

Leadership and Trust – Challenges and Opportunities for Professional Practice

A presentation by the Teaching Council Director, Tomás Ó Ruairc, to the 3U Symposium on Trust and Leadership in the Professions on 1 March 2014. The audience included postgraduate students of leadership in the RCSI Institute of Leadership and in the Tóraíocht programme run by the Department of Education, NUIM.

In one sense, this talk could be over in 30 seconds. The link between trust, leadership and our professions is so obvious and so simple that we might wonder what all the fuss is about.

Nothing unites the professions here today more than trust; it is the bedrock on which all else we do rests. End of story.

And yet... and yet... we clearly have a sense that that is not the end of the story, that it is not as simple as that. Otherwise, we would not be giving up our Saturday to come here and talk about trust, the professions and leadership!

Yes, trust is the bedrock of all that we do. But it is also like the Sword of Damocles - it also is the greatest threat to all that we do. Confused?

Well then we are starting on the right note at last! Let me try and explain.

As Minister Alex White T.D. said last year about leadership, for all that we talk about trust, the extent to which we truly understand the concept is at best questionable. Like poetry and light, we all feel we instinctively know what trust is; it permeates our lives so intimately that we are almost oblivious to it. But without it, we are lost; and it clearly defies definitive explanation. What does it mean to say "I trust you."? How would you feel if someone looked you in the eye and said "I trust you."? Would you really feel comfortable and reassured? Or would you feel under the pressure of an expectation that you felt you could not meet?

There are no clear, definitive answers to these questions. Trust is not simple. It is extremely complex.

So today I would like to explore with you the sense that we have of trust – what we think it looks and feels like. I would like to tease out what this means for the story we tell about our professions to the broader public. I hope that it will be clear that this goes to the heart of what it means to lead our professions, together. This story is built on the pillars of learning, doubt, courage and balance. It all comes together through choice and connections.

And the whole edifice rests in a precarious balance on the pinpoint of hope.

What does trust look and feel like?

If trust is so latent, and by and large things seem to chug along just fine, is it really that important? Yes! Firstly, you say it is, and you are the most important and trusted professions in society. Secondly, note what Maureen Gaffney had to say last November about trust (Gaffney, 2013) –

Trust is at the heart of a well-functioning democracy. It underpins the social contract that asks people to pay taxes, obey the law and consent to be governed because they trust their investment will build the common good that will benefit them.

If you recall that article in the Irish Times, it highlighted a number of commonly held misperceptions about the public service – yet the public trust us. So perhaps we have an understandable fear that while things may seem to be fine on the surface in terms of the public trust, that surface may be little more than a glass veneer which can be shattered all too easily.

The best way to reinforce trust is arguably to deepen understanding. Or put another way, understanding gives depth to trust. The Marquess of Halifax put it another way when he said (The Economist, 2013):

A prince who will not undergo the difficulty of understanding must undergo the danger of trusting.

In other words, to rely on an exhortation of “You must trust me” is risky at best and foolhardy at worst.

How might this translate into the language of today? In that same Irish Times article, Maureen Gaffney (2013) quoted Sam McClure who said the vitality of any democracy rests on “popular knowledge of complex issues”. I can scarcely think of two areas that are more complex, and more vital to us all, than human learning and human well-being. So here is a clearly articulated belief that people need to understand more about complex areas so that our democracy can survive and thrive.

The issue, however, appears to be that as each generation becomes more educated than the previous one, it comes to have higher expectations of professions such as ours. Popular knowledge seeks to know, and understand, more. This is a good thing.

The challenge, though, centres around language. This is indicative of why professional standards bodies such as the Teaching and Medical Councils are so important. How we as professionals talk about what we do to those who are not teachers or doctors or nurses is as important, if not more so, than how we talk with our colleagues. Professional standards bodies endeavour to enhance connections between professionals and those whom they serve so that they can negotiate a shared language around what they do. This is in our own professional interests - in talking and explaining, we enhance and nurture trust. To cite a quote I saw recently on twitter:

The words you speak become the house you live in. (Hafi)

In other words, through deliberate and measured shaping of the language we use about our professions, **we** can reinforce the glass surface ourselves, rather than wait for someone else to shatter it. For if **we** don't explain, if **we** are not prepared to "demystify" our professions, **others** will do so. And they may do so in a way that will have little, no or a very limited evidence base, and therefore will have a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of those whom we care for. So it is both a professional and public imperative that we enhance our connections with those whom we serve in order to safeguard trust for the future.

As professions, we can choose to see this increased interest on the part of the public as a professional insult and clear indication of a lack of trust; or we can see it as a great opportunity to connect and enhance trust. In many ways, it is

as simple as that – it is a matter of choice, and the choice is ours. What choice will we make to enhance trust?

Trust, it seems to me, is fundamentally a matter of choice and of hope. That choice is grounded for each one of us in the values that we hold dear. That hope is embedded in our human nature. We hope because of what we have learned and what we endeavour to learn every day – how to improve the human condition, mind and body.

So we have a sense that trust is the bedrock of all that we do, yet that same bedrock is like limestone – brittle and easily eroded; we know that people have higher expectations of us than their ancestors; they are therefore keen to enhance their connections and understanding of what we do; we can choose to respond and connect, and enhance understanding and trust. If we choose to connect, what do we tell parents and patients about our professions? What story can we tell?

Learning

I think that one of the most powerful and reassuring stories that any professional can tell those whom they serve is that of the reflective practitioner – that you care enough about what you do to think and talk about it, and improve it throughout your life. It runs counter to the view our ancestors would have had of the expert “master” in the local school who knew everything and imparted his / her wisdom to all. In the past, professionals were revered almost, at a remove. Today, as members of society, we now seek to know that in grappling with how we feel and think and are, we are not alone.

We seek to connect. We seek to know that those whom we trust to help us understand all these dynamics i.e. the professionals, are grappling with the exact same issues. We draw comfort and strength, reassurance and understanding from that. And therefore we tend to trust.

But even if you accept this premise, it can still be a tall order for professionals to really look at themselves, what we do, how we do it, and question it. Surely that self-doubting is corrosive of trust? Is it not better to exude an air of confidence and authority, and simply exhort others to trust you? No. We have seen the horrors that can ensue when excessive assertion of authority is not questioned or doubted, and how trust can be irretrievably destroyed in those cases. So paradoxically you must question and doubt yourself in order to get others to trust you.

Typically, we ridicule or laugh at the concept of talking to yourself. But this is the surest sign of all that you are a reflective practitioner. Remember Shirley Valentine, who maintained her sanity by literally talking to the wall! Plato described thinking as “the talking of the soul with itself.” Reflection is implicitly about doubt – you think about what you have done, and you re-examine it on the assumption that there may have been a different, even better, way to do it. Questioning the self actually reinforces the trust you place in yourself. It therefore can empower you to become better leaders for your profession.

It can, in fact, empower us to become better leaders for society as a whole. If we are to have any hope of avoiding a repetition of the mistakes that led to the crisis of the last 5 years, it appears to me that we have to be open to learning. We can never again assume that we have “cracked it”, that “we have it made”. If we are now saying that at the heart of a great teacher lies the heart of a

great learner, then I believe that teaching has the potential to blaze a trail for the country as a whole. We have the potential to show everyone how you can be the consummate professional by being open about your learning. This is counterintuitive, it will take time, but it can be done.

So, we know deep down that trust is complex. We can see that trust is reliant on learning and suspicion or doubt, as exemplified by the reflective practitioner. We know that for all its complexity, we must work to nurture trust so that we can lead our professions and maintain the confidence of the public – it is not an either / or situation. And paradoxically, we must doubt or suspect ourselves if we are to achieve that.

But can this notion of suspicion not be taken too far?

Suspicion / doubt

Clearly, it can. For all the importance we place on trust, we seem to trust some strange sources e.g. “magazines”.

Take the phrase you often hear over a cup of coffee – *I read it in a magazine somewhere* ... and twenty minutes later you’re engaged in a heated debate as to whether a glass of wine a day is good for you or not! So like the History teacher who taught their kids to trust nothing that they read, we endeavour to teach critically aware citizens for the future. So therefore we should not trust – and we’re back to square one in terms of confusion!

Because there **is** a risk of becoming **too** suspicious!

Take this statement:

*“Making such a change [Junior Cycle Reform] will be challenging and requires the **empowerment** of the teaching profession which,*

international evidence suggests, produces good results.” [my emphasis]

Who said this? Me? The Chairperson of the Teaching Council? A head of one of the teachers’ unions? None of the above. It was Tony O’Donohoe from IBEC, their education spokesperson, writing in the Irish Independent on 16 Jan 2014. I’m not suggesting that teachers should go out and hug a member of IBEC! But I am trying to make clear how misleading unchecked suspicion or bias might be.

Because if you took suspicion too far, you really would begin to question the reality of your own existence! As the physicist Freeman Dyson has asserted (Chopra and Flesher, 2013)

To summarize the situation, we have three mysteries that we do not understand: the unpredictable movements of atoms, the existence of our own consciousness, and the friendliness of the universe to life and mind. I am only saying that the three mysteries are probably connected. I do not claim to understand any of them.

If we can’t even rely on our own perceptions, our own consciousness, on the basic structure of the Universe; if we cannot be sure of how suspicious we should or should not be, what do we do? How do we choose to trust? Courage!

Courage

We know instinctively that connections and relationships are essential to the nurturing and growth of trust, and are essential to more modern understandings of effective leadership. In speaking of connections, I am thinking of those within our world of comfort, and also beyond. As Charles Duhigg says (2012), the loose connections that extend beyond our visible horizon are as essential as the close, tight connections we form more locally, if we are to lead and change the world for the better. American politics, for example, are arguably poisoned by the lack of loose connections or relationships beyond the immediately tribal.

This necessity to nurture loose connections requires courage – for it requires us to step outside our comfort zone and engage with those whom we normally would not. True, trust in those closest to you can encourage you to extend yourself beyond your comfort zone, to learn more. But equally, courage can be the only hope in situations where trust is all but lost – the courage to take the first step, the courage to bear the first blow, the courage to try again; the courage to hold fast to what you believe is right and true.

Take this piece from The Economist, reporting last December on the PISA results, as an example of the importance of remaining steadfast in the face of challenging forces (The Economist, 2013a):

New education stars can emerge and old ones fade fast. But the broader lesson may be simple, if brutal. Successful countries focus fiercely on the quality of teaching and eschew zigzag changes of direction or philosophy. Teachers and families share a determination to help the young succeed.

This need for well thought and researched policy, underpinned by consistent implementation and support, has been echoed by Prof. John Coolahan for some years now. And it is another reason why professional standards bodies are so important. We have through our professional bodies the chance to become the prevailing wind in the policy discourse, to help steady the ship when the PISA tornado arrives on our shores; to foster courage to do the right thing, and thereby enhance the trust of the public.

But we still come back to the concept of choice. We can be open about our learning, about our reflective practice, about our self-doubt; we can be courageous in pursuit of doing the right thing. But how can we convince people to choose to trust us in those inevitable situations where someone we trust makes a mistake, or worse, and lets us down?

Choice

Jamie Cullum, the singer, said that people letting you down is a universal truth. So why aren't we living in anarchy? Fundamentally, our society is at peace because people choose to trust. For all of its latent and assumed nature, somewhere, even at the subconscious level, people make a choice to trust others. And that is why the role of a body such as the Teaching Council or Medical Council is so important.

If people choose to trust, they can choose not to trust. And if there is not a robust system of quality assurance in place to maintain and nurture that trust, then one tragic incident can do irreparable damage to the standing of all members of the profession.

That is why, to answer at least one of my earlier questions, things cannot carry on the way they have, because since we are all human beings, someone, somewhere, will make a mistake. And the key to the future of our society's wellbeing rests on how we as professions deal with those mistakes.

Why? Because (a) our primary goal is to seek to improve, and constant pursuit of improvement is the very essence of our life-force; it is the narrative that unites us with our earliest ancestors and (b) because if we accept that human beings will always make mistakes, and therefore that we will never achieve a perfect state of existence, the real litmus test of our human nature can **only be** how each of us deals with the consequences of those mistakes.

At a human level, the implications of this for trust, leadership and the professions are potentially quite raw. At a human level, they essentially mean that we have to be ready to put the hands up when we have made a mistake. They mean that we must demonstrate a capacity to reflect on what went wrong, to identify what we might do differently in the future, and how we might make amends. People tend to be far more forgiving, and trusting, of situations where there is such a genuine and prompt reflection. They tend to be far more severe where they perceive a closed shop or a cover up.

Where this comes full circle with professional leadership is in the notion of our collective professional ethical identity. To admit that you got it wrong can be difficult at a human level, and potentially risky in a legal context. The only way we will get there is by leading each other, and the public, on that reflective journey. We will all, professional communities and the public, have to enhance our understanding of this new way of thinking if we are to make it a reality. We will all have to be prepared to put the hands up when we know we have got it wrong.

So to recap – trust is complex; essential concepts to support it are learning, doubt and courage – they’re the “what” of trust. The “how” of trust is about connections and choice – people can choose to trust, or not. They are very keen to connect and know more about what we do. And how we respond to that interest will in large part determine whether or not trust is maintained.

But as professionals, how do we make sense of, and manage, all these expectations of the public? We do what we have always done - we exercise professional judgement in those most challenging moments of uncertainty to maintain a precious balance.

Trust flows and rests on a delicate balance

If trust is essential, but will always be challenged by human nature, cynics may well argue that to trust at all is naive at best, and at worst downright stupid. The more optimistic of us will acknowledge that what this actually means is that ensuring trust is a matter of carefully nurturing a delicate, inexact and sometimes precarious balance.

This nurturing of a delicate and inexact balance highlights the essence of what it means to be a professional. As professionals, we all make judgements in the heat of a given moment, where there can be much uncertainty; and that judgement is not guesswork, but is informed by a deep knowledge base and supported by a high level of skill. So as we understand what it means to make an informed judgement in an uncertain moment, so we understand how to

nurture and support something as important and precious as the balance of trust.

Because trust depends on the most delicate of balances, it is best maintained by a lot of small, gentle gestures, rather than one big grandiose announcement. Imagine the difference between me going on Six One and loudly proclaiming “The people of Ireland can trust teachers” on the one hand; and teachers in every school in the country organising a celebration of students’ work just after Easter, inviting parents in and chatting to them over a cup of tea?

Which of these two gestures is more likely to nurture trust in teaching amongst the broad populace of parents?

When you remember how many people have an interest in what our professions do, it seems obvious that there is no exact formula that tells us what this balance should be at any given point in time for a given group of people.

This is not a bleak realisation, but an empowering one. This means that in any given moment, that call on trust should, and can, be made by professionals and the public, together. For this to be done in a way that we believe to be best, it requires a new kind of leadership by professionals along the lines of what we talked about at last year’s symposium. In summary, I spoke about how professionals needed to re-engage at a human level with themselves as people as well as professionals; to reflect on why they entered their chosen professions; to reflect deeply on what they were doing. As I said earlier, such an approach to our work tends to resonate very strongly and very positively with people.

We should not be afraid of the contingent nature of this balance of trust. Human nature being what it is, the earth being what it is, a rapidly expanding universe being what it is, to attempt to fix on a definitive answer to this web of relationships seems all but impossible.

But it is the pursuit of this balance that matters, not the exact definition of the balance itself. [Note the title of the programme which the teachers are studying – Tóraíocht – the Irish for pursuit!] For in pursuit, in movement, we come closest to the rhythms of the universe. What this means for the practical development of our respective professions, in layman's terms, is that we can never be satisfied with the status quo. We know instinctively that we can always do it better. Not better than those who went before us, nor those who have yet to come. We can do it better, together. And in that constant pursuit of improvement, to better ourselves, we can give the public ongoing reasons to trust us.

Conclusion

So where are we now? Am I concluding by saying that trust is really important, but that we can't be definitive about it, but not to worry, in some inspirational ethereal sense, it is the pursuit of trust that matters? *Well, you might say, that may be well and good, but it won't transact very well in the daily reality of accountability, of people demanding answers to what went wrong. Individual members of our professions have betrayed trust in the past, and human nature being what it is, they will do so again. What do we do?*

The best, indeed the only real, reassurance that we can offer the public is the reassurance of our collective professional ethical identity.

And that collective identity is fully bound up with all that I have said about trust. Yes, trust is a bedrock to that identity – we must trust each other as professionals to work together. And the public must trust us so that we can have the autonomy we need to do our job as best we can.

That trust is fragile, it can be put at risk by the mistakes of a few. The reason we should hope, however, and have confidence in the public's trust is that as professionals we learn, we ourselves doubt, we ourselves give each other courage to trust; we constantly strive to do things better, we thereby give ourselves further confidence. A key point to capture is that we can make more of this by reshaping the language we use when we talk to the public that we serve, so that they can understand better how much we learn and how much we question ourselves.

Where is the hope in all of this? Ultimately it all comes down to the individual's faith in humanity. If we believe that the vast majority of people set out not only to do no harm, but to empower others to do good, then we should all view breaches of that trust for what they are - aberrations, anomalies. So our faith in trust is fundamentally about our hope in human nature, in full knowledge of the frailties of that same nature. Such hope is not out of touch with our daily reality – it is rooted in that reality, but seeks to continue our journey of learning and improvement that we have done in fits and starts over the ages.

When all is said and done, this is easier said – than done! There are times when I doubt, when I am afraid, when I wonder if I am on the right track. But when I

tip that delicate balance back and forth, when I reflect on my own doubt and my own learning, and seek courage to pursue what I feel to be right, I stand back, take a good look, and find solace in this verse from Seamus Heaney (sourced on Twitter via @HeaneyDaily – 02/02/2014):

*It was a fortunate wind
That blew me here. I leave
Half ready to believe
That a crippled trust might walk
And the half true rhyme is love.*

For me, both personally and professionally, it was a fortunate wind that blew me to this post in the Teaching Council, and to this lecture today. I look forward to walking with you in this professional journey of mutual learning and enhanced trust.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

Director

Teaching Council

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