Like Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003), Covey (2006c) argues that not only is trust essential for change, but it is the foundational element for any relationship in/among organizations, as well as for organizational leadership (Covey, 2006c). His findings indicate that increased trust reduces the time and money required for organizations to accomplish all kinds of tasks (Covey, 2006c).

According to Covey (2006c), the reverse is also true. Covey’s work (2006c) posits a trust “tax” or “dividend” will be applied to an individual’s words and actions based on context and history.

Covey (2006c) categorizes and characterizes seven levels of tax/dividend groupings as: Nonexistent Trust (80% Tax), Very Low Trust (60% Tax), Low Trust (40% Tax), Trust Issues (20% Tax), Trust is not an Issue (No Tax/Dividend), Trust Is a Visible Asset (20% Dividend), and World-Class Trust (40% Dividend) (pp. 22-24). A Nonexistent Trust level, for example, is categorized by “dysfunctional environment and toxic culture (open warfare, sabotage, grievances, lawsuits, criminal behavior), militant stakeholders, intense micromanagement, redundant hierarchy, [and] punishing system and structures” (Covey, 2006c, p. 22). This means that most of what is said or done in this organization is discounted, disregarded or second-guessed at a rate of about 80% (Covey, 2006c). In contrast, a world-class level is characterized by high collaboration and partnering; effortless communication; positive, transparent relationships with employees and all stakeholders; fully aligned systems and structures; [as well as] strong innovation, engagement, confidence and loyalty. (Covey, 2006c, p. 24)

This world-class trust level is accompanied by a 40% dividend (Covey, 2006c). A dividend is “like a performance multiplier, elevating and improving every dimension of your organization and your life … [it] materially improves communication, collaboration, execution, innovation, strategy, engagement, partnering, and relationships with all stakeholders” (Covey, 2006c, p. 17). This is consistent with Hargreaves and Fink’s (2006) assertions: “Trust works. It...
improves organizations, increases achievement, and boosts energy and morale” (pp. 215-216).

From Covey’s (2006c) point of view, trust starts from the inside/out-growing from individuals keeping promises they make to themselves. In contrast, Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) begin their assessment at the interpersonal level. This difference is reflected in their relational groupings. Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) classify their groups as teacher/student, teacher/teacher, teacher/parent, all groups/principal. Covey (2006c), however, theorized five concentric rings of trust: self trust, relational trust, organizational trust, market trust (organizational-educationally speaking, school or district-reputation) and societal trust. Yet both Covey (2006c) and Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) agree on the importance of observable behavior, discernment, and their impact on a group as they relate to trust. Covey (2006c) writes, “we tend to judge others based on their behavior, and ourselves based on our intent. In almost all situations, we would do well to recognize the possibility — even probability — of good intent in others … [sic] sometimes despite their observable behavior.”

In choosing to look beyond the behavior of others (especially teenage children or troubled coworkers) and affirming our belief in them and in their positive intent, we lift them. Our own behavior in doing so gives expression to our higher motives and caring intent. (p. 84)

Bryk and Schneider (2003) have written, [individuals] “are constantly discerning the intentions embedded in the actions of others” (p. 41); “discernments take into account the history of previous interactions. In the absence of prior contact, participants may rely on the general reputation of the other and also on [mutual] commonalities” (p. 41); “discernments tend to organize around four specific considerations: respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity” (p. 42).

The authors’ earlier work, Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), provided a more detailed academic description: At its most basic (intrapersonal) level, relational trust is rooted in a complex cognitive activity of discerning the intentions of others. These discernments occur within a set of role relations (interpersonal level) that are formed both by the institutional structure of schooling and by the particularities of an individual school community, with its own culture, history, and local understandings … these trust relations culminate in important consequences at the organizational level, including more effective decision-making, enhanced social support for innovation, more efficient social control of adults’ work, and an expanded moral authority to “go the extra mile” for the children. (p. 22)

Here, Bryk and Schneider (2002) articulate an importance of roles and role relations for building trust that is not seen in Covey (2006c). The importance the authors (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, 2003) placed on this aspect explains to a large extent the relational groupings differences when compared with Covey (2006c). Both the works of Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) and Covey (2006c) claim four critical components of trust (Some of these overlap with Kidder’s (1996) other universal values: loyalty, respect, freedom, mercy (love/compassion), justice, as well as the valuing of the individual and the community); however, Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) say trust is dependent on respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity while Covey (2006c) states trust
is dependent on integrity, intent, capabilities and results — thus devoid of the facet of interpersonal relationships. In both cases, the work of Covey (2006c) and Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) state that a compromise of any one of their four core trust aspects “can be sufficient to undermine a discernment of trust for the overall relationship” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 23).

The lack of value for personal regard is perhaps where the catch-all aim of Covey’s (2006a,b,c) work falls short for the educational sector. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) state, the social dynamics of schools “are much more important, from a productivity perspective, than in settings characterized by well-defined and routinized production process[es]” (p. 20) such as those of business or government. They state that “A complex web of social exchanges conditions the basic operations of schools. Embedded in the daily social routines of schools is an interrelated set of mutual dependencies among all key actors: students, teachers, principals and administrators, and parents” (p. 20).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) add: “In general, interpersonal trust deepens as individuals perceive that others care about them and are willing to extend themselves beyond what their role might formally require in any given situation. Principals, for example, show personal regard when they create opportunities for teachers’ career development. Expressing concern about personal issues affecting teachers’ lives is another way in which principals reach out to their staff. Correspondingly, teachers who exhibit caring commitments toward students internalize obligations more encompassing and diffuse than is typically specified in collective bargaining agreements or school board work rules.” (p. 25)

They conclude, “Personal regard thus represents a powerful dimension of trust discernment in school contexts. As noted earlier, the social encounters of schooling are more intimate than typically found in associative relationships within most modern institutions” (p. 25).

Both Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003) and Covey (2006c) state the juxtaposition of their four core characteristics with observable behaviours is central to building trust. Covey’s (2006c) work provides some fresh perspectives on trust. Firstly, Covey (2006c) argues trust is a discipline, competency and measurable factor. He defines “counterfeit” behaviours that look like actions intended to inspire trust, but which are not actually well-intentioned, and therefore undermine trust relationships (Covey, 2006c). He also states that even if we do not already embody or hold the core elements and 13 behaviours, we can behave our way into them (Covey, 2006c).

The Speed of Trust book and website provide a practical framework, assessment tool set and methods to develop — and even recover — trust (Covey, 2006a,b,c). To support his work, Covey (2006a,b) produced a series of online assessment tools to determine personal “credibility gaps” with your stakeholders. Some useful instruments are: “Who Trusts You?”, personal credibility, the 13 behaviours at work and personal practice of the 13 behaviours or their counterfeits (Covey, 2006a,b).

The work of Kidder (1996), Bolam et al. (2005), Hargreaves & Fink (2006), Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003), as well as Covey (2006a,b,c; 2007), all underscore the importance of trust. While Covey’s (2006a,b,c) tools do not address the interpersonal and personal regard aspects emphasized by Bryk & Schneider (2002, 2003), they do provide a starting point for assessing perceptions of trust and a way to further develop your leadership capacity. Trust is the fundamental currency of leadership. It is a pivotal element — perhaps the pivotal element — that allows leaders to lead. To lead, educational administrators must cultivate, maintain — and at times regain — the trust of their stakeholders groups. So, “How much do your stakeholders trust you?”

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Cover art Our cover art this month is by Yeon Son who was a student at Sentinel Secondary in West Vancouver when she completed this work last year. Yeon is now studying at the Rhode Island School of Art and Design. Our thanks to Yeon, Barbara Sunday, her art teacher, and Barbara Jones, her principal.
Like a two-legged stool, however, this pair of elements seemed in need of a third leg. The twin criteria of a mission — even a commonly held mission — and of activities directed toward the mission does not seem sufficient.

The necessary third leg is a framework that includes some important agreements. First, that classroom instruction is the cardinal leverage point for improvement in achievement and, second, that professional learning activities, allocating resources and making personal commitments must be aligned with an informed agreement on a robust and moral approach to classroom instruction that will ground any plan for building capacity.

Unfortunately the adoption of an instructional paradigm, whatever is chosen, will stand at the heart of resistance to an overall plan for building capacity. This resistance stems from an unsupportable view of professionalism as autonomy that allows one to justify actions on the basis of personal opinion whether or not informed by research and best practice. Teachers and educational leaders need to redefine and adhere to a more defensible definition. I repeat Fullan’s quote of Richard Elmore: “Educators equate professionalism with autonomy — getting to use their own judgment, to exercise discretion, to determine the conditions of their own work in classrooms and schools. In fact, professionalism outside of education is exactly the opposite of this definition. Professionals gain their social authority not by exercising autonomy, but by subscribing to an externally-validated body of knowledge, by agreeing to have their discretion limited by that knowledge, and by facing sanctions if they operate outside that body of knowledge.”

Principals and vice-principals have the BCPVPA Leadership Standards as our “externally validated body of knowledge.” Our challenge is to lead discussions among ourselves and others to refine and flesh out that body of knowledge. It’s also up to us to lead respectful discussions with other educators to identify the externally validated body of knowledge that will lead us to a common understanding of effective classroom practices and to increased achievement for all of our students.