Exploring Trust Building Processes in the Face of Conflict

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ABSTRACT   This paper presents an investigation of the processes by which trust can be built in the face of interpersonal workplace conflict. Using grounded theory approach, we analysed the qualitative data collected from 45 team leaders and members in two organisations employing semi-structure interviews. Data analysis revealed the complex nature of the relationship between conflict and trust. While employees have various perceptions of values, shared values (team and personal values) were revealed to be critical in trust building when there is conflict. Additionally, participants agreed that a climate of honest and open communication as pivotal for building trust in the face of conflict. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: values, trust building, conflict, communication and grounded theory.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have established that as organisational structure becomes more team-based (Pelled 1996) the role of trust becomes more pertinent (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995). Research has also established that trust is an important antecedent for conflict such that the presence of trust is more likely to result in positive effects (Simons & Peterson 2000) and work relationships characterised by trust engender cooperation and reduce conflicts (Morgan & Hunt 1994). Additionally, we are aware that trust is fragile and takes time to build (Nooteboom & Six 2003), and any negative interaction can result in a dramatic reduction or complete disappearance of trust and even distrust (Malhotra & Murnighan 2002). Nevertheless, research that examines the process through which broken trust is repaired in the face of conflict is not forthcoming (Ayoko and Pekerti, 2008). Given the above concern, the present research investigates the relationship between conflict and trust. In particular, it examines the processes of repairing trust in the presence of conflict.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Trust as Antecedent to Conflict

Though trust is variously defined, in this research, trust is defined as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another" (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer 1998: 385). Given that trust is an emergent state, Kiffin-Petersen (2004) suggests that it can be influenced by team processes and outcomes. For example, trust is believed to reduce conflicts (Morgan & Hunt 1994) and consequently, scholars proposed that teams experiencing low trust will also report more relationship conflicts (Kiffin-Petersen 2004). This, in turn will divert energy from tasks thereby decreasing trust even further

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(Kiffin-Petersen 2004; Peterson & Behfar 2003). On the contrary, scholars have also found that trust enables conflict to be used more constructively such as exploring differences, promoting greater knowledge sharing and stimulate knowledge creation that leads to innovation (Lee & Choi 2003). Moreover, scholars propose that high trust teams will experience more helping behaviours that will even engender further trust (Kiffin-Petersen 2004).

Conflict as an Antecedent to Trust

We have earlier established that trust can be influenced by team processes such as conflicts and outcomes (Kiffin-Petersen 2004). We further noted that trust is fragile and takes time to build (Nooteboom & Six 2003) and according to Murnighan, Malhotra and Weber (2004), any negative interaction (e.g conflict) can result in a dramatic reduction or complete disappearance of trust. Thus, it is anticipated that intra-team conflict (especially destructive conflict) will most likely have a critical impact on trust. This is mainly because team members will make decisions about their willingness to be vulnerable towards other team members based on the perceived risks involved and the alternatives available to reduce those risks (Kiffin-Petersen 2004). In this sense, conflict can pose as a risk in reducing the trust perception.

Scholars have also acknowledged that the empirical evidence of the reverse link of conflict effects on trust has been understudied (Ayoko & Pekerti 2008; Rispens, Greer & Jehn 2007). More importantly, scholars have begun to recognise the importance of examining this reverse link of conflict and trust (Ronson & Peterson 2008). Nevertheless, few studies have attempted to examine these effects of conflict on trust (see Ayoko & Pekerti 2008; Korsgaard, Brodt & Whitener 2002). For example, Ayoko and Pekerti (2008) reported that relationship conflict; high levels of conflict intensity and destructive reactions to conflict inhibit trust, while task conflict and longer conflict duration among organisational members facilitate trust. Likewise, Korsgaard, Brodt and Whitener (2002) found that negative encounters such as conflicts and disagreements between manager and employees are not necessarily associated with low trust while Rispen and associates (2007) report that task and cognitive connectedness among team members are linked with the reduction of negative effects of trust. Although these quantitative studies provide interesting insights into the link between conflict and trust, yet, the empirical evidence of the processes through which conflict affects trust is still

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lacking. Given this, we extend work in this area by qualitatively examining how conflict serves as an antecedent of trust. We anticipate that this approach will lead to more in-depth understanding of the complex connection between conflict and trust.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This study is driven by three major objectives. Firstly, we seek to understand how team members build trust in the face of conflict. Secondly, because qualitative research on trust building and especially in the face of conflict is scarce, we aim to do so by employing grounded theory as our analytical strategy. Finally and more importantly, we seek to generate a theory explaining the process of building trust in the face of conflict.

Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded Theory (GT) uses qualitative research methods with the aim of generating theory which is grounded in the data, rather than testing existing theories (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990). In addition, GT is helpful for discovering complex interactional human processes (Hutchinson & Wilson 2001) such as trust and conflict. Specifically, it allows for the inclusion of the complexities of the issues under investigation without discarding, ignoring or assuming away relevant variables. Thus the richness of data is able to provide a holistic understanding to the phenomenon (Kan & Parry 2004).

Research Setting and Sample

The study was carried out in two organisations in Queensland, Australia. Organisation A was a small software company with about 12 employees while Organisation B was one of the leading telecommunication companies in the state with more than 6, 500 employees. Two teams from Organisation A participated in the study, while six teams from Organisation B participated in the study. One of the teams in Organisation A was involved in software development, while the team was involved in administration. However, the six teams in Organisation B were involved in more diverse roles including customer services, technical support, sales and marketing. The average tenure for the participants was 2.3 years while the average the tenure of the participants in Organisation B was 10.3 years. In addition, the participants in Organisation A were younger with the average age of 28.5 years old, while the average age of the participants in Organisation B was 41 years old. The average size of

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the participating teams from Organisations A and B was 6 members and details of the participants' demographics are presented in Tables 1-2. Altogether, 45 workgroup leaders and members participated in this research.

Data Analysis

The 45 semi-structure interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions of the interviews were entered into NVivo 8.0 software to assist with analysis. Specifically, NVivo was used to store, categorise transcripts and memos, code and conduct searches related to analysis. NVivo is a computer software package designed by Qualitative Research and Solutions (QSR) (QSR International Ptd Ltd 2006). The analysis underwent several iterations over a period of a year. The final analysis was carried out intensively over 5 months. The iterative analysis process underwent the stages of open coding, axial coding and theoretical coding until the categories were saturated (Glaser 1978; Kan & Parry 2004). Specifically, the relationships between categories towards theoretical coding were facilitated by the "Six Cs" (causes, consequences, conditions, context, contingency, and covariance) (Glaser 1978). Theoretical coding using the Six Cs allows the researchers to ask a number of questions of the data and categories to help clarify the relationships with one another (Kan & Parry 2004). Memos were written concurrently throughout the process of analysis to enhance the theoretical sensitivity by facilitating the theory building process through higher level of abstraction. The coding map, which aims to provide a larger, consolidated picture that, emerged from iterative process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation from the mass data (Anfara, Brown & Mangione 2002; Marshall & Rossman 1999), is detailed in Figure 1. The next section discusses the results.

FINDINGS

Conflict Effects on Trust are Complex

The relationship and the effects of conflict on trust were found to be complex. Four outcomes of conflict effects on trust were identified: 1) Conflict though inevitable, do not affect trust, 2) the effects of conflict on trust are dependent on values in conflict, conflict management employed, level of conflict, and the type of conflict, 3) Conflict will diminish or reduce trust, and 4) Conflict enhances trust because conflict provides an opportunity to express views. Majority of the participants stated that

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the effects of conflict on trust were not a simple one, for example 08-B2 stated, "*No jumping to that conclusion is that trust is necessarily impacted if you're in conflict. It depends on how you define conflict. Disagreement can be, I don't necessarily see the link between disagreement and trust. You've just got a disagreement on an issue. You might think it's white and I might think it's black doesn't mean to say that we distrust each other*".

Further analysis revealed that the effects of conflict on trust were dependent on conflict management. For example, if the team environment provided for open discussion, conflict would pose as opportunities to express one's own views without any retribution or judgement on the outcome of the differences in views. However, participants also stated that the effects on trust perception were also dependent on the type of conflict. Specifically, task related disagreements were deemed as healthy conflict because these conflicts were perceived as discussions, and therefore has the potential to enhance trust perception. However, conflicts that were related to personality, gender and religion were completely unhealthy. In particular, participants in this category identified relationship or personal conflict as potentially capable of provoking negative and harmful effects on trust at the workplace. Overall, the relationship between trust and conflict is complex and what happens to trust in the face of conflict may be dependent on issues such as work climate, type of conflict and conflict management strategies employed. This was clearly articulated by 17-B3 "*So, in an environment we got really high level of trust, it doesn't necessary mean that everyone gets on like best friends…ah…they could be…but if you trust the people around you…. ah…they're willing to accept that you might have a different view and that you know, those views can be debated… when you have conflict or different points of view, I think, it is healthy actually to have robust discussion about issues and sometimes, there can be conflict but not…hopefully not in the personal nasty way*" (see Table 3 for related representative quotes).

Values Influence Trust and Conflict

First, data analysis revealed that values are conceptualised and perceived variously. For example, participants clearly differentiated the value concepts as personal values, work value, shared values or team values, and organisational values. To make matters worse, these different values have different value content, and originate from various sources, yet they operate simultaneously at the

workplace. For example, majority of the participants identified values as daily rules and principles. The values identified are oriented towards three major areas; toward personal life, towards others, and towards work. Value types that were oriented towards personal life are honesty, integrity and respect being the three major values quoted, while values oriented towards others were trust, treat others the way you want to be treated. Similarly, values types that were oriented towards work included working hard, achievement, diligence, dedication, and getting the work done.

In addition, all the work teams identified work values as values that are oriented towards individual character, towards organisation, towards team and towards work. Again, consistent with earlier findings, honesty and integrity were the most prominent work values. The participants also perceived work values as values oriented towards the organisation, which included focusing on their jobs, doing their best, putting customer first and preserving company interest. This orientation and belief towards work values were consistent with the way participants defined and understand work values; ethics and rules at work. Consistent with personal values, participants also identified working hard and being diligent as two important work values oriented towards the work, while having trust, being a team player and being loyal as top work values that were oriented towards the team. Therefore, participants articulated that work values were extension and expression of their personal values. Nevertheless, participants expressed that they experienced two-faced values when their personal values interfered with work issues. They also experienced challenges and felt like 'chameleons'. For example, 42-A2 expressed "*I have faced it more in the factor of letting personal values get in to work, …It's almost like when you go to work you adorn a different mask. It's sort of like a dulled down version of what you really are, do you know what I mean, it's sort of like your personality is not as much as what you are when you're outside of work and with other people, your loved ones and all that type of thing, so that all changes, so I think when you come to work it is sort of instilled in you that you almost are like a different person when you're at work from when you are outside of work.*"

It was interesting that all work teams members shared values in their teams. However, the conceptualisation of shared values or team values was again variously defined. A majority of respondents defined shared values as shared belief system and goals in a team, while others defined shared values as team expectation of behaviours. In addition, some participants also defined shared

values as being similar to their own core values. Overall, participants articulated that shared values originated from the personal values, but noted that recruitment and team interaction were the next two important sources in establishing shared or team values. Finally, participants indicated that organisational culture and values were also pivotal in the formation of shared values.

Though participants identified organisational values as pivotal, a majority of participants perceived organisational value as work code of conduct, while others perceived organisational values as principles and guidelines at work. Besides, participants saw organisational values as mere posters on the wall and mission statement or as mere projections from top management. Furthermore, participants also articulated that organisational values were organisational wishes and merely a political showcase as described by 03-B3: "*Organisational values mean nothing to me, absolutely nothing. I find it quite disrespectful that an organisation would actually tell you what the values should be because you either employ me with a set of values or you don't employ me*" Clearly, the various understanding and perceptions of the different value components, which operated simultaneously at the workplace, appear to complicate the effects of conflict on trust.

Additionally, data analysis indicated that the various 'make-up' of values has different effects on trust. For example, participants revealed that fundamental trust and shared values led to productive conflict because shared values helped to eliminate doubt and questioning among the team members about one another's motives in the tasks carried out. In addition, specific values were found to be related to trust. For instance, values such as honesty would potentially build trust while value of dishonesty would negatively affect trust. Participants are of the opinion that where trust itself is a value, it would determine the conflict behaviours and approach while the mismatch of values and trust will lead to conflict.

Another finding is that similar values made it easier to trust because similarity in values facilitated greater opportunities to build rapport that would help develop the relationship. On the other hand, differences in values may mean that longer time is needed to build trust. These findings imply that there is an interactivity among values, conflict and trust. Other related representative quotes are in Tables 4 and 5.

Communication is Pivotal for Trust Building

Participants shed some lights into the process of managing the effects of conflict on trust by identifying communication as the key to facilitate trust process. Additionally, participants isolated numerous communication types (e.g. open and honest communication) as a key tool in building trust. Especially, participants defined communication that will facilitate trust as one that is clear, honest and open where information is shared openly and honestly. Informants also explained that open communication will facilitate productive effects of conflict on trust because communication keeps conflict as task conflict (not relationship/ emotional conflict), where discussions are facilitated. Furthermore, participants also expressed that disclosure of personal information enhanced trust building processes, which was clearly quoted by 39-A2 quoted "*And if you're just always talking about work related issues, it's not really. You're not really opening the person up to what you believe in, your values. So, yes, you know…. personal communication, just talking about things, money, common interest, that sort of thing just helps tune individuals to relate better to each. The more you relate to each other, the more you can trust each other.*"

In addition, the participants also identified that psychologically supportive communication as another form of communication that would facilitate the trust building process. For example participants expressed that if there was no fear of retribution or attack by disclosing personal information and providing unconditional selfless communication; trust would be built rather rapidly. Interestingly, some participants also identified regular face-to-face communication as another form of communication that would help build trust. Participants remarked emails were not personal enough but that face-to-face communication promotes the ability to read body language during interactions which, in turn, should assist in building trust easily.

Some participants also identified well-mannered professional communication as another crucial element for trust building process. Specifically, participants expressed that communication at work should be kept formalised, work-related and professional, where every form of communication should be carried out with respect for one another. Finally, participants identified communication through actions would assist in trust building process. Specifically, trust takes time to build; hence it would be positively facilitated if the actions of communicator substantiated his/ her verbal communication. In addition, such interactions over time would thus ease trust building process. This was clearly

articulated by 17-B3: "*Trust is like a bank account. You keep on making deposit in it. You say, you know, you say something and you follow it up with your actions. Ah…every interaction you have with someone builds or diminishes trust. So, it is not something that you can expect straight away at the beginning of a relationship. Some people, are able to…ah… ingenerate high level of trust in their first interaction but most of the time you actually build it up over time through your actions, through your words*" (See Table 6 for more related representative quotes).

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The grounded theory approach has shed some lights into this 'black box phenomenon' of the relationship between conflict and trust. Our finding that numerous factors such as the level of conflict, the type of conflict and conflict management may be critical in explaining the effects of conflict on trust is an interesting finding. Although recent work by Ayoko and Pekerti (2008) has uncovered some findings on how conflict intensity is connected with trust perception, what we do not know is the process by which conflict intensity is connected with trust. The finding from this study disentangles this riddle.

In addition, this study revealed that there are many facets of values at the workplace and more than one facet may be used simultaneously. This is consistent with Elizur and Sagie's (1999) work, which found that values are multifaceted and are various defined. They also found that there is an overlap among the various facets of values (e.g. personal and work) and they are largely dependent on the context and environment. Our finding reiterate their work and further extend literature as we found that the value content and the perception of each value facet or component affect how conflict and trust building processes.

One of the most interesting revelations in the current study is the insight we have to the participants' understanding of organisational values. For example, respondents perceive organisational values as merely posters on the wall, projections from top management and political showcase. This is an important finding and indicates that managers need to work very hard to market organisational values to their internal stakeholders while using the organisational or team values to motivate them to increase their loyalty and productivity at work. The present findings also imply that managers and

organisations should focus on understanding and integrating the different facets of values into organisational values. This will improve value management in organisations (Paarlberg & Perry 2007).

Our findings on open and honest communication as pivotal for trust are consistent with prior findings in this area. For example, researchers (Garman, Fitz & Fraser 2006; Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999; Jo & Shim 2005; Willemyns, Gallois & Callan 2003) have long established that communication is important for trust building. More specifically, Ayoko and Pekerti (2008) identified open communication as the key feature towards trust building. Furthermore, literature suggests that open communication is associated with a variety of team outcomes such as innovation (Lovelace, Shapiro & Weingart 2001), decision participation (Trombetta & Rogers 1988) and motivation (Kay & Christophel 1995). Our findings are not only consistent with those from extant literature but they further revealed other types of communication such as professional, face-to face communication and the need for verbal communication to be consistently aligned with behaviours and actions in order to build trust. This has many implications for managers. Managers and team leaders who will like to facilitate trust in the face of conflict will need to be able to promote open, honest, professional and face-to-face communication in their organisations and teams.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study is not without any limitation. Though we found several links and relationships among the constructs, we are unable to quantitatively test these relationships. Future research should continue to tease out the relationship between conflict and trust using triangulation research approach. However, the findings in this study clearly have significant contributions towards theory, method and practice. Our study is one of the first qualitative studies that have employed grounded theory approach in understanding conflict effects on trust. By using this approach, the complexity in the relationship between trust and conflict is indicated. Outcomes of the present research suggest that trust and conflict should be studied holistically rather than in compartments. Our study has therefore paved the way for more complex theoretical thinking to elucidate the link between trust and conflict in the workplace.

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APPENDIX
Figure 1:
Coding Map: Hierarchy of Abstraction Model and Findings
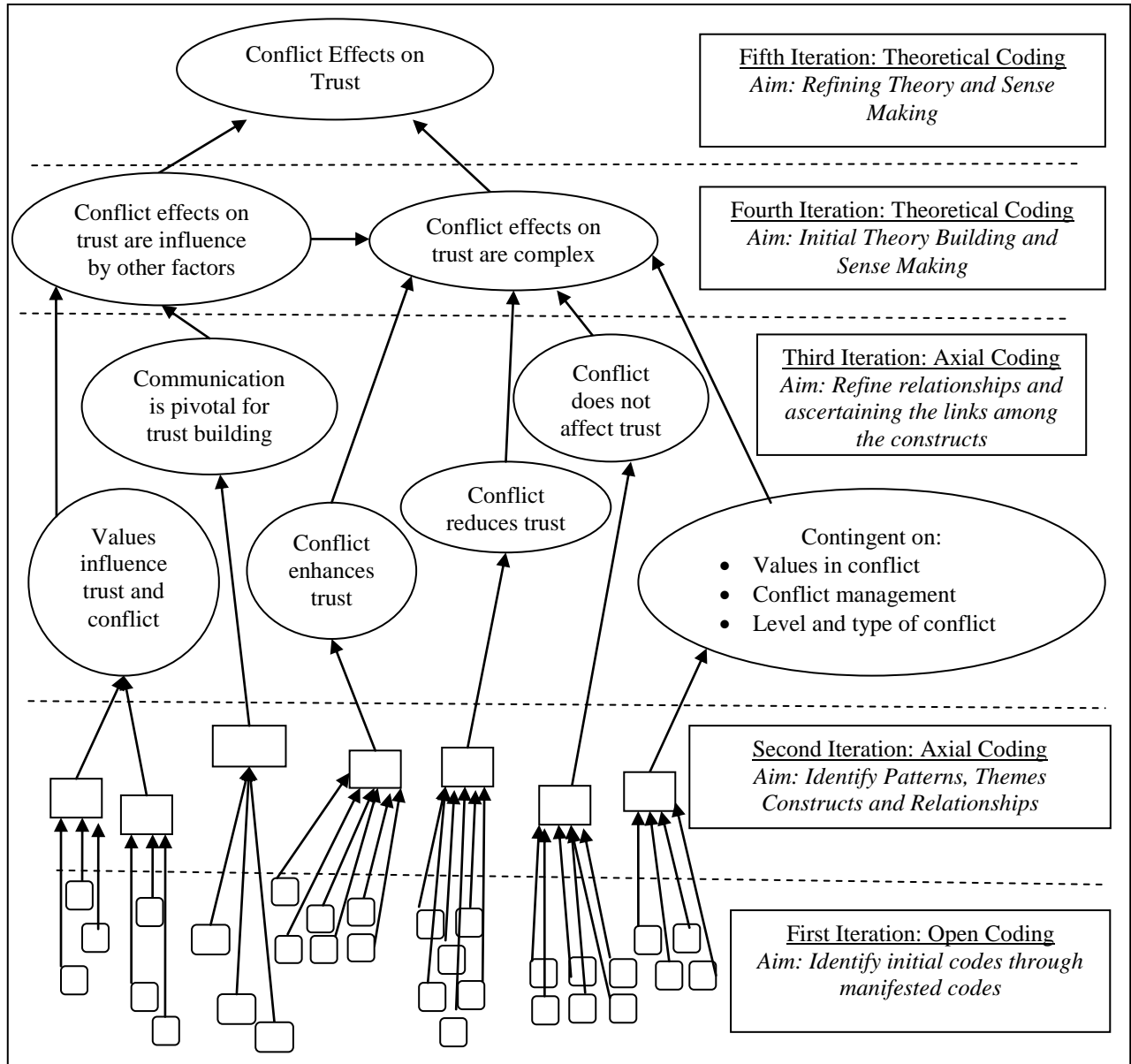
* The number of boxes does not represent the actual number of codes in the data.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

| Age | Organisation A | | | | | | Organisation B | | | | | | |
| | Gender | | | Ethnicity/country of origin | | | Gender | | | Ethnicity/country of origin | | | |
	Male	Female	Total	Australian	Indian	Total	Male	Female	Total	Australian	Indian	Filipino	Total
20-30	6	1	7	5	2	7	2	3	5	5	0	0	5
31-40	3	1	4	4	0	4	4	5	9	7	1	1	9
41-50	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	3	15	14	1	0	15
Over 50	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	4	4	0	0	4
Total	9	2	11	9	2	11	21	12	33	30	2	1	33

Table 2: Work Team Roles

Organisation	Team ID	Number of Team Members	Team Roles/ Work Descriptions
A	A1	4	Administration
	A2	7	Software development
B	B1	7	Relationship management
	B2	5	Sales
	B3	6	Sales
	B4	5	Sales
	B5	5	Technical Support
	B6	5	Technical Support
	GM	1	General Manager

Table 3: Conflict Effects on Trust

Conflict Effects on Trust	Representative Quotations
Conflicts are inevitable, do not affect trust	**02-B1**: *If I had different opinion, that is just it, they have a different opinion, I don't think there is any negative to that. I think it is a good thing*
Contingent on values in conflict, conflict management, levels and type of conflict	**11-B1**: *It depends on how that conflict is managed I suppose between the two people or the environment if the conflict is about a task or about an activity or a way of doing something then that can be quite a healthy conflict. If the conflict is about you or the other person and the way they do something and is more based on personality or gender or religion or something like that then they're completely unhealthy conflicts*
Conflict reduces trust	**07-B1**: *Trust can go down, can be built back over the period of time but initially it is a big hit. Downwards.*
Conflict enhances trust	**02-B1:** *I supposed conflict, it is, it gives you the opportunity to express openly your views. And if I can express them to one of my colleagues and they can express them back to me, their own views, we may not agree but we have a relationship or a team environment which allows us to do then, that builds trust because we know that we won't, there won't be any sort of retribution and outcome of expressing different views to each other*

Table 4: Value Perceptions and Value Type

Values Type	Representative Quotations
Personal Values	02-B1: *What are my core values? Personally? I suppose my core values related to. I find it difficult to tell you what they are. But I suppose they relate to fairness, efficacy, about treating people of how they should be treated as you would be treated in their position. Ahmm, I suppose it is shivering, is sort of things, I value highly family ...*
Work Values	11-B1: *Yes there are a set of work values but we're given, we're told about we're that are promoted within the organisation and I think they are reasonably self evident. They certainly don't contradict with my own. No they don't contradict.*
Organisational values	07-B1: *It is where the company or the organization want to be seen as politics to external people or basically it's customers, who they are making money from, to be honest. We want to be seen as an environmentally friendly conscious and most trustworthy company, you know.*

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Table 5: Values, Conflict and Trust Link

Values, Conflict and Trust Link	Representative Quotations
Trust is a value	**10-B1:** *Hmm, trust in one of the values that I, that we share or we suppose to share.*
Specific values relates to trust	**39-A2:** *Honestly, loyalty, erm… If you are dishonest and disloyal it can severely affect trust and if you are honest and you are loyal, you know, you can really help to build trust.*
Shared values enhance trust process and lead to higher trust	**06-B2:** *I think that because we all share those values then the trust level is higher because of that and we don't necessarily question ourselves or others motives in terms of how things are being done.*
Similar values makes trust easier	**02-B1:** *I supposed that if you find people with the similar set of values, then you have a greater opportunity to build rapport that develops the relationship. So if I can talk to somebody and feel trust in that conversation, so it will develop from there.*
Value diversity leads to conflict, jeopardize trust	22-B5: *If you don't have the same values…it could cause conflict …therefore, no trust..*
Specific values lead to conflict, subsequently determine trust level	28-B6: *Ok..well, again, if you have a conflict concerning your values and somebody else's, depending on how it goes…I mean, as I said if both parties being honest, both parties discussing in a straight forward manner and neither side is getting upset for no reason or blowing out of proportion, then, there still be a trust there... it all depends on personal reaction. How much you are drawn how much somebody want to throw into something?*

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Table 6: Forms of Communication That Facilitate Trust

Communication Facilitates Trust	Representative Quotations
Consistent face to face	07-B1: *Face to face. Personal meeting, email, not personal enough. I make it a point of my customers, my interactions with the business, with the team members, of being face to face. I would go up three floors and see them, rather than sending them an email because I believe it shows the interests that you can give across to make sure that they are interested, they can see whether it is important from your own personal things. And yea, which then builds the level of networking and trust, which in future, may not start that way from the first interaction but you build it up over time. Personally is the best way to go.*
Open and honest communication	02-B1: *Open, open communication, ahm, I mean to me really, it is trust is built by people who talk openly about things. And also who act in the way I would like to be treated. Treat me in the way I would like to be treated etc. And people whose word is their bond, you know*
Well-mannered professional communication	35-A1: *Communication within an organization has to be communication with professional nature. It has to be a certain way of...it can't be a personal way of upfront to anybody. As long as you are of the field of offering people respect then anything they should got to trust including criticism, if they have not done the job well. And you can sit in front of them and say that they have not done their job well so that also develops trust because it is just straight forward response of what that has just been confronted.*
Psychological supportive communication	18-B2: *Open, respectful, good measures of listening and discussion. The ability of having one on one discussion without there being animosity or you know negative worry and things like that about how they're going to, like they're going to jump down your throat and things like that. Yeah.*

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