

The Importance of Trust

by

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What is trust? The dictionary definition is ‘firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something.’ Without trust, we would do nothing. For example, if you did not believe that the ground would continue to support your weight the very next time you took a step, then you would stay just where you were. Trust allows us to move forward in the reasonable expectation that our well-being will not be compromised. This is a vital component in life as without it, how would we grow?

In a very literal sense, if we never moved, then all we would know of the world, would be what we could see, hear, smell and feel in that particular spot. Of course, we might read books, watch television or look at things on the internet, but the world that was revealed would in some sense be meaningless. I might do all the research in the world to gather knowledge about what an orange tastes like, but the only way to know, is to eat one.

The opposite of trust is distrust, which the dictionary describes as ‘The feeling that someone or something cannot be relied upon.’ When we distrust something or someone, we ensure that our engagement with that thing or person is kept to a minimum, (that might even mean eliminating them). Often, if not always, we put up barriers, literal or otherwise, to protect ourselves from the dangers that we perceive, real or otherwise.

The decision to trust or distrust is part of the survival instinct and as such it is hard-wired into us and is a very difficult pattern to break. There is a basic rule that what we don’t know or have experience of should be treated with suspicion and avoided. On a survival basis, it is better to be safe than sorry. But at some point, it becomes necessary to take a risk and engage with the things you fear. Such behaviour is much easier, when at least you can take account of the experience of others. So for example, a child is much more likely to jump into a swimming pool if he/she sees his/her parents and siblings having a good time in the water. Much of what we know as a species, is accepted because of the collective experience rather than because each individual has experienced it directly. I don’t need to stick my hand in a fire, to know that it will be extremely painful and damaging if I did.

The trouble comes when there is no collective wisdom to fall back on, because then pushing boundaries is a risk. We literally don’t know the consequences. Imagine finding yourself shipwrecked on a desert island with very little to eat. You come across a tree laden with a fruit that you don’t recognise. For all you know, the fruit may be delicious and provide you with the nourishment you need to survive, but it could be poisonous and kill you. You have to be pretty desperate to risk such a choice.

So trust or otherwise is pretty fundamental to the life experience. In simple terms, the more you are prepared to trust, the broader and richer your life experience will be. The corollary of that is also true, the more you default to distrust, the narrower and more impoverished your life experience will be.

Whether you look at problems on a macro or micro scale, many of the world’s problems are based on a lack of trust, so it is amazing that it is topic that gets very little coverage. Generally, the coaching and training industry covers the things that get in the way of fulfilling our potential, but ‘trust’ doesn’t seem to be one of the industry’s buzz words. This is very sad, because a life lead without trust is also a life without a sense of well-being.

As an aikido practitioner, student, coach and teacher for close on 34 years, I have often marvelled at how the latest hot topic in the training and coaching world is something that is central to the principles and practices that we study on the mat, (stress management, agility, team building, leadership, mindfulness to name a few). It was for this very reason that I decided to launch my own coaching and training enterprise. And whilst, the training and coaching hasn't latched on to the importance of building trust, aikido does. Given the importance of trust, it is not surprising that it is central to the art, because much of the time we spend on the mat is spent working with a partner. In doing so, we have to give them the thing we value the most, ourselves. We literally put our bodies on the line, so that our partner can practise their technique. In doing so, we know that they may apply a wrist lock or perhaps throw us to the ground. We also know that taking a fall badly or having a technique done crudely can be painful and damaging.

So how do we go about building trust and what makes it worthwhile to take those risks? In simple terms, we take it step by step. We start training from a static position, which makes it much easier to take a throw or absorb the technique that is being applied. Even in this position, there are a number of gears and it's wise to start in the lowest gear, which means that we move slowly and sensitively, so like a car moving at slow speed, the action of applying the brake is almost immediate. As we iron out the potential problems, we start moving through the gears and work with greater speed and power.

At some point, we start to practice with movement, again slowly at first, but ultimately we aim to attack as vigorously as we can, knowing that as the attacker, if the person performing the technique makes a mistake that we have the sensitivity to stop and that if they do not, we have the requisite skills to receive their technique fully and keep ourselves safe. The reward for our endeavour is that there is a true joy in becoming one with another human being. Dancing on your own is fine, but doing so in perfect harmony with another is taking it to another level. This is the place, where we can push the boundaries and grow.

Back to the real world, these ideas are exactly how we need to proceed off the mat too. The steps described above are a clear physical manifestation of how we go about building trust, when we are faced with something new and unknown. But taking things slowly and step by step is good way of building firm foundations in any relationship, be they personal, business or even on a national level.

The next time, you find yourself closing a door, ask yourself why and what you are potentially missing out on. If we want to build a better world, we need to start opening doors and taking risks. We need to build trust!

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