

Dialogue IV

Trust and Trustworthiness: A Response to “Organizational Control Through Trust: A Biblical System?”

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I very much enjoyed reading this article, and especially appreciated the way it was situated in the mainstream literature and the care with which it was written. I agree wholeheartedly that we must not allow a “genuine trust” to be replaced by a “counterfeit trust.” Indeed, it is precisely because the paper is so well-done that I feel compelled to comment on certain elements highlighted in its conclusion, which I found lacked the careful attention that characterizes the rest of the paper.

Recall that Smith notes that “in the experience of management, many workers have not displayed the trustworthiness required,” and concludes that graduates from Christian universities “should be in high demand ... if we can make an adequate case to the employers” demonstrating that they are trustworthy in the “good” biblical sense. While I agree that we

should nurture graduates from Christian universities to be trustworthy, what bothers me is that the conclusion (probably unintentionally) implies that the onus for genuine trust in the workplace is on workers.

Put differently, to me it is not self-evident that “in order to create trusting relationships in a broad pattern across the organization, we must *first* have a large percentage of trustworthy employees” (emphasis mine). We must not forget that the employer needs to be trustworthy, too. As Smith points out, trusting God is facilitated by the fact that God is trustworthy. Is there a parallel situation in organizations? Whereas God cannot betray us, the same cannot be said of organizations. Moreover, what is the biblical rationale for persuading and expecting workers to accept an organization’s mission statement and goals “as their own”?

Is it self-evident that managers and organizations are trustworthy? Studies like Badaracco and Webb (1995) suggest not. For example, they found that young managers who were asked, "Does fear of punishment motivate you to do the right thing?" responded by turning the question on its head, saying that they feared repercussions for doing what they believed to be the right thing! If managers cannot trust themselves to act ethically, then why should employees trust managers (and, just as importantly, why would we expect managers to trust subordinates)?

Building on an argument that I've started elsewhere (Dyck, Thiessen, & Timmerman, 1997), a key to facilitating trust in organizations may be to provide managers with and make them accountable to a trustworthy "moral community" that transcends the organization where they work. Such a community could take a variety of forms, but may be modeled after the professional associations characterizing other professions (e.g., accountants, lawyers, nurses, engineers, etc.). It seems odd, especially given their importance in people's everyday

lives, that managers should be less accountable than other professions.

In sum, while I certainly agree that our yeastiness will serve to increase genuine trust in organizations, we must take care not to assume that organizations are inherently trustworthy (rather, we should expect our yeastiness to change organizational missions and goals). Obviously there is much more that needs to be written about understanding the meaning of developing genuine trust in organizations. I thank Smith for the important contribution he has made toward this end.

REFERENCES

Badaracco, Joseph L. Jr., & Allen Webb (1995). "Business Ethics: A View from the Trenches." *California Management Review*, 37 (2), Winter, 8-28.

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