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Building trust relationships in the context of parliamentary committee work

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Whether people trust a message is not so much about the content of the message, but about who is delivering the message. With so many competing sources of information, citizens make a decision about which source to believe based on their degree of trust in who is delivering it. There are a number of psychological and sociological mechanisms influencing trust; these will be discussed in the context of parliamentary committee work. If committee work is to be valued, the public and key stakeholders must trust the process. This is difficult when committee members are members of parliament, who are among the least trusted information sources. I contend that committee staff are key players in building trust relationships – with their committees, stakeholders and, indirectly, with the public.

IN the current climate, in which trust in government and parliamentarians is abysmally low, it seems that committees still enjoy a relatively high degree of credibility and respect. While parliamentary committees may not be quite as revered as Royal Commissions, they are nevertheless often described as "powerful" and "influential". Inquiry stakeholders eagerly anticipate report findings and recommendations and the media will often seize upon them to fill their news bulletins and webpages.

Parliamentary committees are a valuable way for Members of Parliament to connect with the public. They provide an opportunity for the public to become directly involved in important issues, with some expectation that their contribution might lead to legislative or policy changes. But committees, being comprised of politicians – one of the least trusted professions – need to work hard to ensure their work is valued. Citizens and stakeholders have to trust in the process. Central to building this trust are the committee staff. Behind the scenes, they endeavour to ensure that a committee functions effectively and that the public (and the parliament to whom it reports) sees the members as united. (Of course, this sometimes comes unstuck, despite best efforts.) An effective and united committee hinges on a number of critical trust relationships:

- The relationship between the committee secretary/clerk/principal research officer and the committee chair
- The relationship between the committee secretary/secretariat and the other committee members
- The relationship between the chair and the committee members
- The relationship between the secretariat and the stakeholders

All of these converge to create a level of confidence in the committee that determines whether, ultimately, messages from the committee are trusted.

This paper will explore these relationships – in particular the first, which I believe can be the most tricky to manage and also the most critical to get right. I will do so with reference to social theories of trust, psychological aspects of trust, and the personal experiences of committee staff.

Social theories

The most commonly cited aphorism about trust is that it takes years to build, seconds to break and forever to repair. This is true, but trust has many layers of complexity and sociologists have been endeavouring to define and understand it as a social mechanism for some decades.

Misztal (1996), in her comprehensive exploration of trust in modern society, says that "to trust is to believe that the results of somebody's intended action will be appropriate from our point of view" (p9). An "intended action" is not just a person's intention to carry out an action but their ability (technical, emotional) to perform the action. Further, to trust is to believe despite uncertainty. In an increasingly uncertain world, trust becomes an even more significant player. Most individuals do not have the capacity or opportunity to attain a level of knowledge that would enable them to assess the value or the risk of a scientific development or medical procedure, for example. The same is true of other complex matters such as superannuation and taxation. German sociologist and systems theorist Niklas Luhmann (1988) argues that systems need to reduce complexity in order to function properly and that trust is a way to do this. Individuals base decisions to place trust in an individual or system on experience (history of past trust) as well as anticipated risks. Risk is a critical element: without it, there is confidence or expectation, rather than trust. Risk is present because we are unable to completely monitor another's behaviour or know their motivations (Luhmann 2005).

When we trust a doctor to perform a medical procedure, we have made a decision based not on our intimate knowledge of medicine and the human body (because we are not thus qualified), but on the belief that the doctor has the required expertise (which may be influenced by a range of factors, such as where the doctor trained and length of time in practice), our previous experiences with the medical profession, family and friends' experiences, the experience of strangers on a trusted online medical advice page or chat group, the belief that the doctor is motivated to succeed, and the belief that the risk of trusting these aspects outweighs the risk of not trusting them and not going ahead with the procedure.

It is a feature of contemporary society that we do not take at face value everything we are told. While our parents' generation may have accepted without question what they were told by a professional (such as a doctor or lawyer), the current generation is much more sceptical. Hence, we look for trusted sources. In the world of medical science, people might choose to trust someone like prolific UK broadcaster Michael Mosley. In politics, trusted messengers are not likely to be politicians. They might be political journalists, commentators or academics. But they may not remain trusted sources forever. Poortinga and Pidgeon (2004) suggest that people constantly re-evaluate and change their trust judgements. Because doing this continuously means it cannot be done comprehensively, they tend to do so intuitively – on the basis of perceived similarity (people with similar social identities). This explains why politicians are not likely to be trusted messengers, since they are often perceived to be out of touch with the public or motivated by different goals.

This is where committees, as (at least theoretically) non-partisan entities, have an advantage over individual politicians and political parties. If, as Luhmann (1988) and Putnam (1993) and others contend, building trust at the micro level contributes to trust at the macro level, the interpersonal relationships within committees outlined above will help build the trust in parliamentary committees as a political institution (and even in politicians). To continue the doctor analogy, positive experiences with your local doctor eventually increase your confidence in the medical system as a whole (Misztal, 1996).

Sociologists have endeavoured to understand the distinction between trust at the micro (psychological, interpersonal) and macro levels (societal, institutional). Luhmann (1979) and Barber (1983) concluded that trust cannot be studied exclusively as psychological/interpersonal or as institutional, because it permeates both. Bearing this in mind, we need to take a closer look at interpersonal trust so that we can understand how it affects how committees operate at the micro level and the influence this has at the macro level.

Interpersonal trust

One of the bases of trust identified in psychological models that is particularly relevant to committee work (and to many business relationships) is knowledge-based trust. According to Lewicki *et al.* (2006), this type of trust is "grounded in the ability to know and understand the other well enough to predict his or her behaviour", even if the other is "predictably unpredictable" at times (p1007). The pathway to knowledge-based trust includes regular communication; learning about the other's reputation, reliability, and integrity; understanding what the other wants and prefers; and understanding how the other thinks and responds.

How does this operate in practice? How do people successfully build trust and/or eliminate mistrust? In looking at interpersonal trust as "a central characteristic of relationships that promotes effective knowledge creation and sharing in networks" Abrams *et al*. (2003:65) identified actions and behaviours they regard as "trust builders". From more than 40 interviews across 20 organisations, they learnt that those who were seen as trustworthy sources of knowledge tended to:

1. act with discretion – not keeping information confidential when asked to do so violates trust and may result in people withholding relevant information; people also need to feel secure sharing sensitive information or information that may expose their own ignorance;
2. be consistent between word and deed – do not say one thing and do another; deliver on commitments (helped by setting realistic expectations and not over-committing to things you cannot deliver);
3. ensure frequent and rich communication – this increases the opportunities to assess another's abilities, intentions and behaviour and to develop a shared vision and language;
4. engage in collaborative communication – this is an inquiring style of communication where all parties can contribute to exploring and resolving problems (e.g. a committee brainstorming terms of reference for an inquiry with the staff); people are more likely to trust others who allow this to occur;
5. ensure that decisions are fair and transparent – outcomes may favour one person/party/action over another, but ensuring they were arrived at by following an agreed process and in a transparent way reduces suspicion/increases trust.

Organisations could promote interpersonal trust by:[1]

6. establishing and ensuring shared vision and language – initiate projects in a way that establishes a commonly held vision of the group's objectives;
7. holding people accountable for trust – measure and reward trustworthy behaviour;

Trust was stronger if the two parties were able to:

8. create personal connections – finding things in common (university education, holiday destination, age of children) can make other people seem more real and approachable;
9. give away something of value – for example, knowledge or personal networks; while this is more applicable to relationships between committee staff, it may also be applicable to relationships with the chair; a chair's willingness to divulge a source or contact may be an indication of a high degree of trust.

An individual's awareness of their own abilities was also a trust-promoting behaviour, characterised as:

10. disclose your expertise and limitations – delineating the limits of knowledge adds credibility to the topics in which expertise is claimed; if you do not know something, say so rather than providing misguided advice.

These 10 trust builders promoted either one or both of two dimensions of trust: competence-based trust (having the relevant expertise and being depended upon to know what you are talking about); and benevolence-based trust (that you have the person's best interests at heart and will act in good faith). While these trust builders were developed in the context of manager-employee and co-worker relationships in business organisations, there is much that is applicable to the committee relationships outlined above.

[1] These two organisational dimensions are only peripherally applicable to committee relationships, although number 6 is being embedded as part of WA's approach to LA committee inquiries.

Interpersonal trust as a feature of committee work and relationships

Fellow principal research officers[2] (PROs) independently identified many of the trust builders listed above in conversations about the (sometimes precarious) relationships they have had with chairs and committee members.

The chair and the principal research officer

All PROs talked about the importance of understanding the chair's preferences in terms of communication (frequency, method and style), being consistent and dependable, and being seen to be non-partisan and fair in dealings with all members. Some mentioned the value of creating a personal connection, and being candid about the limitations to what you can achieve.

There are other actions and behaviours that contribute to trust in the secretariat's competence that were not identified in the Abrams *et al.* (2003) study, such as being shown to have provided the correct advice, and providing thoughtful and relevant briefing notes. PROs also mentioned the way the trust relationship developed over time, roughly in line with Lewicki and Bunker's (1995, 1996, cited in Lewicki *et al.,* 2006) characterisation of transformational trust; and how the personality, gender and political experience of the chair might impact the relationship with the PRO. Having a can-do attitude and seeing the relationship as one in which you serve the chair were also mentioned.

Let's look at these aspects in more detail with direct reference to committee activities. It is fair to assume that at the start of a parliamentary term, after committees have been formed and staff appointed, the chair and PRO have a low trust/low distrust relationship. This is simply because they do not have enough information about one another to know how the other will behave. However, each party may have a little information, which may shape their attitude at the outset. If the chair has been on a committee previously (even if not as chair), the staff of that committee will no doubt pass on their experiences. Even the behaviour of the chair in the house (firebrand or diplomat) may be an indication of what to expect. The brand new parliamentarian is the big unknown. This can be good or bad; they may be very receptive to guidance, given their inexperience, or they may be ambitious and keen to make their mark through committee work, with little knowledge of what can (and cannot) be achieved. It would be naïve to think that chairs do not also compare notes on staff, which is where a good word from a previous chair/member to a current chair can be a valuable leg up on the journey to trust. As one PRO noted, it pays to treat all MPs well when the opportunity arises because you never know who your next chair may be.

The first committee meeting is the first opportunity to begin building trust based on personal experience. Simple things, such as whether the minutes meet the chair's approval, build to something more significant. The PRO will need to establish how the chair likes to communicate (which may take a few weeks to consolidate) and, importantly, what level of advice to provide and how to provide it. PROs who regard the chair as the boss, or perhaps as the client – particularly in the early days – are more likely to elicit cooperation. They should act with authority but avoid being dictatorial – hence, a suggestion for action, with perhaps several alternative actions if appropriate, may be received more warmly than a direction. There is a good chance that the way advice was provided and received by a previous chair will be different from what the current chair prefers.

A briefing paper that proves to be useful in a hearing (perhaps unearthing something that the witness would not expect the committee to know) can do wonders for building trust in the secretariat's competence (i.e. they can be depended on to know what they are talking about). Letters that are approved with few or no changes are also an indication that the staff understand the chair's wishes. But the first substantial test is the chair's draft of an inquiry report, which the secretariat prepares. How accurately the PRO has interpreted the stance that the committee (and in particular the chair) wishes to take will be determined by the chair's feedback. What the PRO does with this feedback is critical. Just as the customer is always right, the chair, also, is always right – at least until the adoption meeting, when the other committee members may mount a challenge. The

[2] This is the term used in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly Committee Office for what other committee offices might term the committee clerk, secretary or advisory officer.

chair must be able to trust the PRO to make the changes. If the chair suggests something inaccurate with the potential to reflect badly on the committee, the PRO must provide the evidence that demonstrates this in a tactful manner. The construction of an inquiry report is often a delicate balancing act; it must convey the voice and position of the committee (and whatever political agenda may be in play) as well as be accepted as an accurate reflection of the issues. This will ensure it is a document that the committee is happy to own, but that also has credibility within parliament and with the inquiry stakeholders.

In report content negotiations, absence of ego is also helpful. That the chair criticises their work and fails to acknowledge their efforts should not bother a PRO unduly. It is, after all, the committee members' report. They present it, they speak to it, they defend it. They are the public face of the committee.

Everything discussed thus far, apart from whether the chair is a first-timer or more experienced, is within the PRO's power to shape or control: quality of advice, well-crafted briefing papers and reports, consistent and polite communication. But certain things are beyond a PRO's control. A chair will almost certainly be carrying political and/or personal baggage. It is helpful to try to identify, acknowledge and understand what this is. The chair may have been overlooked for a cabinet post and chairing a committee is viewed as a consolation prize. He or she may be going through a divorce, or may suffer from migraines, or be having a hard time in their electorate or in the media. A brusque manner with the staff may be attributable to these factors, rather than to anything staff members have done.

The personality of a chair is most certainly outside the secretariat's control but there are ways to manage it. Engagement with a chair who appears distant (or even prickly) can be enhanced by getting to know who they are as a person. Reading their inaugural speech to parliament is a good start, and taking note of the issues which fire them up in (and out of) parliament. Creating personal connections (trust builder no. 8 above) might mean noting which football team they barrack for and congratulating them on their team's win; or also getting to know their favourite TV shows so you can have a conservation about them. Laughing at their jokes (except in hearings or if denigrating another member) can also work wonders. Knowing their history with other members and staff can also be useful. One PRO suspected that seeking advice on a committee matter from a more senior colleague had not been well received because the chair did not particularly like that member of staff.

Issues of gender could form an interesting paper in its own right, if thoroughly explored. What works best? Does a male chair prefer a male PRO? My sense is that there is no blanket rule; it depends on the views of the individual chair. For some chairs, the gender of the PRO may be neither here nor there, but some preferences have been noted. It was felt that one female chair was much more receptive to female than male staff members. And problems experienced by a male chair/female PRO team seemed to improve when a male took over the PRO role. In one case, a young female PRO assisted by a young female research officer was anticipating difficulties working with a mostly older all-male committee. But in fact, she sees as it as working to her advantage because the members are protective of them in the way they would be protective of their own daughters, and respect them in the way they would respect the main female role model in their lives – their mothers. It will be difficult to build trust between a chair and PRO if one or the other feels that they are being judged unfairly because of their gender.

Other committee members and the principal research officer

The fact that the PRO has to have a close working relationship with the chair can lead to feelings of mistrust from other committee members if not handled carefully. PROs need to make it clear from the outset that they are there to serve all members, but that they will, often for administrative and procedural reasons, need to liaise more closely with the chair. New parliamentarians may not understand this as fully as others, and if they are a minority member the secretariat may need to work harder to ensure that they are not seen to be permanently aligned to the chair. Greeting members in the same fashion and having casual conversations with all members is important. Distance is also important. One PRO reminded me of sage advice from a past clerk to "be friendly with all and friends with none".

Many of the aspects of developing a trusting relationship with the chair also apply to the relationships with other members. Reading their inaugural speeches and looking up some key speeches in Hansard can provide valuable insight into what inspires or annoys them. At the very least, it can help staff avoid getting a member offside by raising a divisive or sensitive issue.

Acting with discretion – trust builder no. 1 – is particularly important so that members feel confident to raise issues with the secretariat that might reveal their own ignorance (for example, in relation to procedural matters they are not familiar with); and to perhaps raise complaints about the chair or other committee members.

Many PROs have asserted that travel is a golden opportunity for building trust with and between members. The staff have the opportunity to get to know the other members better by spending more time with them and not just with the chair. There are often non-work related activities (dinners and mini-van trips, for example) when opportunities for personal connections arise. A stalling relationship with a member who may have perceived a PRO as biased – because of the need to accede to the wishes of a chair who is not politically aligned with the member – may be turned around by something as simple as discovering that you both enjoy a macchiato or the same brand of yoghurt.

For one PRO, revealing his background in another industry proved fruitful because it turned out to be something the chair was genuinely interested in. The PRO felt this marked a turning point in what had been a stilted relationship. Allowing the chair and another member (from opposing political parties) to accompany him on a privately organised day trip at the end of a conference shored up the change and paved the way for a highly functional relationship.

The chair and committee members

A chair that adopts a consensus approach to chairing is more likely to earn the respect and trust of the committee. Trust builder no. 5 is that decisions are seen to be fair and transparent. An example of this is the chair allowing all members to ask questions in a hearing (even if he/she does not agree with them), and allowing input into report findings and recommendations without immediately shutting other members down.

Some chairs will make much more of political differences than others. Some members are able to be involved in a full-blown political dust-up one minute and joke with their political opponent the next. Some are not. Committees can become destabilised when the political aspects of an inquiry become the main story, and a good chair will work to avoid this (unless they are getting too much pressure not to). PROs may not be able to influence this. What they must bear in mind, however, is that committee dynamics and power plays may be responsible for the chair not approving a course of action. A rejected suggestion from a PRO may be nothing to do with the merits of the suggestion but with the fact that it was proposed by another member who the chair opposes politically. This is an assertion of power over the other members rather than the secretariat.

One of the more extreme cases of politics derailing a committee occurred when two members resigned from a committee after a particularly politically charged inquiry, leaving the remaining three members – all from the same party – on their own for nine months. One of the members was reappointed along with a new member of parliament. One can easily imagine the uphill battle faced by the members and the secretariat to win the trust of the new member.

Deliberative meetings where long and wide-ranging discussions of topics are encouraged is an example of trust builder no. 4 – collaborative communication. This assists with buy-in to an inquiry by all members and can result in a smoother report adoption meeting. While this is something that is controlled by the chair, it can be assisted by the secretariat ensuring that adequate time is scheduled for such discussions.

The secretariat and stakeholders

While the committee members are the public face of the committee, if the staff do not maintain relationships behind the scenes, trust in the committee and in the committee process can deteriorate. Inquiry stakeholders – the agencies, organisations and individuals who make submissions and/or appear at hearings – need to be taken seriously and to be kept informed. Sometimes they also need to be persuaded. They may not want to provide certain information or it might not suit them to appear on the only day that is suitable for the committee. Sometimes, if the inquiry is long, there will be an ongoing relationship with the representative of a particular stakeholder (perhaps an executive assistant to a director general or commissioner); keeping this relationship on good terms can only serve the committee well. A trust relationship is developed, based mainly on discretion and consistency between word and deed.

Secretariat staff will often be required to provide advice to stakeholders, not necessarily in consultation with the committee (in the case of telephone queries about submissions, for example). If the advice provided turns out to be incorrect, trust is eroded. For example, it is not wise for staff to promise things that they do not know will eventuate (for example, promising that the committee will provide a written response or initiate an inquiry).

Stakeholders – particularly government departments – may realise that committee reports and correspondence often have a political flavour, but they must never feel that the secretariat is anything other than neutral. This helps the relationship in a sense, because in cases of subjectivity (or even bias) the staff can hide behind the committee: "This is what the committee thinks, but not necessarily what I think. Our relationship is not affected by this."

The secretariat may have to explain to a disappointed stakeholder why their letter or submission has not received the treatment they were anticipating. Their ability to do this without divulging the deliberations of the committee, and without further upsetting the stakeholder, also contributes to how committees as a whole are perceived.

How do you know when trust has been achieved?

Some PROs can point to a specific moment when the trust relationship changes for the better. For many, it is a more gradual process. Signs that the chair trusts a PRO's expertise (competence-based trust) and that they have their best interests at heart (benevolence-based trust) might be that they ask for their advice, and, even more significantly, their opinion; that they want the PRO to write the chair's foreword to a report; that they will speak about politically sensitive issues in the presence of the secretariat; and confiding in the PRO in regard to political or personal issue.

Lewicki *et al.* (2006) talk about a stage of trust that succeeds knowledge-based trust – identification-based trust. This occurs when one party "fully internalises the preferences of the other, such that he or she identifies with the other" (p1007). This allows one party to act for the other, because they know their intentions and interests are the same. I am not sure that chairs and PROs ever quite reach this stage, or even that it is desirable to do so. A certain amount of distance is necessary in a professional relationship – particularly one that is embedded in politics – and it would also be unwise for a PRO to think that they are ever "there".

In conclusion

Hopefully by now it is clear how trust at the micro level, within the various committee relationships, impacts on trust at the macro level. A mistrusting and disunited committee undermines public confidence in any messages emanating from the committee and in the process itself. There is speculation that this is what was behind the resignations from the committee mentioned earlier. There was an effort to discredit the committee (some may say further discredit, because the inquiry which prompted the resignations was seen as a witch-hunt by some) by leaving it with representatives from only one party. In this case, the committee and the secretariat had to work particularly hard to make sure any accusations of political bias (at least more than is usual) had no foundation.

Regardless of how important and interesting the content, the public, the parliament and stakeholders will only take committee reports seriously if they know they can trust the messenger.

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