



FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF *Dr. Alexander Laufer*

A Tale of Two Houses: Building on a Foundation of Trust or Mistrust

Trust has been a main theme in over 20 articles that have been printed in ASK so far

THESE STORIES MAKE IT VERY CLEAR: TRUST AMONG PROJECT PARTIES IS NOT JUST AN attitude that is nice to have. It is a must, since lack of trust costs money—often a lot of money. Trust helps resolve conflicts before they arise; trusting relationships are conducive to full and open exchange of information within the team; elaborate surveillance and control systems must be implemented to compensate for lack of trust, often with only partial effectiveness. In past issues, we’ve taken a look at projects that succeed because of these factors, but we haven’t directly focused on how trust and mistrust are built. In this article we will see how prejudice shapes what we see and how we act.

Reflecting on this, I remembered a story about my friend, T. Rust Worthy, who was in the market to buy a townhouse. His father was an experienced contractor, so after receiving a list of references from him, T. Rust pinpointed one on the list. He selected a developer and quickly struck a deal on a house that was in the process of being built.

T. Rust then met with the architect, who was a consultant, to request design changes. He found out that changes went through a lengthy process: his requests were drawn up by the architect, an estimate of the cost was drawn up, approval was obtained by the chief engineer, and then the approved changes were sent to the site superintendent. This process took forever and was compounded by the fact that the architect hadn’t been informed about the developer’s changes to the original design.

He asked the developer if he could work directly with the chief engineer and site superintendent since his

changes were small and didn’t require major redesign. The developer told him that he used to do things that way when his business was smaller, but he had adopted a more formal process to eliminate misunderstandings and disagreements with his customers. Since he knew T. Rust’s father, however, he said he would work with him that way. During the completion of the house, two major episodes helped to establish a relationship of trust between the developer and T. Rust.

First, the storage room that he had been promised—which was located in a separate storage building—was mistakenly sold to another customer by the sales agent. T. Rust simply accepted another room without making a fuss. Then the site superintendent made a mistake while securing the water pipes during a routine leakage test, resulting in water damage to the interior walls. Once T. Rust had been assured by his father that there would be no permanent damage, he didn’t make a big deal out of that problem either.



The site superintendent was very grateful to T. Rust. Therefore, when it was his turn to make mistakes or change his mind, T. Rust was able to deal directly with the superintendent in an informal, friendly way. However, he made sure that the formal paperwork was always completed by the developer's main office. As time went on, he developed a trusting relationship with the chief engineer as well. This made the formal approval process faster and smoother.

In contrast, my friend's future neighbor, one Miss Trust, was going through the same process to buy her townhouse. She, however, was having a less satisfying experience. Miss Trust and the developer initially got off to a bad start, because she had always thought badly of developers. She wouldn't do anything without the presence of her lawyer. The lengthy process for design changes only made her more positive that the developers were underhanded.

Since Miss Trust didn't trust the contractor, she went to the site every day to scour for mistakes. (In contrast, T. Rust stopped by only once a week and communicated mostly by phone.) When Miss Trust found discrepancies between the construction and design, she got angry and assumed that she was being cheated.

She found out that T. Rust had been charged slightly less for a similar design change and refused to believe it was a result of the waived architect fee. On another occasion, T. Rust paid less than Miss Trust had for a similar scope of work. This was because T. Rust elected to have the work charged "cost-plus," allowing it to be finished as quickly as possible. Miss Trust on the other hand, didn't trust the contractor at all, and would never have approved a change without knowing the final cost. She signed a lump sum agreement which eventually turned out to be more expensive.

In the end, T. Rust was satisfied and recommended the developer to others. Miss Trust served the same developer with a lawsuit.

This story clearly shows that once we accept stereotypes, prejudice shapes what we see and how we act. Since initial opinions of team members are crucial, if possible, you should avoid recruiting team members who start the project distrusting you. You should build trust incrementally by making statements of intent that express the desire to trust the other party, followed by actions that support and comply with these statements. •

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