

## To Trust or Not to Trust, That Is the Question

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Research shows that when deciding whether to trust another person, there is only a bit more than a 50/50 chance of being right. That's because people tend to place too much emphasis on reputation and perceived confidence, ignoring the fact that human behavior is always sensitive to context. Before we put faith in others, we should consider four principles:

- *Integrity can vary.* Contrary to common belief, integrity isn't a stable trait.

Someone who has been fair and honest in the past won't necessarily be fair and honest in the future. To understand why, we need to abandon the notion that people wrestle with 'good' and 'evil' impulses." Rather, people assess their short-term and long-term gains and decide what will further their interests. One study showed that 90 percent of people (most of whom thought of themselves as morally upstanding) will act dishonestly if they believe they won't get caught and there won't be any long-term consequences.

- *Power does corrupt.* Studies show that increasing status and power go hand in hand with decreasing honesty and reliability. A person's honesty depends on his or her relative feelings of power – or vulnerability..." (It's not about financial status.) A person in a higher-status position worries less about the long-term consequences of being untrustworthy and is driven to satisfy short-term needs and desires.

- *Confidence often masks incompetence.* There's a natural tendency to trust those who act self-confidently but sometimes they can't deliver. That's why it's important to find out about the person's actual track record of performance.

- *It's okay to trust your gut.* Researchers in the academic, business, and military communities have spent years trying to uncover a few simple methods for detecting untrustworthiness but, despite their best efforts, continue to come up short. However, it turns out that we are quite good at instinctively reading subtle cues and forming a gut sense of whether a person can be trusted. One study found that four cues *occurring in the same interaction* signal dishonesty: leaning away from the other person, touching one's hands together, touching one's face, and crossing one's arms. The person reading these signals has no conscious awareness of their sense of the person's dishonesty, but built-in trust-detectors were working on a subconscious level. I suggest allowing your mind to arrive undisturbed at a judgment; don't overthink it by focusing on the person's reputation or a single nonverbal cue. Of course, you shouldn't blindly trust your intuition. Body language can tell us about a person's *current* intentions, but circumstances in the future may change their trustworthiness one way or the other.

Three suggestions on how to influence a person we're dealing with to be more trustworthy:

- Give the person a reason to feel grateful to you.
- Emphasize common ground, which helps the other person see you as someone with whom it's possible to build a lasting and beneficial relationship.
- Don't threaten or punish; sanctions may work in the moment but they undermine the other person's motivation to be honest and make the person less likely to take risks to support you.

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