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PANEL DISCUSSION ON BUILDING AND MAINTAINING
TRUST IN THE ABSELESQUE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this panel is to clarify the benefits of a climate of trust in the classroom. In particular, the panel focuses on building students' trust in teachers who use experiential methods such as exercises or simulations. We contrast a trusting climate to a mistrusting climate, discuss ways to build and maintain trust, and suggest possible consequences of trust. We address expectations and perceptions held by students. Two specific models for building trust are discussed. The first is a content model that identifies ten conditions (antecedent factors) that can lead to trust. The second is a process model that proposes cause-effect relationships for causes and consequences of trust in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Definitions of trust are as diverse as the people who have defined it. For example, Gibb (1991) said that trust is freedom from fear. Larzelère and Huston (1980) defined it as the belief that another person will be honest and benevolent. Butler (1991), following Zand (1972) and Deutsch (1958), defined trust as the willingness to risk being vulnerable to another person whose behavior is beyond one's control. Similarly, Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman (1995) proposed that we trust another person when we are willing to be vulnerable to their actions under

the expectation that the other will perform an action important to us, regardless of our ability to monitor or control the other.

The feelings of risk, vulnerability, and lack of control are all very familiar to students. Their lack of content knowledge and their uncertainty about whether they can learn enough to satisfy course requirements puts them at risk and makes them feel vulnerable. Further, the teacher's behavior is largely beyond students' control. Especially in ABSELesque courses, which include simulations or experiential exercises, risk taking is part of the learning process. Mistrusting students shun the risks and they remain tight in a bud. Trusting students are willing to risk increasing their vulnerability and they blossom. Thus, "upward trust" in the teacher would seem to be advantageous for students.

It also seems beneficial to students if they earn the trust of their teachers – build "downward trust." For one thing, compared to mistrusted students, trusted students tend to be evaluated more leniently because teachers are likely to be more receptive to their ideas. For example, if a student's response is ambiguous, we believe that a teacher who trusts the student will make an effort to understand the student's perspective and to judge the response favorably. This bias is one explanation of halo effect, which is frequently discussed in the literature on performance appraisal.

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However, since the proposed panel would be designed for an audience primarily of teachers, we would like to focus on behaviors teachers can engage in to earn the upward trust of their students. Building upward trust can be a win-win process that enhances downward trust as well, because of the reciprocity of trust (Butler, 1983).

Building trust requires the knowledge of its causal antecedents. This approach goes a step further than the various definitions offered previously. Several writers have addressed determinants of trust. For example, Hosmer (1995) synthesized the literatures of organization theory and normative philosophy, and concluded that trust follows from an intrinsic expectation of an implicit moral duty. Mayer, et al. (1995) summarized the findings of 23 researchers. Combining the works of three of them – Gabarro (1978), Larzelère and Huston (1980), and Butler (1991) – the antecedent conditions of trust include integrity, consistency, openness, discretion, competence, honesty, benevolence, availability, fairness, promise fulfillment, and receptivity.

Thus, it seems useful to ascertain the behaviors that cause trust. Knowledge of such behaviors can provide insight into how one can go about building trust. Ten behavioral conditions of trust were identified in interviews with 84 managers and executives (Butler, 1991). Although the intent of those interviews was to investigate the conditions of trust between managers and their subordinates and superiors, the conditions seem relevant to trust between teachers and students. The panel members intend to focus on the following ten conditions of trust. The following are behaviors that teachers can engage in to earn their students' trust.

1. Availability: posting and holding office hours, giving students your phone number, email address, etc.)
2. Competence: using effective teaching methods as well as knowing your discipline.
3. Consistency: behaving the same way from time to time whenever the situation is the same. Also, showing consistency among thoughts, words, and deeds (Integrity).
4. Discretion: keeping confidential sensitive information (such as students' grades, disabilities, etc.)
5. Fairness: treating all students equally, grading equitably, avoiding favoritism.
6. Honesty: telling the truth as you know it.

7. Benevolence: demonstrating helpful good will toward students; never doing anything to take advantage of them, make them lose face, or embarrass them.

8. Openness: sharing your thoughts and ideas with students and telling them what's on your mind.

9. Promise Fulfillment: following through on things you said you would do.

10. Receptivity: listening actively and reflectively to students, and making an effort to understand what they say.

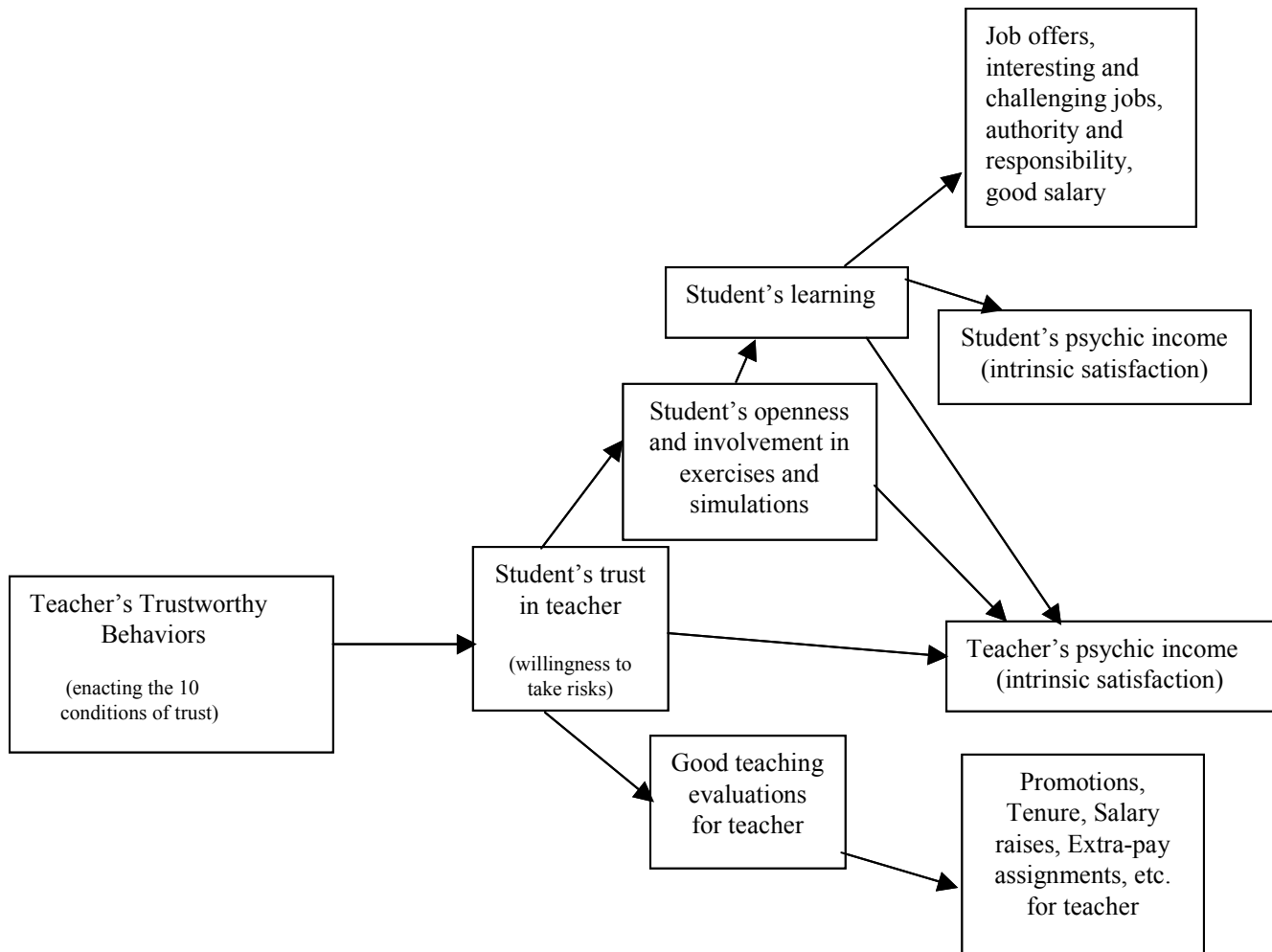
For example, considering just four of the trust conditions (competence, benevolence, fairness, and receptivity) it is clear that a teacher who manifests these conditions will be more "comfortable" for students than one who does not. Students will perceive that such a teacher knows the material well and can impart it to them skillfully (competence), has their best interests in mind and will look out for their welfare (benevolence), will not play favorites when evaluating their performance (fairness), and will listen to their ideas and try to understand them regardless of agreement (receptivity). Under such conditions, we expect that students would be likely to involve themselves in discussions, interact with the teacher both inside and outside of the classroom, and participate freely in exercises and simulations. Thus, upward trust leads to students' openness and involvement and consequently to their learning.

Panel members will lead an interactive discussion addressing how teachers can build upward trust in their classrooms – how we can get our students to trust us. We propose that upward trust leads to beneficial outcomes for students such as their openness and involvement, consequent learning, and consequent good grades. For teachers, the favorable outcomes of upward trust could include good teaching evaluations and consequent extrinsic rewards such as promotions, tenure, salary raises, and extra-pay assignments.

A CAUSE-AND-EFFECT MODEL

The conditions of trust are useful in that they specify the antecedents of trust. However, to predict what will happen if we implement the conditions of trust we need a process model showing cause-effect relationships. Figure 1 portrays a process model proposing a number of consequences of upward trust. Not the least of these consequences is psychic income for both students and teachers.

Figure 1. Model of trust-building process and outcomes



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