

TRUST BUILDING IN CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ICT AND HSE

ABSTRACT

I will first argue that mechanisms involved in trust building within cross-cultural relations may have an impact on HSE in multi-cultural teams. At the end of the paper I relate this to the use of ICT. In my master thesis, *The Game of Trust*, I studied cross-cultural cooperation between Europeans and Latin-Americans at an oil refinery in Latin America. Cultural differences in mechanisms involved in trust building were an important issue in this study where I focused on cultural differences in attitudes towards punctuality and planning. I tried to explain this by addressing how *formal* processes in an organization need support by *informal* trust-generating activities in order to operate as intended. Use of ICT may amplify these challenges. In my study the role of trust in an organization was viewed from an economic and functional stance. Even though HSE and ICT was not an issue in this study, I will now argue that the challenges identified in the study regarding trust building in multi-cultural teams are also highly relevant for use of ICT and HSE. One important field of research to be effectuated in the future should therefore be how to ensure trust building in cross-cultural teams using ICT.

KEY WORD

Trust building, Cross-cultural communication, ICT, HSE, Oil industry, Globalisation, Latin America

I. INTRODUCTION

Until recently the role of *trust* and *community of practice* as an organizing principle within and across organizations has not been given much attention

in economic and organizational theories. One reason has been that rational economic actors should not rely on trust when managing interdependencies and the allocation of shared resources. [Williamsin, O.E., 1993] Development of trust creates dependencies and increases the likelihood of prioritizing actions than may not be optimal viewed from a traditional economic and market based stance. Trust in this perspective has been seen as a pre-modern concept reducing the likelihood of economic exchange between strangers and thus being perceived as an obstacle to economic progress. Recent publications have addressed a need for more research focusing on the importance of trust in organizations. One example of such research is McEvily, et.al [2003]'s development of notions of trust as an organizing principle. They specify structuring and mobilizing as two sets of causal pathways through which trust influences an organization. *Structuring* is connected to networks of communication and arrangements of actual social relations within a more formalistic organization structure; *“Organizational forms can accordingly be viewed as partially closed systems that are shaped by the organizing principles that its members internalize.”* [McEvily, et.al 2003: 100] *Mobilizing* involves motivating actors to contribute their resources, to combine, coordinate, and use them in joint activities. McEvily, et.al. [2003: 99] explicitly argues that development of trust is economically beneficial for organizations. Adler [2001: 19] advocates the same argument: *“Trust can dramatically reduce both transaction costs – replacing contracts by handshakes – and agency risks – replacing the fear of shirking and misrepresentation with mutual confidence.”* Community/trust, Adler argues, is equally important as a coordination mechanism for organizations as market/price and hierarchy/authority. They are mechanisms working side by side. The knowledge intensity in modern industries and organizations is increasing compared to earlier low-knowledge-intensity associated with scientific management theories. [Taylor, 1911]] This may indeed lead to a trend towards greater reliance on trust since knowledge sharing and transfer is closely connected to the development of trust between the actors involved.

[Carlsen, et.al. 2004]] One important contribution to the discussion is Adler's argument that trust must be understood in terms of the *sources* of trust, the *mechanisms* by which trust is generated, its *objects* and its *base*. [Adler 2001: 217-18]

These authors refer to the importance of understanding the role of trust and community as an organizing principle viewed from an economic and functional stance; for reduction of transaction costs and to make organizations more efficient. In this paper we will use these insights a little differently by focusing on how cultural differences in trust building mechanisms, sources, object and base of trust may influence HSE management.

HSE MANAGEMENT IN A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

Within HSE management it is common to use different analytical methods that systematically identify possible dangerous situations, and thus establish barriers and safeguards to detect and avoid the occurrence of these situations. Even though this method will expose the majority of potentially dangerous situations, it will be impossible to identify *every* possible situation. Therefore, the sole use of such an analytical method may impose a false, and thus dangerous, feeling of security. We also need to consider dependencies between situations and barriers. Dependencies will occur if two or more barriers can be weakened by the same event or condition. A failure in the electricity supply (blackout) may, for instance, leave several active technical barriers inoperative. Additionally, the majority of errors are so-called human: due to performance that is not in line with planned procedures. This should imply that it is not possible to obtain a perfection of zero errors just by planning. Therefore, we have to accept that failures happen, because of humans and in turn, technology. [Rosness, et.a., 2004] However, some will still argue that it is possible to obtain a zero error situation. They advocate that by accepting that individual human and technological errors are inevitable, the organization as a whole may obtain

zero errors by developing “organizational redundancy;” *co-operation patterns that allow the organization as a whole to perform more reliably than each individual operator*. Creating organizational redundancy implies the need to develop skills in order to detect errors and to contain these errors at early stages. Such an organization is called High Reliability Organization (HRO).

HSE MANAGEMENT LINKED TO HIGH RELIABILITY ORGANIZATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL REDUNDANCY

LaPorte, et.al. [1991] drew attention to organizations that display outstanding safety records in extremely hazardous operations, such as aircraft-carrier flight operations at sea. Such HROs are required to handle complex, demanding technologies under hazardous conditions without causing major accidents. They suggested that HROs achieve reliable performance by building Organizational redundancy. Engineers are sometimes confronted with the task of building a reliable system from less reliable components. They achieve this by integrating redundancy, which means including extra (redundant) components that can take over in case of a failure in a critical component. The braking system of a car comprises two separate hydraulic circuits, although a single circuit could do the job perfectly well. They found that the HROs used the principle of redundancy to derive highly reliable performance from less than perfect human beings. Organizational redundancy may be created when individuals ask for advice and second opinions from colleagues, when an operator challenges the judgment of colleague, or when she intervenes to recover an erroneous action by a colleague. This can only be achieved when people with overlapping competence have the opportunity to monitor each other’s performance and intervene in the case of inadequate performance. However, the ability to intervene may be affected by culture and organizational structure. [Rosness, et.al., 2000]

Based on the work of LaPorte, et.al. [1991], Rosness, et.al. [2000] have outlined a framework that relates organizational redundancy to both

structural/instrumental preconditions and cultural preconditions. The *structural/instrumental dimension* of organizational redundancy concerns the personnel's possibility of direct observation of each other's work, overlapping competence, and overlapping tasks or responsibilities. This may be exemplified by two pilots in an aircraft being able to see and understand what the other pilot is doing. The *cultural dimension* of organizational redundancy concerns the personnel's capability and willingness to exchange information, provide feedback, reconsider decisions made by one self and colleagues, and intervene to recover erroneous actions. It is not sufficient for the second pilot to see and to understand that the other pilot is performing an erroneous action; it must also be culturally acceptable for him to intervene. Thus the cultural aspects of Organizational redundancy must include trust building mechanisms. In addition, organizational redundancy includes diversity. [Weick, 1987 and Schulman 1993] Organizational redundancy is not simply a matter of duplication. Two people with very similar conditions and background will increase the possibility of executing similar human errors. A diversity of operator perspectives may be needed to match the variety of possible occurrences in a complex system. However, such diversity can only contribute to reliability if a requisite level of trust has been built between operators.

II. TRUST IN CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONS

Globalization processes have led to an increase in the number of worldwide cross-cultural cooperation resulting in increased amount of multi-cultural teams and organizations. Some research has targeted cultural influence on HSE management and work practice. [Lamvik, et.al., 2004] However, in their theoretical discussion little attention is paid to how cultural differences in trust building mechanisms affect security management in multi-cultural teams. The existence of trust between employees is easily taken for granted. However, recent anthropological research has shown that there are cultural differences

in *what* elements function as a guarantee and source for trust in social relations. [Gambetta, 1988]

In my thesis [Sæther, 2005] I did not study HSE management. I made an attempt to understand how Europeans and Latin Americans have different attitudes towards punctuality and planning by focusing how *formal* processes in an organization need support by *informal* trust-generating activities to operate as intended. I studied some effects created by cultural differences in what Adler [2001: 217-218] calls the mechanisms by which trust is generated, it's source, it's object and it's base. "*The Game of Trust*" describes informal activities aiming at creating and maintaining trust in social relations in a situation where such trust cannot be taken for granted. I used Luhmann's [1988] and Giddens' [1990] view of trust as phenomena closely connected to individuals' and groups of individuals' perception of risk. The majority of the empirical material consists of in-depth interviews carried out in the winter of 2002/2003 with European and Latin American engineers and technicians that had worked together in a refinery for two years. To understand the social situation in the society, the social context of everyday life outside the boundaries of the refinery, in more general terms, a previous fieldwork was carried out by a participant observation method over a period of six months in close proximity with 24 students.

A NOT VERY ABSOLUTE SOCIETY, A WEAK STATE

Giddens [1990] assumes that trust disembedded into abstract expert systems, hence an abstract system and not a person or a collectivity as the object of trust, makes it easier for people in general to trust each other. However, I [Sæther, 2005] argue in this thesis that Giddens takes for granted that the abstract systems work as intended. People's experiences with gatekeepers of the abstract systems of a society, i.e. lawyers, police or doctors, one example of a source of trust, are important mechanisms leading to disembedding of trust into abstract systems. An underlying theme in the

material from the local students indicates on the other hand a high degree of uncertainty in their society; a high crime rate, rapid changes in politics and economics. Many of the locals had little reason to trust bureaucracy, institutions and legislation; the legislative expert systems. It was not the system itself that was not trustworthy, but the practical execution of the system; the locals had low confidence in the gatekeepers managing the system; that they were following the rules of the system as intended. This society could be characterized as *a weak state*. Hence, different state institutions, and acts of its representative's i.e, politicians, police and bureaucracy, will not give the local citizens a feeling of a security net as is the case for people living in societies with a higher grade of stability.

Latin America is marked with a violent history suffering from instable political situations and several coup d'états. The latest happened in April 2002 in Venezuela. The past and present history of the region has been characterized by corruption on all levels of the society and a growing division between the huge amount of extremely poor and the ruling, rich elite. [Coronil, 1997] This uncertainty, as the study among the local students also showed, was caused by little faith in the possibility of getting a stabile life in the future, as well as a high crime rate and little trust to the local police or other institutions in the society. Many students were robbed during the first research period, but no one went to the police to report this. *"It is no point of going to the police, they don't do anything anyway"*. When the police (a formal institution) fail to guarantee for your security, how do you manage to find such a guarantee? What ends up being the object, and thus the people's base, for trust and a feeling of security? One possible answer is a persons (informal) alliances and family. Some students also mentioned money as a guarantee; If you have money you may always buy your way out of trouble in a corrupt society. Alliances and informal networks become highly important for establishing predictability in an insecure and not very absolute and predictable society.

In contrast to what Giddens [1990] proposes, even though Latin America is modern in many ways, a sense of security is to a greater extent created by capacity to develop personal relations with people that may help you in a problematic situation. Abstract systems as the society's institutions are not an object for trust in the same way as relations. Relations and rules are also interconnected in Norway, but in Latin America personal relations function as a guarantee of predictability are more important. Since there is little protection to be found in the legislation, one needs goodwill and/or a sense of mutual 'use' for motivation to cooperate. How does this affect cross-cultural cooperation?

“THE GAME OF TRUST” AT THE REFINERY; A PROCESS OF PERCEPTION

The interviews were focused on the employees' experience from more than two years of cross-cultural cooperation in a technological environment. The following summary gives a stereotypic description of the cooperation between Europeans and Latin Americans as it was described from these parties respectively. While confronted with these descriptions neither the Europeans nor the Latin Americans expressed familiarity with how they were described by their colleges. This situation was the starting point of an analysis of how the cross-cultural meeting was experienced by the involved parties. An important part of the analysis had reference to the process of *perception*, and how the social contextual situation both in Europe and Latin America (outside the refinery environment) affects perceptions.

Even though most of the European employees emphasized that it is pleasant and social to work with their Latin American colleagues, they claimed that they are not always content. Some complained about what they perceived to be chaos caused by a lot of unnecessary chat and often an inappropriate amount of joking. The Latin American tradition of hierarchy was also very unusual for them. A major part of the European employees experienced that decision-making was a long process and that it looked for

them as if many of the decisions made seemed to be made at random. Further, some claimed that they experienced the Latin American to take no pride in their job and did not focus enough on the work. A major part of the Europeans felt that they had to give people a kick-start and that it was necessary to control that people were actually doing the work they were supposed to do. One of the experiences most Europeans had encountered was that the word “no” hardly existed in the vocabulary of their Latin American colleagues. In different situations they had experienced that they could not fully trust their local colleagues to do what they were asked to do or had agreed to do. Having to control that the work was actually carried out was not something the Europeans were accustomed to. One Norwegian engineer tells what has surprised him most:

“I have to check in the corridors to see if the messages have gotten through. In the beginning I was surprised of the fact that everybody said “yes” when meaning “no”. It took me some time to realize this. You need to check twice to see if the message has gotten through and if they actually mean it when they say “yes”. Discovering this was a bit frustrating. Now we deal with these things by talking to people in private. We want to know the truth directly, whether it is good or bad because when you are going to make a decision you need a solid platform. Not just at work. The word well known in Norwegian as “no” does not exist here.”

The Latin Americans, at the other hand, emphasized that the Europeans were following regulations rigidly and were perceived to take on an unnecessary aggressive behavior. Episodes where people had been yelling and banging fists in the table were mentioned by a major part of the interviewees. The Latin-Americans thought that the Europeans criticized too directly and often in public for other people to hear. This is, according to the Latin Americans interviewed, inappropriate behavior. Further, the Europeans were described as cold, mechanic, and only engaged with their work. The

Latin Americans wanted to be able to joke in order to blow off steam. Furthermore, they pointed out that there should also be given room and possibility to handle unpredicted events without rigidly following the rules. The Europeans did not share their private life with their colleagues, which were pointed out by the Latin Americans. They did not talk about their families or socialize in any other ways. The Europeans were perceived as only interested in getting the work done. The Europeans were described as naïve. During one interview I asked a local technician about the importance of building trust within a group. The technician (T) said:

T: *"We are used to people being on the defensive. We all have had bad experiences with people that lie, you see? [The Latin American technician made some seconds break before he continued.] That is why you always start out a bit on the defensive. On the first meeting we would never say anything to people we don't know."* **I:** *"In other words, you are being careful?"* **T:** *"Yes, exactly!"* **I:** *"And you always need to show that you are willing to allow trust?"* **T:** *"Yes, exactly!"* **I:** *"How can you lose trust? In the same way?"* **T:** *"Exactly!"*

This is one of several quotations from the thesis illustrating how local strategies to handle the insecure and unsafe situation in the society outside the refinery filter into the refinery context. This is commonly embodied knowledge based on experiences through years and thus influencing actions. The quotation from the Norwegian engineer illustrates lack of trust in the refinery context. Several quotations like this were one of the factors that lead to the focus on the role of trust in this study that had set out to understand why punctuality and planning are not equal focused among Latin Americans as among Europeans [Sæther 2005: 27]. The last quotation from the technician describes the main mechanism in *"The Game of Trust"* as it is described in the thesis: You are in the beginning skeptical to people you doesn't know because you during life have experienced so many situations

that give you reason not to trust; experiences from living in a not very absolute society. Therefore, trust to another person, also including a colleague, is also something that has to be deserved and maintained based on actions and fulfillment of expectations of how to act. The study concludes from a detailed analysis of the situation both inside and outside the refinery context, that there exist social codes and mechanisms for trusts building that are closely linked to expectations of proper behavior.

The analysis concludes that informal activity as greetings, jokes and investment of time in social relationships by giving information about family and personal life, is a process which in a Latin American context takes place continually and is important to achieve a feeling of responsibility. The different focus on punctuality and planning is one effect of this activity [Sæther, 2005: 173]. Since trust is not taken for granted, it has to be actively created and maintained; e.g. the local mechanisms involved in trust building. While chat, jokes and “not structure” were linked to relaxation for the Europeans, continuous stream of jokes and dynamics during the whole day were not only important aspects in informal trust building processes for the Latin Americans, but also a source for relaxation as dealing with stress due to the unsafe life. A somewhat aggressive behaviour among some of the European employees, often as a response to jokes, lack of punctuality and ‘not structure’, could generate bad will and create uncertainty among the locals.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST BUILDING FOR HSE MANAGEMENT

HSE management was not a theme in the study [Sæther, 2005]. But some of the findings from the study may be highly relevant in other fields of organization theories and management. I will with this paper argue that the mechanisms described regarding culturally distinct trust building mechanisms, as well as culturally distinct sources for trust, may have an impact on HSE management in multi-cultural teams. The effect trust building mechanisms may have on cultural dimension according to High Reliable

Organization theories based on establishment of organizational redundancy, is already discussed. As outlined in the introduction, trust issues in organizations may affect the organizations' performance levels and hence also it's dealing with HSE. It is easy to think that trust, or failure of addressing trust building mechanisms in cross-cultural teams, may lead more directly to dangerous situations. If these issues are not properly addressed it could be a possibility that the base of trust that is necessary to cooperate well is not established thus leading to poorer communication and higher possibility for misunderstandings. An HSE strategy heavily focused on establishment of formalistic rules, and sanctions on rule violations, will not function well if it is not at the same time taking into consideration the more informal mechanisms involved in trust building between individual employees in the multi-cultural team. One of the more fundamental stances in my previous study [Sæther, 2005] is that formal organization structures in general are in some degree dependent on informal trust building activity to function as intended. Still not much attention is given these kinds of mechanisms in an organization that are closely connected to the phenomena trust. The degree of a formal organizations performance dependence on informal activities may vary considerably from region to region. In the thesis [Sæther, 2005] I outlined an argument trying to explain why such informal activity is even more important in regions characterized by a weak state and that this phenomena may be one possible explanation of culturally differences in attitudes towards punctuality and planning. This shows the importance of not only addressing the role of trust and community of practice as an organizing principle to economic considerations based on reduction of transaction costs and efficient organizations, but also in order to improve HSE and safety in an organization or at a work place. Based on this study I conclude that perceived risk among a group of people influences local mechanisms for establishing and maintaining trust between these people leading to cultural distinct ways of trust building mechanisms, and that these mechanisms may have a direct influence on cross-cultural collaboration. In this paper I argue

that the mechanisms discussed in the thesis may also be relevant within other discussions of organization theories; e.g. efforts aiming to ensure HSE in multi-cultural teams. Cultural issues, if mishandled, may become very expensive as they often influence operational regularity, security and safety.

IV. How may trust building be ensured in cross-cultural teams?

The challenges identified in the study from Latin America are increasingly relevant for other regions with similar characteristics (a weak state; i.e. in the Middle East, Africa, etc). This calls for an approach to ensure and facilitate trust building mechanisms in multi-cultural teams. SINTEF Technology and Society believes that it is possible to increase operational regularity and safety, and thereby also reducing costs, if appropriate preparations are made to handle potential challenges raised by cross-cultural cooperation. The study [Sæther, 2005] indicated that local situated trust building mechanisms are both linked to the locals past experiences with other people and the functioning of the institutions in their society, as well as social codes for proper behaviour from whom they are actually acting. It is not enough to tell people about cultural differences. To be sufficient understood it should be developed through mutual interaction and communication in a safe and controlled environment. This will allow the participants to achieve experiences about how the other actors act and react *before* the planned cooperation tasks are started

THE SINTEF SMARTER TOGETHER APPROACH

SINTEF's group Smarter Together has vast experience with arranging and leading action research processes with actors in the petroleum industry. The approach is to involve all relevant parties and bring them together in purposely designed processes and facilitate the development of solutions, and thereby creating ownership and motivation. In order to achieve this,

SINTEF Smarter Together has developed a unique understanding of operational practices and challenges [Altern, et.al., 2004]. Smarter Together uses a four step action research approach when addressing organisational issues within the oil and gas industry. The main four steps in the approach are:

1. Researchers collect data (interviews, documents, written material) about the platform or refinery, perform an analysis, and initiate a dialogue with the participants about the future work.
2. Search conferences establish a common perspective between researchers and organization about which challenges are the most important to address. Which possible measurements seem appropriate?
3. Development of action plans. Responsible persons and deadlines are specified.
4. Implementation and following up the action plans. In order to ensure the implementation in busy offshore workdays, SINTEF takes on a process role in following up the different action plans.

A preparatory process addressing cultural differences in trust building mechanisms may consist of developing a training concept through a mapping of potential cultural challenges, local requirements and work practise in the different companies. The mapping could be used in the planning of seminar(s) where the participants together get possibility to address the potential main challenges, define roles and rules of action. This training may involve a social simulation process where the participants are solving an imagined case together. By this the participants may achieve a common understanding, ownership and motivation to later take part in the multi-cultural community.

V. TRUST BUILDING IN DISPERSED CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS USING ICT SOLUTIONS

Addressing the issue of trust building will be even more important in the future. In the oil and gas industry there is an increased use of advanced ICT equipment to facilitate cooperation over long distances. In the oil and gas industry this technology is used to allow expert centres located in different countries to support local asserts discussing real time data by communicating through video conferences. An increased possibility of ICT is a great advantage because it opens up for cooperation, support and sharing of knowledge over geographical dispersed areas. On the other hand, ICT may also involve different communication mechanisms that normally used since what is communicated only will be a part of what is normally communicated face to face. ICT does not easily communicate body language and other informal trust generating mechanisms In this way ICT may contribute to amplify the effect of the mentioned challenges connected to cross-cultural cooperation thus affecting regularity and HSE performance.

One important field of research to be effectuated in the future should therefore be how to ensure trust building and trust maintenance in multi-cultural teams frequently using advanced ICT equipment.

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