



Trust Coach Vol 2: Trust, emotion and American politics.

Both love and hate are blind. The vast majority of the existing literature on trust takes a rational actor perspective. That means the authors assume people are always reasonable and rational, and the work focuses on the cognitive process that takes place when we decide to trust someone. If you've ever dated someone or had children you are likely aware that people are not always rational. Not that there's anything wrong with the great existing material on trust, it's just incomplete. The result is that attempts to rebuild trust in situations that are emotionally charged are far less likely to be successful if you stick with the approaches you'll most often read.

In this installment of the Trust Coach I will examine the role that our emotions play in our decisions to trust. When I wrote my doctoral thesis on building trust in hostile environments, I was interested in understanding why long-term disputes seemed so difficult to resolve. It likely seems obvious to most reading this as I point it out, but when people get emotional they tend not to be all that reasonable. Long term disputes (think the Middle East, Native land claims, the Hatfields and McCoys, anyone and their ex) are often incredibly destructive to all parties involved. So much time and energy are invested in hating the other party and doing them harm. We tend to vilify the other party, which makes us feel ok doing things to them that we normally wouldn't even consider.

The example I'm going to use here is the US political system and the current run for presidential candidacy. The thoughts, however, are relevant for any groups that have a long term dispute and seem to dislike one another.

How we interpret the world

The world is a complicated place, filled with complicated people. When faced with this complexity, we often use stories to help us interpret and understand the world and things that happen. My friend Fritz Mayer is a professor at the Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke University, and has done some great work on narrative and storytelling. His recent book (Narrative and Collective Action, 2014) details how stories play a central role in allowing communities and organizations to successfully engage in collective action.

Our emotions tend to make our stories even stronger. If we like someone, we think they are good people and that we should trust them. We look for confirming evidence, and are even more likely to trust them when we see it. We are also more likely to interpret outcomes of our interactions with them more positively, making us like them even more. These virtuous cycles can become extremely powerful and resilient over time. The reverse is true when we dislike someone, and the vicious cycles that are produced can be extremely hard to counter. When our emotions become extreme, moving from like and dislike to love and hate, we become irrational. When we hate someone, we tend to find reasons

not to trust them and blame anything that goes wrong on them. Essentially, the stronger our emotions become the less rational we are in our evaluations of others and our decisions about who to trust and when.

### **Why trust matters in politics**

Most political systems, by their very nature, require some form of collaboration to function effectively. We have seen in the US over the last few years how dysfunctional a government can become when the representatives involved refuse to find some way to cooperate. The US government struggled to pass any bills, including the spending bill required to continue funding the government itself. A lack of trust between the representatives in any government leads to suspicion, excessive monitoring, and incredible inefficiencies.

Failure by a government to generate trust in those they govern, the general population, can have extreme consequences. We have historically seen unrest and revolution in states where people came to feel that they couldn't trust their representatives or leaders to act in their best interest. The US itself evolved from discontent over British rule and a lack of representation in exchange for taxes paid. In less extreme instances people simply stop abiding by the rules set out by their government unless absolutely forced to do so. This can have profound implications for a government's ability to function.

Imagine if people in the US simply decided that they would only occasionally obey the law, protest relentlessly or engage in avoidance rather than voluntarily paying their taxes. According to John Koskinen, IRS Commissioner, a 1% decline in voluntary compliance to taxes would cost the government \$30 billion dollars per year. We've recently seen a stark example of this in Greece, where tax avoidance is epidemic and the country is in economic ruin.

We don't have measures for how much trust there is between members of the US Senate and Congress, but their patterns of behavior and comments suggest that these levels are very low. We do know how much the average American citizen trusts its government, however, and that is extremely little. According to a number of polls, including Gallup, only 19% of Americans trust their government. This figure has been low for a long time and seems to be trending in a negative direction.

To sum up, both internal and external trust are important for governments to function and nation-states to stay stable. Trust levels in government in the US are incredibly low and appear to be headed in the wrong direction. Both parties are likely aware of the significant trust deficit they face, but appear to attribute all of the blame to the other party. They continue to do a truly fantastic job of convincing their supporters that they representatives from the other party are incompetent. Unfortunately, it would appear that vast majority of the general public is convinced that all members of government are incompetent and fundamentally unlikeable. The relentless character attacks on politicians, both from outside their parties and within them, have generated a strong emotional response among the general population.

## **Emotions in politics**

Strong emotions are often present in politics and can be far better than apathy for driving collective action. People become passionate about their beliefs and their vision for the future. American politics is no exception, as there are clearly strong beliefs held by a wide range of people. From the Tea Party to the Occupy Wall Street movement there are disparate beliefs strongly held. These emotions can be productive and provoke action. Unfortunately, when people move from being passionate for what they believe in to being passionate against people they dislike, it can become incredibly difficult to generate consensus on anything.

Media outlets on both sides of the political spectrum have made things worse by playing to all of the things that are different between the parties, and relentlessly portraying those that don't agree with them in an increasingly negative light. Apparently, being negative, both in reporting and in campaigning, works in the short term – it promotes strong allegiances from increasingly committed followers. Unfortunately, this appears to have created suspicion and disgust with those in the political mainstream, generating real traction for candidates who can claim to be outsiders.

One of these outsiders has been the curious case of Donald Trump. Trump has received devoted support in his run for the nomination to run for President on behalf of the Republican Party in the US. This support has continued, and even accelerated, despite numerous hateful, false, racist, and derogatory comments made by Trump. External observers and members of the Republican Party have routinely pointed out that, while Trump has had successes, he's also had spectacular failures. Trump himself stated that he could shoot someone on Main Street and it wouldn't diminish his support.

This appears, and is, irrational; but again, both love and hate are blind, and it would seem that both are at work here. Trump supporters do seem to love him but they also seem to hate those that oppose him. The generalized disdain for politicians mean that Trump's belittling and bullying of politicians resonates with members of his base rather than disturbing them. Comments made by those opposed to Trump are dismissed by Trump supporters, because they neither like nor trust those making the comments.

The heightened emotional state of politicians and the electorate that seemed to gain new fervor with the election of President Obama appears to be escalating with the presence of Trump. Those attempting to provide rational and reasonable arguments in this environment are likely to have little success. If anyone were to attempt to rebuild trust between these parties using the logic- and reason-based approaches most routinely described in the popular literature, they would gain very little traction.

## **Where do we go from here?**

Things can seem dire when emotions run hot. At times, vicious cycles in long-term disputes become toxic, and the parties involved don't even care if they win anymore. They just want to make sure the other party suffers. The first step in situations like this is to attempt to reset the emotions of the parties involved. They don't have to like each other, but to make any progress, we need the level of hatred to subside to something manageable. Once people's emotions reach a more neutral state, there is a far greater likelihood that we can get them to resolve differences in a rational manner.

There are a number of approaches that can work to reset emotions. The first might be to simply stop highlighting the differences between the two sides and instead pay attention to the similarities. If we could get the two sides to stop vilifying one another and start generating a more positive story together, the narrative might begin to shift. Similar to this is finding shared goals that can be agreed on; it doesn't have to be anything big but creating a few, even small, successes may start a positive cycle. It is likely that the similarities between the two sides outweigh the differences. Unfortunately, attention has been drawn to those differences to the point they seem insurmountable.

In many instances the parties involved in long term or emotional disputes can't settle things by themselves. An independent third party is required to help them mediate their differences. In the case of politics in the US, a third party that is deemed acceptable to both sides may be hard to find. It's possible that representatives of each group could come together to try to find ways to communicate that aren't as charged as they currently seem.

Finally, it would help if we could get politicians and the media to stop trying to convince us that other politicians are incompetent and evil. First, it seems from the polls that the message has already been received. Second, when we say harsh things about others it is often a stronger statement about us than it is about them.

### **Summing up**

The intent of this newsletter has been to point out that emotions can play a profound role in our decisions to trust others and that purely cognitive approaches to building trust are unlikely to gain much traction when emotions are high. The example used here was politics in the US, but the reasoning holds for any emotionally charged dispute.

In the US political example, I argued that trust within a political system is essential both internally (trust between the representatives) and externally (trust in the political system by those governed). The US political system seems to be extremely short on trust from all perspectives. This profound lack of trust can have devastating consequences and it seems to be getting worse in the US. Emotions seem to be getting even more inflamed, meaning that attempts to generate consensus or build trust through rational approaches are unlikely to gain much traction. Attempts need to first be made to reset emotional states so that the parties involved can collaborate and the government can function.

### **Trust Tip**

It is far easier to build trust with people who like us. We tend to like people who are like us. Ask questions and share information, try to find common interests and things you can talk about that aren't strictly related to the topic at hand. A shared interest can start a positive cycle.

Sincerely

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