Vulnerability, Faith and Trust as a Way of ‘Being’ in Service Sector Workplace Groups

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... I began with the benefit of a sense of trust [from other group members] regarding my general competence, but I had to work for trust in relation to my judgment. As a group, we started with ... great optimism about our ability to move forward to achieve our goals... A deeper and stronger form of trust developed when I became more vulnerable in sharing my thoughts and feelings – although initially it caused discomfort and even distrust...

- ‘Erika’, one of the subjects of my doctoral research, a public servant writing about her experience with a group of businessmen on a newly-hatched local economic development council

1. Introduction
The kind of “deeper and stronger” trust that Erika writes about leads groups to experience connection, an extraordinary level of group cooperation and a high degree of group success. In the service sector workplace of the 21st century these outcomes could revolutionize what it means to be a member of a committee, team, executive or task force. Given that we spend so much of our working day with groups, both inside and outside our organizations, this “deeper and stronger form of trust” can literally make us feel more like getting up in the morning! To paraphrase another of my research subjects, ‘Johanna’: “Can you imagine how much less work we’d have to do if we trusted one another?”.

‘Johanna’ was absolutely right, as the stunned silence that greeted her statement in one of my research focus groups attested. The absence of group trust at work results in longer, less productive days. I have witnessed first hand three different types of behavior that lead to extra work. First, we have problems trusting each other’s ideas and initiatives. We automatically second guess ideas and initiatives from others and assume hidden agendas. Most of us can’t even brainstorm in a group without criticizing and commenting on other’s ideas. Second, we have problems with trusting the work done by others. We often duplicate preparation and follow-up work in our groups. We engage in these time-consuming individual efforts because we don’t trust that others will do what they said they will do or that they will understand or represent our interests in so doing. The result: we don’t delegate effectively to others in groups and end up doing way too many things ourselves. Third, we experience frustration around aspirations and feedback loops. We struggle to achieve group and organizational vision and goals because we don’t talk about what is really happening in the organization, we don’t articulate what our group work is really about, and we seldom provide honest feedback to one another. Instead we talk

1 I owe my thoughts on ‘being’ to Christina Baldwin, who contends that we need more ‘to be’ lists and fewer ‘to do’ lists. See her book The Seven Whispers: Listening to the Voice of Spirit
2 All names used in here are pseudonyms.
about the political and the expedient. We often don’t trust that the others are as well-intended or care as much as we do and we attribute our own problems to external circumstances and those of others to internal character. Thus, we fail to hear others out and we end up defending our own assumptions “as if we are defending ourselves” (Bohm, 2000, p. 34). It all adds up to a malaise of the soul and a ton of extra work. We selectively perceive and interpret actions of those we don’t trust so we can then prove to ourselves that they aren’t worth trusting. In the end we face, in the words of the evocative title of a recent book, *Death by Meeting* and by other workplace group activities.

The effects of workplace mistrust in a personal sense are equally daunting. We continue our tendency to just “reload” instead of listening to and validating others. We disengage from our connection with other people. We get wrapped up in our own, often, flawed assumptions. We end up with “an inflationary glut of words... more words, less and less meaning” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 46-47) and we miss out on the “infinity of the unsaid” (Dostal, 2002, p.121). In the end, problems with workplace trust lead to enormous losses of time and personal energy at work. The time we can never recover. Lost time represents an opportunity cost—we lose the opportunity to be doing more productive and fulfilling work. The energy loss makes the remaining time we have in our day not nearly as fruitful as it could be. When we take a feeling of not being valued and heard and lack of trust home with us, we often engage in projection and blaming of those who are closest to us, which perpetuates a negative cycle that then affects the next work day. And on and on it goes.

Why should we create and find trust in our teams, committees and other groups? My research indicates that with trust our groups can reach a state where they generate new ideas and approaches to recurring ‘old’ problems and daunting new problems, solving the supposedly unsolvable. As well, with trust, group members talk in a ‘real’ way with each other, often for the first time ever.

Group trust, in a definitional sense, is a state where “all individuals in a group accept vulnerability to the group based on favorable expectations but no certainty of positive results.” Those results typically come in four areas. The first thing we expect but have no guarantees of is our acceptance in the group. Second is an expectation of finding mutual opportunities in the group to achieve desired outcomes. Positive intent and considerate and benevolent behavior of other group members is a third expectation. Finally, we can expect social capital derived from our involvement in the group. Social capital is the connection with others in our society that is an antidote to the loneliness of urban life for many, as exemplified by the book title *Bowling Alone*.

### 2. The sources and summary of my research

1. See Attribution theory at [http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm](http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm), last viewed on May 4, 2006
2. See the Ladder of Abstraction in The Fifth Discipline Field book.
4. “People do not listen, they reload”—Isaacs (1999, p.18)

May 8, 2006 Draft.
The framework I describe in here emerged in part from a review of the literature on group development, dialogue, systems thinking, leadership and trust. I found much in this literature to be encouraged about. Georg Gadamer was particularly inspiring:

… in a successful conversation… both [partners in the conversation] come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer, 2002, p. 379)

The stories and the model I describe in this article emerged from evidence I gathered from a population of fifty-seven research participants, most of whom dedicated at least eight hours to this work. Just over two thirds of the research participants were graduates of a Masters degree in leadership at Royal Roads University in Victoria, Canada. The others were fellow faculty at Royal Roads and fellow doctoral students at UBC. Most of the research subjects, myself included, had at least fifteen years of work experience. The majority of research data was gathered between April and October, 2004 in a total of nine face to face focus groups and on-line discussions. The last three of those groups dealt with summary material and an earlier version of the model presented on the next page.

Group trust, as I define it, involves faith and vulnerability. Mollering quotes a description of trust as “a functional alternative to rational prediction” (Lewis and Wiegert; in Mollering, 2001, p. 410). Mollering adds that trust performs “a crucial function in modern societies whilst the bases for trust are actually rather weak. The ‘leap’ [to trust] is far from rational… trust combines good reasons with faith…” (Mollering, 2001, p. 411). The word vulnerability is derived from the “Latin vulnerare to wound, from vulner-, vulnus wound; probably akin to Latin vellere to pluck, Greek oulE wound”. To be vulnerable is to be “capable of being physically wounded” and to be “open to attack or damage”.

Both faith and vulnerability are essential to the six element model which emerged from my research. A model is, quite simply “…something taken or proposed as worthy of imitation”¹⁰. The models that appear in Diagrams 1 and 2 of this article describe one way of reaching group trust. Following these models involves approaching group work in quite different ways from those to which we are accustomed.

The first three elements in both of the models are: planning and initiating trust, undertaking activities to earn trust, and creating a trust space. The pivotal fourth element involves an individual group member making a 'leap of faith'. The final two elements of the model are an embracing of the leap of faith and reaping the results of trust.

Diagram 1: The Six Element Model for Building Trust in Groups

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¹⁰ “model” in Merriam-Webster Online; last viewed spring, 2005
The Six Element Model for Building Trust in Groups

1. Planning and initiating pre-conditions for trust
   Organization or individual 'in charge' establishes group mandate and membership. Any preparation (e.g., training) is initiated. Previous alliances and fractures known.

2. Undertaking activities to earn trust
   Group starts with activities, with many members acting polite and some acting dominant. The group often places greater emphasis on task or process while trust is earned.

3. Creating a "trust space"
   Group internalizes group practices: shared leadership responsibility; common purpose/passion; deep listening; open attitude. Creation of fields: identity, safety, bond.

4. Taking the "Leap of faith" initiative
   "Moment of truth" where someone takes the leap of faith. Group trust - reliability/vulnerability - is tested and the tester is left hanging.

5. Embracing the "Leap of faith"
   Vulnerability shifts from the individual to the group. The group's embrace of the leap demonstrates visible and unified dependability and/or empathy.

6. Reaping the trust benefits
   Group achieves cooperation/connection/success. Group has reinforced one or more fields: identity, safety and/or bond. The group is sustainable and can lead.
The leap of faith requires exposure to vulnerability, risk-taking and uncertainty. The leap results in successful trust-building only where the group in question embraces the leap, thereby shifting vulnerability from the individual to the group. Groups that achieve group trust have ‘fields’ or auras radiating amongst group members: group identity, group bond and psychological safety. Thus group members can go from the fear associated with vulnerability to the joy and release that come with success. With success, there is also an increased likelihood of group members participating in peak group experiences: generative dialogue, synergy, high performance, fusion of horizons, flow and common consciousness.

3. Starting out

3.1 Planning and initiating pre-conditions for trust

The first element of this model’s approach to building trust is a deceptively simple one. We invest time in thinking about and preparing a group for trust before the group formally meets. We pay careful attention to the diversity, skills and attitudes of the membership of the group and to the mandate that we give the group. In so doing we are specifically aware of the competence and confidence levels of group members in doing group work. We can further initiate the pre-conditions for success by getting group members reading and thinking about group work in advance of the first group meeting. In essence what we are doing in the first element is planning and initiating pre-conditions for trust. One of my summary research focus groups said that, in the workplace, this is the single most underdeveloped and underutilized element of the six elements of building trust referred to in the model.

3.2 Undertaking activities to earn trust

Once the group has been created, whatever its degree of preparation, it is time to move to the second element and engage in some form of group activity. In ‘Erika’s’ case this was an action stage and did not involve a lot of sitting around navel-gazing. With task-oriented people, one of the most basic ‘trust’ foundations is ‘doing what you say you will do’:

As a new organization there wasn’t a sense of institution or organization. I found myself amongst a group of highly task-focused, action oriented people, and looked for effective ways to introduce process and policy. As time went by, we organized around governance, and a sense of trust through the [development of ourselves as] institution began to emerge, but is not the most compelling source of trust...

Other groups can earn trust, at this early stage, by having a very high degree of process and interpersonal orientation. Take this description of the beginnings of a women’s support group that has been together for 17 highly intense years:

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11 A field is a force “of unseen connections that influences… behavior” (Wheatley, 1994, p. 13) and an "unseen" structure, “occupying space and becoming known to us through [its] effects” (Wheatley, 1994, p. 49).

12 See the situational leadership model developed by Hershey and Blanchard
… from the very first weekend we have followed a format where each of us take one turn at speaking, about whatever is there for that person to speak about. First there are some easy conversations over a meal and then we gather in the living room of whose ever house we’re at and we arrange ourselves comfortably with pillows and Kleenex and knitting and journals and whatever else is needed - and we settle in for however long “a turn” will take. Without any kind of process to decide whose turn it is, it is usually clear who will go first – a very organic system. One of us will start unwinding the story of whatever part of her life she wants to share – work, kids, partner, parents – whatever arises.

- ‘Pam’ another one of the subjects of my doctoral research

The contrast between the two groups couldn’t be much more stark. While Pam’s group was not a workplace group, I see it is as a more ‘extreme’ version of several work-related groups that research participants described as being primarily focused at the beginning on process and on interpersonal connection. In the end, both Erika’s and Pam’s groups were described as achieving a high degree of group trust. The key, I concluded through my research, is selecting the approach to activities to earn trust that fits most naturally with the stated emphasis on or comfort with task or process of the group itself. This is what both Erika’s and Pam’s groups did. At this early stage, where politeness prevails, we may be driven to places where dominant members of the group take the group.

Thus a task and action-oriented group could continue to work at whatever it was created to accomplish and to develop its process as it goes along. Back to Erika:

One of the first major decisions we made was to hire an economic developer (and we were "miserable failures” in so doing owing to serious problems with the person who was hired)... As I reported to the group my concerns, I was surprised by resistance and some perceived lack of trust towards me in terms of my judgment in this situation. There seemed to be concern that I was over-reacting (a stereotypical gender based response?), perhaps a personality issue, or that being so close to the situation I was lacking in perspective. Some combination of factors along these lines resulted in a perceived lack of validity with regard to my concerns.

3.3 Creating a trust space

From there, a group that aspires to trust can create trust space by internalizing one or more specific practices that lead to a greater possibility of group trust. The four practices that emerged from the stories I gathered are: deep listening, having true openness, sharing leadership responsibility and developing common purpose or passion. Those practices are not easy to take in and make part of our ‘being’. Our own perceptions, biases and sense of urgency get in the way of listening and openness. Our sense of hierarchy and what is ‘right’ gets in the way of truly sharing responsibility. We struggle to make the time to really deeply discuss common purpose and passion in a meaningful way. Over time, though, if we work at one or more of the four practices, we can develop up to the
earlier-mentioned fields or auras among group members: i.e. bonding, a sense of pride and identity among group members and real psychological safety to say what you think.

Take Pam’s group, for instance:

There is something amazing and so unusual about being given the space to just speak until you have unfolded and unwound all there was to say. It is equally compelling to listen in that way – to give up the responses that ordinarily surface and just surrender to the story you are hearing, to witnessing… In this way we … heard stories of new love, passing love, addiction, children growing, educational adventures, houses built, grandchildren arriving, critical illnesses, books published, betrayal, new careers, bankruptcies…the gamut.

Erika’s group clearly operated very differently than Pam’s as it developed a trust space. Yet it too began to develop a strong identity and people were heard in different ways. The early meetings of the group involved what Erika called “optimism”, a form of the standard politeness\(^\text{13}\) we typically see early in a group’s life. Mixed in to those meetings were both process and a real action orientation to respond to the external pressure of the community. The group developed a way of operating and an identity as a very visible group in the community. Erika notes: “As time went by, trust grew, partially as familiarity grew, [also] as time went by I became more factual and direct - I adjusted my style to suit the group, and my concerns were heard and realized more fully”.

The alternatives to working on trust space include becoming a pseudo or fake team\(^\text{14}\) or cycling back and forth between the group fracturing into subgroups and group members engaging in stilted politeness in a downwards-descending negative vicious spiral\(^\text{15}\).

4. The Leap of Faith
4.1 Testing the trust space
What is most important at this juncture is whether a group progresses from being in the trust space to testing that space through one or more leaps of faith. This in turn involves getting past fear and answering the penetrating question posed a recent best seller: “What would I do if I were not afraid?” (Johnson, 1998, p. 53). One of the single most potentially disabling fears that I came across in the literature was “the fear of reflection” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 260). Isaacs notes that “people will raise privately what they feared to raise publicly” (Isaacs, Ibid). He describes a group of people trying to map the differences they faced as behaving in the following dysfunctional way:

I felt as if I were pulling teeth! They were reluctant to say directly that they did not trust the other division to look out for their interests. They felt they could trust no one, but to say such a thing would be heretical (Isaacs, Ibid).

\(^{13}\) See Tuckman, Blanchard et al, Katzenbach and Smith and MacIver (2001) on the stage typically referred to as forming.
\(^{14}\) See Katzenbach and Smith
\(^{15}\) See Maclver (2001)
Here is where research on the subject of the link between trust and faith comes to the forefront. By looking at the risk, uncertainty and vulnerability as inherent in group trust, we can start to accept Mollering’s concept that “Complete knowledge or ignorance would eliminate the need for, or possibility of trust” (Mollering, 2001, p. 406).

Thus, I have concluded that in order to develop trusting groups, we must be willing to “risk and test our own prejudices, understand others, better understand ourselves” through moving towards discourse (Vokey, 2001). This represents a deeply threatening idea to many people: “really taking in the other will involve an identity shift in us” (Dostal, 2002, p.141). Moreover, “real understanding always has an identity cost” (Dostal, Ibid.). Gadamer adds to the ‘threat level’ by promising, if we truly allow ourselves to be challenged, “we will see our peculiarity for the first time” (Dostal, 2002, p. 132). Only the most secure people are likely to be comfortable with being in a group setting when we first see our “peculiarity”.

The leap of faith involved in seeing our peculiarity provides the group with an opportunity to accept, reject or ignore the leap of faith. Again back to Erika:

A deeper and stronger form of trust developed when I became more vulnerable in sharing my thoughts and feelings – although initially it caused discomfort and even distrust (a bit of fracturing occurred before the issues culminated in intensity to the degree that a decision was deemed necessary). Over the 6 month period that I built support for [the] difficult group decision [about the economic development officer], congruence between the information being relayed and the action required became painfully clear. With this decision came more vulnerability – however, now the vulnerability shifted from myself to the whole group.

The results, in the end, can be spectacular, in terms of connection. Here Pam chimes in about her women’s support group:

…There is a connection and something that I would call sacred about these times together. Something is invoked that for me goes beyond words like “groundrules” and “safety”. When I think of the “space” of trust that is held, Rumi’s beautiful words comes to mind: “Out beyond the idea of right thinking and wrong thinking is a field. . . . I will meet you there. . . .”

4.2 The manner in which the leap of faith occurs
The question then, is how does the leap of faith occur and how do we increase the likelihood that we will get the kind of group embracing of the leap of faith and “group vulnerability” that Erika describes?

All eleven of the research subjects whose stories are told in my dissertation agreed that the key “moment of truth” in their story came when someone tested the trust space by making themselves vulnerable. In Erika’s case that came when one of the business people on the committee moved from discounting her concern about the economic officer to agreeing with it. In Pam’s case there would have been a moment early in the life of the group when first one member, and then other members, told stories that they had not
dared to tell elsewhere and were embraced by the agreed-to response of deep listening
and no un-requested advice, all in accordance with the groundrules.

However, what I also found in my research was that the memories of what was involved
in the vulnerability-testing ‘moment of truth’ are easily lost. Here I was aided by
recollections made in two learning situations where participants were keeping journals,
one involving a research participant and one involving myself. ‘Peter’, the research
participant, consulted with and was affirmed by a close colleague before taking the leap
and admitting to problems participating fully in a recently-formed group:

What happened next was truly a leap for me: I shared my misgivings and my
perceived shortcomings with my “team.” I apologized for my lack of engagement
and asked for their understanding that my natural tendencies (and my worries over
a very serious accident in the family) had meant that I had not contributed what I
felt I could. Essentially, I was trusting that they would give me a second chance
to meet my own expectations, and they didn’t let me down.

For my part, I documented an in-class experience I had in the doctoral program that gave
me a ‘live’ demonstration of my experience of the very leap my research was turning up.
Here is a slightly edited version of what I recorded in my journal:

The conflict thing from the other day—well the conflict thing worked itself out in
a very positive manner. Prior to the class I wrote out several times my own
description of the problem behavior [of one individual in the class, ‘Hector’,
towards a subgroup of five of us who had made a presentation together] and how
it had felt to me. I actually studied this to make sure that I could be constructive
in my comments if I chose to comment but I desperately wanted someone else in
the class to address the issue, not me. The instructor… opened it up to the floor
for discussion about the process in the previous class… I was bound and
determined to have what needed to be said [said]… but I did not want to go first.
So I waited through four statements. One of the statements in particular was
touching but it did not deal with the ‘elephant in the middle of the room’… I let
the silence settle in for a few seconds after the fourth person spoke (it seemed like
an eternity)… So I took a breath and plunged in, opening by saying that I had had
lots of time to think because I had tossed and turned for hours about this… I then
pretty much said what I had written out in my practice notes just in case I felt I
had to speak… [After I said what I said] ‘Hector’ looked pale and made it clear
that it not been his intent to have the effect that he had… He and I had a very
positive conversation during the break, building on our exchange earlier… Also
after the break, one of my classmates told me that she had observed at least one
member of the class holding their breath when I started speaking to ‘Hector’ and
not releasing it until I had spoken for some time… I was spent after all of that… It
takes so much out of me to do what I did but it absolutely had to be done by
someone— the neat thing was the feeling of release by the class afterwards—
there was a wonderful joyous feel to the presentations and questions which
followed. The pall really was lifted…
5. Levels and Layers of Trust

5.1 The concept of deepening and layering

I learned through both personal reflection and the information from my research subjects that, with groups that exist for a period of time, there can be a deepening, layering dimension involved in the building and reinforcing of trust (see Diagram 2 on the next page).

Conceptually, the deepening element can be diagrammed as loops in and around and between the six elements for building trust. These loops can be pictured as ‘rising up’ over time, giving a third dimension to the model. The deepening element is what Senge and others call a “virtuous upwards spiral”. In some cases, such as Erika’s, the upward movement must occur to get us to the initial group trust. Erika herself took several leaps that were not embraced in raising her concern about the economic development officer. In each instance the group response was to go from Erika’s leap of faith back to task-oriented activities. However, the group also progressed at improving their listening to and regard for each other until, after six months, Erika was finally supported by the group. This occurred when one of the other group members took a leap by agreeing with Erika after her character was publicly called into question by the economic development officer. That is where the vulnerability shifted to the whole group. In the case of two other workplace stories recounted in my thesis, Donna’s and Joan’s stories, there was a level of doubt that arose each time a more inclusive, listening and process-oriented decision-making environment was tested. Here is part of Joan’s story:

[Getting to real listening] took a long time, and when I talk about the process, that took an even longer time to work through…we were able to set aside a lot of the fears and egos and agendas because there’s quite a few different agendas in the organization to say, ‘Okay, we'll put those aside for now, we have this goal because there was clarity on what this goal was going to be, and for this time with these ground rules I will trust you. I may not trust you the rest of the time, but for this small piece I will trust you.’

The leap of faith moment came about each time a decision had to be made by consensus and it actually was done that way. Joan noted that the group said that “We won't stop this process until [consensus]… happens” and added “we didn't stop that process until it happened”.

5.2 The impact of deepening layers of trust

The impact of the deepening can be the accomplishment of tasks at a level and in a way that far exceeded previous efforts, as happened with both Donna and Joan:

… by the process, by really ensuring that people were listened to… we were able to come to decisions [on both of the issues we were assigned to work on and then to] put decisions forward, have them supported both at the board's level and at the board of governors level, and actually implement them. And some of that work has been… 20 years outstanding… (Joan)

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16 See the description of reinforcing loops in Senge’s The Fifth Discipline and Senge et al’s The Fifth Discipline Field Book
Diagram 2: The Six Element Model for Building Trust in Groups: Systems Loops
“We came out with a project report that went to our Practice Committee, which [was] very impressed… It went to a variety of places within the organization in the upper executive, and they were very surprised at the kind of work that we had done, and they’ve taken it as a model for the other disciplines…” (Donna)

The deepest impact of layering of trust revealed by my research may be evidenced in Pam’s group. In Pam’s group the trust grew over 17 years to the point where the five women in the group make it a high priority to come back together, “sometimes making arrangements to fly back from various parts of the world to make the gathering… There isn’t really a question about it [us returning] – we just come, like migrating birds or returning salmon.”

5.3 Reaping the benefits of multiple layers of deepening trust
The combination of cooperation, connection and success that come when a group reaps the benefits of trust are well summarized in Adrienne’s workplace story about the development of an outstanding course for a national private sector company:

…We became more than friends… The… level of respect that each person had for the three other people in the room and the caring and support that I felt from them [was]… phenomenal … …That program turned out to be probably the single best thing we produced in the time that I was with [the company, out of]… about 70 different courses … [It was] probably one of the best project experiences I’ve ever had in my life… (Adrienne)

5.4 The way in which the loops and ‘moments of truth’ actually work
As noted earlier, Diagram 2 illustrates multiple leaps of faith that are either ultimately embraced by the group or embraced regularly in repeating cycles. It is important to note that looping around the first three elements in order to get to that first embrace or to deepen group trust can start by revisiting any one of the first three elements. Thus we may decide to improve our preparation through training. Alternatively we may choose to engage in more activity where we earn a better foundation for group trust through task accomplishment, discussion of improvements in process or just getting to know each other better. In the end, in order for any of the loops to result in the building or deepening of trust, we must return to creating trust space. Thus we can go from preparation and earning trust to experiencing even deeper listening. We can also get better at one or all three of the other practices: opening ourselves up more by suspending certain previously-defended assumptions, sharing responsibility more instead of being burdened with or oppressed by responsibility17, and discovering or defining common passion or purpose, which may require revealing parts of ourselves we haven’t shown before. In some cases we discover parts of ourselves we didn’t fully know about before.

Once more, the moments of “truth” where the leaps occur are easily lost. Moreover, as Erika noted in an e-mail to me, it is important to understand these leaps from the perspectives of all members of the group. Here again my reflection on my doctoral studies provided some insight into differing experiences of vulnerability and faith over

17 For more on burden and oppression see Oshry on ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’
time. The twelve-member doctoral cohort of which I was a part became a highly trusting group and went through at least three distinct leaps of faith. The first one came just after three weeks together. It involved constructively discussing a course that wasn’t working for us, building on our stated value of inclusiveness and finding an involving solution, working with instructor. The second leap came just over a year into our studies together. We responded to the challenges of two members of faculty in a course on feminist and First Nations research to examine and reveal more about our research interests. A third leap of faith occurred twenty months into our studies when a course intended to prepare us for our oral comprehensives wasn’t working completely for us. In this instance we lived inclusiveness and risked challenging the status quo by suggested that we incorporate our self-developed practice of circle right into the course itself.

Part of my research involved consulting with the cohort as an ongoing focus group. Through that consultation, I was able to confirm that the eleven of us who moved into that third leap together agreed that all three leaps of faith took us down the road of deepening knowledge, understanding and personal development.

Here is one group member’s reflection on the process:

Vulnerability is the only way to be real and to actually realize that the response doesn't matter. But certain things happened in the group at the very beginning where I experienced not belonging - this actually undid the sense of openness I believed I came into the room with, it ruptured the sense of trust. I recognize that I was often a porcupine as a result…. Throughout, it was a time of personal learning for me to let go of my prickliness, (that defensive posture against what others would never understand as an attack for it is the norm, or often meant kindly) and for me to keep on reminding myself to return to my spiritual practice and see the other as myself, extend care to myself and other, and thus let go. I worked at trust, and at openness. I am sure others had to do that with me too.

At the opposite extreme perhaps was another cohort member who said this about our process: “I think that unconsciously I just come to groups… in a trusting way. I believe that what you give to a group will be returned to you. That was how I approached this group.” This group member, like the one referenced just above, was a highly valued, trusted and trusting member of the group. I suspect that the other nine of us came somewhere in between, which again points to the great diversity that comes to the forefront in being real and building trust in groups, be they existing committees or a task force you are about to launch.

The result of these deepening layers is reflected in summary statements by one of the other nine members:

We learned that in this group you can mess up and it’s OK with the group. Another thing that was important for us in developing trust is that we have a willingness to take ownership for our process and for our learning. You don’t see that often in adult groups. We came to this group with an
interest in education, a strong belief in the learning process. I am inspired and rejuvenated every time I spend time with you as a group…

6. The Take-aways, Lessons and Conclusions

One major and practical take-away from my research is that there are specific processes we can follow to assist in developing trust space and in getting to a group leap of faith. Six processes were specifically referenced in my dissertation. Each of the six is a variation on 12 criteria for effective teamwork that I outlined previously. The six processes were: rule-making (as in groundrules or jointly held values), personality typing (through some form of personality profile), debriefing after group activity (i.e. what did we learn), encouraging conflict resolution, doing away with judging (e.g. as in brainstorming), and checking-in (i.e. stating how we are, really, when we first get together each time we meet). There are numerous other credible approaches to developing trust. Two of the ones I most value are the “procedural justice” approach of Korsgaard et al and the self-revelation, feedback and disclosure approach of Lencioni (2002). Procedural justice is made up of: leadership, climate and intragroup dealings. Lencioni suggests that group members reveal information about themselves (e.g. your challenges growing up, best and worst previous jobs), share profiles such as the Myers Briggs Type Instrument and give each other feedback on teamwork, both good and bad. However, he also says to stop short of intimate psychological revelations. In Lencioni’s model, the foundation of trust provides a basis for getting past fear of conflict and for introducing positive and compelling ‘drama’ into group processes. Each of the above-noted processes (i.e. MacIver, Korsgaard et al, Lencioni) can help us establish a trust space if it contributes to the development of the earlier referenced practices and fields.

However, my work also suggests that what is essential in order to go from potential trust to actual trust is the leap of faith and the embracing of the leap. This was the case for each of the groups that I examined in detail as part of my research (the earlier-referenced eleven groups). It was also the case for each of the groups I personally experienced and reflected on during the four years of my doctoral research (a total of four groups).

There are, however, two further specific lessons that I wish to draw to the reader’s attention. One is that making the trust process work requires awareness of ‘other’ and commitment on the part of group participants. The awareness part, which then contributes to planning and preparing the preconditions for trust, can be helped a great deal by reading such popular works as Lencioni’s books and more academic pieces such as Korsgaard et al.

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18 MacIver (2001). Reduced to their shortest form, the 12 criteria are: direction, improvement, roles, letting go, discipline, management of outside resources, the right things done right, getting the job done, balance, diversity, creativity and conflict management.

19 See Myers (1980)

20 Interestingly, one of the groups that I described in the stories that went out to focus group members involved a group getting to trust through discussion and agreement on a groundrule not to get too personal in self-revelations. This occurred in reaction to a group member being perceived as having overstepped the bounds of safety into personally intimate details.

21 See Cockell (2004) for another dissertation that resulted from the work of one of these groups.
I am convinced by the stories told by my research subjects that we can, with effort get past our self-protective human tendencies. We can them get out of negative cycles where “… we fall back on… habits [and] protect ourselves… and cling to our views and defend them as if our lives depended on it” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 6).

However, my research also indicates that we mustn’t lose our self-protective tendencies altogether and simply abandon ourselves to trust with each and every group we are part of. We must pick and choose. The dramatic and cautionary part of this second lesson is this: there are recurring behaviors that are repeatedly demonstrated by a small number of people in society. These behaviors can interfere with and threaten trust to the point where trust-building should not be attempted. This behavior is referred to as “destructive” or “malevolent” narcissistic behavior. It is behavior that is entirely self-centered and manipulative. I believe that this behavior precludes the true openness, listening, sharing responsibility and relating purpose and passion that I found to be fundamental to the creation of a trust space.

Following the process of picking and choosing, keys to building trusting groups are taking personal and shared responsibility (Oshry, 1995, pp. 51-127), working smarter (Drucker, 1992, p.97), putting forth a concerted effort (Putnam, 2000, p. 90) and showing as much vulnerability as we can muster (Mollering, 2001). As the story I told above about one of my own personal experiences of the leap of faith suggests, I personally shudder at the thought of once again showing and responding positively to vulnerability in future groups of which I will be part. Showing vulnerability drains me physically, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally. However, I shudder more at the consequences of not showing and responding positively to vulnerability in the most important of the groups I choose to join in future. This would represent a triumph of learning disabilities (Senge, 1990, pp. 17-26) and a Dance of Blind Reflex (Oshry, 1995, p. 54) and a failure to take advantage of opportunities for success, cooperation and connection.

I would like to close this summary piece as I did my dissertation itself by challenging the reader to see and explore new possibilities in selected groups of which you are a part. You can do so by examining three sets of questions. You should focus on whichever of the groupings of questions apply best to your situation with an existing or new group:

#1. What have I and others in the group I am part of or about to be part of done to plan, initiate, earn and create space for trust? What could we do in future?
#2. Will I be ready, at the appropriate time, for myself or someone else in my group to display vulnerability, risk-taking and uncertainty? In other words, will I be ready to take a leap of faith or to have someone else take a leap that I could choose to embrace? Such leaps can occur through asking open and challenging questions, making assertive statements, and voicing frustration and passion, concern and joy.
#3. When and where will we choose to begin trusting in our most important groups?

The next move is yours and mine and all of ours.

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22 For more on the various forms of behavior which can interfere with group trust see Brown, Hare or Peck on destructive/malevolent narcissism and the section of Korsgaard et al that deals with attachment issues.
References:

23 For the full dissertation, including all of the stories, please go the following Web sites and wait patiently: http://teambase.spawglass.com/documents/files5009/maciver-thesis.pdf