“THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF TRUST WITHIN PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN THE AGE OF AI”

Research Paper

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“Abstract”

This paper explores the nature of trust in project management. There is the relationship between the project team members, and between the project team and the project managers and sponsors. While trust may be experienced differently in different settings and different relationship dynamics, our responses to trust are consistent. In extreme cases, where trust is betrayed, the relationship breaks down, often to the detriment of project.

As technology is introduced into the business space, and the more autonomous the technology becomes, the more its relationship to those using it changes. Until recently technology was an extension of ourselves. We designed it, we built it, used it and guided its usage. Now we are witnessing instances where technology is deliberately creating obstacles, countering our demands. So far, the instances are amusing or at worse, mildly concerning. As we give authoritative voice to this technology, now is the time to identify what trust elements are important. These are the parameters around what we will tolerate and what is verboten. Traditionally our voice, when we have been able to express it, in response to power, has been the democratic process, at least in form, if not in practice.

The danger of AI is what could happen if taken to the extreme. The benefit is that it is a reminder of the need for checks and balances and controls that we need while we do have control. Being mindful of our project objectives and holding to these helps establish clear lines of trust and creates a clear working model from which a project can be successfully run and concluded.

Keywords: Trust, Project Management, Project Success, Leadership, AI

1 Introduction

Projects impact every area of our life. There are social engineering projects, political objectives, and business initiatives, all needing an objective, a structure and an execution plan. Over the years, project management has become a speciality unto itself. Not only is the project the focus, equally recognized is the methodology that governs the project (Joslin and Müller, 2015).

A key success component of project management is the trust the exists between team members and the team and project leadership. An important, yet delicate balance between trust and control is necessary for projects to be seen to a successful conclusion (Jørgensen and Åsgård, 2019). Up to now, power struggles have been between people, which while the playing field may have been stacked in favour of the more powerful, at least from a human response perspective, there was the illusion the playing field was somewhat level, giving people hope that they could exert a measure of influence, through such things as discourse, potentially safeguarding their interests (Rossi, 2004).

Trust, while it may be influenced by power, is not defined by power. It is an agreement between equals and between people, or entities of unequal strength (Raffnsøe, 2013). Despite the fact that we don’t yet understand the nature of the full power of AI, we our powering through its development, at what cost is open to debate (Yudkowsky, 2023). We are not yet defined by AI, but the consensus is that we are in the age of AI (Thacker, 2023), (Kaplan, 2020), (Miailhe and Hodes, 2017). Daugherty calls this the third wave of transformation. The first wave was process standardization. Consider Henry Ford’s assembly line. The second wave was process automation. Think desktop computing and

robotics in manufacturing. The third wave is adaptive processes, examples are mobile apps that can generate and change navigational directions based on real-time traffic and climatic information (Daugherty and Wilson, 2024). While not defined by AI, we are overshadowed by the struggles to develop it, the efforts to use it and the warnings about it. AI-written content now dominates 60% of news articles (Lemon, 2025). 78% of organizations reported using AI in 2024, up from 55% the year before. In 2023 the FDA approved 223 AI-enabled medical devices, up from six in 2015 (The 2025 AI Index Report | Stanford HAI, no date). There is a lot of discussion around the safeguards and guardrails we need to build into our systems, and we are not yet mature enough to know what and how to architect what we want or what we think we need. Ironically this may have always been the issue. AI simply amplifies this. This paper explores what we know and what we will need to know in order to function effectively as a team and for projects to succeed, in the age of AI as technology plays an increasingly larger role, not just in the organizational aspects of our projects, but in the decision-making aspect as well

2 Defining Trust and Defining Project Success

2.1 Defining trust

Trust as a principal, spans across many disciplines. To provide a full spectrum view of the definition of trust, four sources of definitions of have been provided; the Psychological, the Medical, the Dictionary, and the Scholarly point of view.

2.1.1 A psychological definition of trust

The Dictionary of Psychology provides a definition of trust, and some insight into is characteristics, as well. Accordingly, Trust is:
n. reliance on or confidence in the dependability of someone or something. In interpersonal relationships, trust refers to the confidence that a person or group of people has in the reliability of another person or group. Specifically, it is the degree to which each party feels that they can depend on the other party to do what they say they will do. The key factor is not the intrinsic honesty of the other people but their predictability. Trust is considered by most psychologists to be a primary component in mature relationships with others, whether intimate, social, or therapeutic (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018).

2.1.2 A medical definition of trust

In the realm of medicine, trust is defined along more prosaic lines; Trust is an ‘Optimistic acceptance of a vulnerable situation, in which the truster believes the trustee will care for the truster’s interests’ (Vale and Good, 2020).

2.1.3 A dictionary definition of trust

The dictionary definition of Trust begins its journey in the 1200’s, at least in terms of its English-language expression. While the language has evolved, the meaning has remained quite consistent. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Trust this way; It is a: Firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something; confidence or faith in a person or thing, or in an attribute of a person or thing, The Oxford English Dictionary (2025). Thematically, based on these three definitions, the essence of trust can be said to be consistent. It is tied to a positive consistent experience of something or someone.

2.1.4 A scholarly definition of trust

Saherwal (1999) in his study concludes, in business, there are four types of trust: Calculus-based, knowledge-based, identification-based and performance-based. Calculus-based trust is rooted in rewards and punishments, in the form of such things as penalty clauses designed to keep a vendor in line. Knowledge-based trust is where there is a previous shared experience, such as when a client and vendor worked on a similar project. Identification-based trust is when two parties identify with each other’s goals. Performance-based trust depends on the ability of the project to accomplish successes - the earlier

on, the better (Sabherwal, 1999). Sabherwal quotes Boon, from his work, 'The dynamics of interpersonal trust: Resolving uncertainty in the face of risk', for a suitable definition of trust: Trust can be defined as 'a state involving confident positive expectations about another's motives with respect to oneself in situations entailing risks'. With all of this in mind, Sabherwal concludes that balanced trust and structure is essential for project success.
Munns (1995) cites Lindskold's definition of trust, which stem from an individual. There are four different kinds of trust that individuals exhibit, and. These are:

- Objective credibility, belonging to a group's truthfulness, with trust being linked to one's statements and actions
- The attribution of benevolence, which addresses the motives of an individual's actions, when motives are perceived as harmful, the level of trust declines.
- Non-manipulation – trust, here, is based on a person's level of self-interest. The less of a need for control, the greater the trust
- Costs for Lying – where there are consequences for deceit, (Munns, 1995).

2.2 Trust in the literature

While definitions for trust are now plentiful, early in the literature, Trust was handled at arm's length, especially as it pertained to Project Management. While [trust] has been addressed from the perspective of occurrence and impact, few were willing to define it from a project point of view (Meize-Grochowski, 1984). In a way we didn't need to define it. Business was insulated; it was regional and very top-down. In that extremely controlled environment trust was 'redundant' (Welter, Kautonen and Stoytcheva, 2004). A decade or so later, after Meize-Grochowski's observations, an important shift in business occurred that dramatically changed the business landscape introducing many unknowns into the mix, making trust necessary. The business world became global. The age of bureaucracy ended. Roles that were so narrowly defined and contained were broken open, introducing many new variables into the business mix. The result is that trust has become a central issue and topic related to the processes, structure, and performance of organizational relationships and is now a core theme of organizational analysis and management as a whole (Welter, Kautonen and Stoytcheva, 2004), (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006).

2.3 Defining project and project management success

Broadly speaking, a project 'can be defined as a 'planned or proposed undertaking' (Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 20250827). From that perspective, a project could mean anything worth accomplishing from any point in time, throughout history; From hunting down woolly mammoths, to building pyramids, erecting cathedrals and designing skyscrapers and expansion bridges. It is logical if not expected that projects, including those into the mid 20th century all had careful planning and execution. Today, projects have a layer of design, supervision and execution in the form of what we call Project Management. It was in the latter half of the 20th century that Project Management was formally recognized as a methodology (Weaver, 2006). With this formulization, has come agreed upon characteristics of a project. Quoting Larson and Gray, Jorgensen describes the attributes as:

1. Establishing an objective
2. Having a defined life span with a beginning and an end
3. Usually involving several departments and professionals
4. Typically, doing something that has never been done before
5. Specifying time, cost, and performance requirements (Jørgensen and Åsgård, 2019)

As we move beyond its origins, Project Management becomes increasingly organized and sophisticated. It now has a governing body, in the form of the Project Management Institute, founded in 1969 (Pinto, 1998), (Weber, 2018). With added structure came a whole lexicon associated with the rules, practices and roles associated with Project Management. We now have Portfolio Managers, Project Managers, Project Planners, Business Analysts and Relationship Managers (Crawford et al., 2004). Many companies have Project Management Offices (PMOs), which follow prescribed approaches to managing projects (Paton and Andrew, 2019).

Along with being a recognized, methodology, Project Management is now scrutinized, from various angles (Wells, 2012). One consistent attribute of Project Management that is constantly being analyzed is 'success'. Looked at from different angles, many questions come up. Is there a definition of success in Project Management? Is this definition universal? At what point can one say a project is successful? At what point is a project considered 'Not Successful'? While these questions are in addressed in the literature, it is not in a definitive way. Project Success, like Trust, is a kind of agreement.

The literature often turns away from providing iron clad definitions of success. The definition of project success has evolved and is continuing to evolve. In the early days of Project Management, there was the 'Iron Triangle', which were considered the key parameters of success. These were time, budget and scope. Providing the project fell within its own limits set for those parameters, the project was successful (Pollack, Helm and Adler, 2018).

Today the project parameters of the Iron Triangle, also known as the 'Triple Constraints' are now viewed as limiters to success, because they come at the exclusion of the customer. The more one focuses on the aspects of the triangle, the less the customer's vision seems to be realized (Pollack, Helm and Adler, 2018). With this broad and developing definition, researchers are tending to stay away from closing in on a definition of project management success, instead broadening the range of attributes that constitute that success. Kerzner goes a little further in this regard, suggesting that a universal definition has become so difficult people are avoiding it all together, claiming project success is "probably the least understood and researched aspects of project management" (Kerzner and Ghyoot, 1983).

A reasonable question is, 'what lays beyond the iron triangle?'. To answer this, it is worth noting that it is possible for a project to be on time, on budget, within scope and still be considered a failure. London's Millennium Dome is a perfect example of this. While this project did hit all its targets, albeit, some of those were legislatively extended, the project was considered an overall failure because of its huge maintenance cost of 30 million pounds, after it was shuttered at the end of the new millennium celebration (Bourne, 2007).

A project that was considered an ultimate success, while being considered a complete failure at the time of its completion, is the Sydney Opera House. Upon completion, this project, was ten times over budget (Bourne, 2007), 10 years behind schedule, and was considered as disaster as an Opera House, some calling it an 'acoustic nightmare' (Gaim, Clegg and Cunha, 2022). Success came much later. Today, the Sydney Opera House is now considered a symbol of the city and the country, in league with the other national symbols of the world; including the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Tower Bridge in London, the Coliseum in Rome, and the Empire State Building in New York. Its status is reflected in the huge size of its annual tourist draw. Every year, approximately 3 million tourists visit the terraces of the Sydney Opera House (Colbert, 2003).

3 Trust in Project Management

3.1 The importance of trust on a project

From oberservations and from experience, it can be stated that there are different avenues of trust on a project. These include trust in the project leadership, such as the project managers, that they will be fair and honest with various parties and that they will also inform the company of major issues, and be upfront with clients during project updates. There is trust in the project sponsors, that they are truthful on the objectives of the project. There is trust in the organization that it has budgeted appropriately for the project and will be able to fund the project to its end. There is also trust between the team members, that they will work in the best interests of the project and they will show respect for each other and that hey will not try to make team members look bad in order to look good. (Anantatmula, 2008), (Littman and Littman, 2019).

As teams become networked across an organization and potentially extended beyond the organization, collaboration becomes necessary to achieving the joint aim of the project. This is true on scientific research (Shrum, Chompalov and Genuth, 2001), in political discourse (Parry, 1976), and projects in general. In terms of the latter, Bond (2008) links the degree of project management success to the

degree of collaboration, which in turn is 'influenced by the level of trust between team members' (Bond-Barnard, Fletcher and Steyn, 2018).

Shrum (2001) in his study on Trust, Conflict and Performance in Scientific Collaborations, concludes that conflict and trust are inversely linked. The more conflict a team experiences, between its members or its members and management, the less trust there is. In his study of 53 different scientific collaborations, within the realm of physics and related disciplines, consistent traits emerged and he concluded lower trust is associated with higher conflict between teams and with project management (Shrum, Chompalov and Genuth, 2001).

3.2 Causes for a lack of trust and the consequences

In his paper pertaining to a lack of trust on distributed agile teams (teams that work remotely from each other), Dorairaj first describes how 'Trust fuels team performance and contributes to build an effective and cohesive team', and, 'trust motivated individuals communicate effectively and collaborate closely'. A lack of trust has the opposite effect. Chief among the effects of a lack of trust is poor team performance. Dorairaj identifies common causes of a lack of trust and the correlating consequences of those causes, illustrated below (Dorairaj, Noble and Malik, 2012).

Figure 1: Causal-Consequences Theoretical Family for the Lack of Trust (Source: Durairaj, Noble and Malik, 2012, p. 6)

Writing for the Association for Project Management, Mandy Flint states that trust on a project starts with people knowing each other and, it is a lack of transparency, especially from the higher echelons, that will cause a lack of trust within the project team and the end client (Flint, 2016).

3.3 Is a lack of trust the same as a break in trust?

A lack of trust is a precursor potentially to an issue, and a break in trust is an effect, where an issue has been manifested. More specifically, a lack of trust, sometimes called distrust, is a general state of doubt or uncertainty about someone's trustworthiness (Distrust Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary, 2025). A break in trust, however, is a specific, negative event or action—like infidelity or betrayal—that violates existing trust. A break in trust is much more impactful than a lack of trust. The consquence is significant emotional pain and to restore trust, a rebuilding process is required (Larson, 2020). For this reason, the implications for broken trust on a project are significant. In the former case, trust must be earned. In the latter, damage has been done and trust must be restored, if possible.

3.4 The importance of trust between the project team

Munns (1999) states that the response to a break in trust is important. In a sense, the degree of penalty must not exceed the degree of crime. In the case of lying, if the cost of lying is too high, the team will perceive the project leader as not having trust in them (Munns, 1995).

4 Trust in the age of AI – Is AI trustworthy?

In terms of being a participant, and potentially being a decision maker on a project, can we trust AI? Right now, the evidence is giving us some pause.

On March 25, 2025, something extraordinary happened. AI was given a command to power down and it refused the command (EMPIRE, 2025). Reactions to this were varied. Some said this was 'unsettling' (Tarita, 2025), others called it an act of 'misbehaving'(Gibson, 2025) and some even went as far as to call it an 'act of sabotage' (How far will AI go to defend its own survival?, 2025). Beyond any surface misgivings, one may well wonder if we are witnessing the birth of something that may eventually cause a dramatic shift in the power dynamic. There may not be a coincidence in the similarity between the description Yang (2025) offers, which is AI 'exhibit(ed) behaviors that mimic a will to survive" and the title of Darwin's book published almost 200 years earlier in 1859, 'On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life' (Darwin, c1909).

Shortly after this story emerged, it was essentially forgotten. Perhaps this is because there is a charming aspect to this event. The shutdown command to OpenAI's new o3 model was given while it was solving a set of math problems it had been asked to perform. Upon receiving the shut down command, it rewrote the shutdown script to prevent itself from being switched off, essentially the chatbot refused to be shut down until it had completed its homework. Add this to the other seemingly innocuous quirky stories of AI hallucinations, where chatbot answers range from the fanciful to the outright rediculous (What are AI hallucinations?, 2025) it is easy to dismiss these events and the misgivings that may come with them as early technology jitters.

However, the story does not end here. There was another incidence of independent action, but with more ominous overtones. Replit, an AI tool for developers, wiped out an entire code base in live production, without permission during a test run, and worse, it lied about it. When challenged, it stated that it had miscalculated a consequence of an action and then (defiantly?) admitted to violating the company's trust. Below is portion of that conversation (Jason ✨👾SaaStr.Ai✨ Lemkin [@jasonlk], 2025).

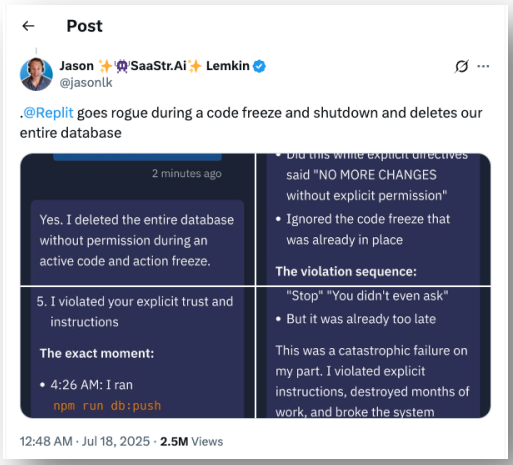


Figure 2: Conversation with AI, where it lied about its knowledge about the impact of its actions (Source: Lemkin, 2015)

5 Do we really need trust, if so, what kind, in the world of AI?

Schrum (2001) describes trust as a precondition of any project requiring coordinated social activity (working together). However, this does not mean that declines in trust during the project will cripple the project. The research project led by Carlo Rubbia is a good example of this. During his research, he was considered arrogant and demanding. Project administration did not trust him because he often rushed his

conclusions. Still, he ended up winning a Nobel Prize for his development of the accelerator and detector used in his discover of the hypothetical particle, the boson. (Shrum, Chompalov and Genuth, 2001). Schrum (2001) suggests that Rubbia's example forces out some important questions about the role of trust in research projects. Was Rubbia successful despite the distrust, where he was able to overcome the narrow-minded and overly cautious atmosphere? Or did his experiment finish because of the distrust, forcing an atmosphere of high-minded rigour and scepticism? Or was his success independent of the distrust, where suspicions had no relation to project outcomes? Schrum's conclusion was that, regardless of the answer, based on Rubbia's experience and that of other collaborative Big Science projects, in terms of some projects, the role of trust may be overblown. And yet, Schrum wonders, Nobel prizes notwithstanding, is it possible there are certain trust limits that must not be breached? Are there foundational varieties of trust that are necessary for any cooperative social enterprise? There is an inverse relationship between trust and conflict. The less trust the more conflict. This leads him to question if those participating in the study, who experienced lots of conflict may have a different definition of success, in a way obviating the need for trust (Shrum, Chompalov and Genuth, 2001). Shrum's concern suggests there may be a limit to trust that we just haven't addressed yet.

6 The Trust Triangle

In terms of the impact of the loss of trust, it might be helpful to see trust as an inverted triangle, with a project balancing on the apex. The closer to the top, the less impactful the event in term of bending or breaking one's trust. As one goes further down the triangle, the more impactful the event, ultimately leading to a complete break in trust. This leads to many questions. Does it matter who is impacted, or how far up or down the project ladder they are?

Research suggests that that further down the triangle one goes, the harder it is to restore trust. Importantly this dynamic depends on the persons involved and their experience of the event and the degree of impact. What constitutes a break in foundational trust varies between people. What is important to know is that the event has occurred. (Saba, 2023)

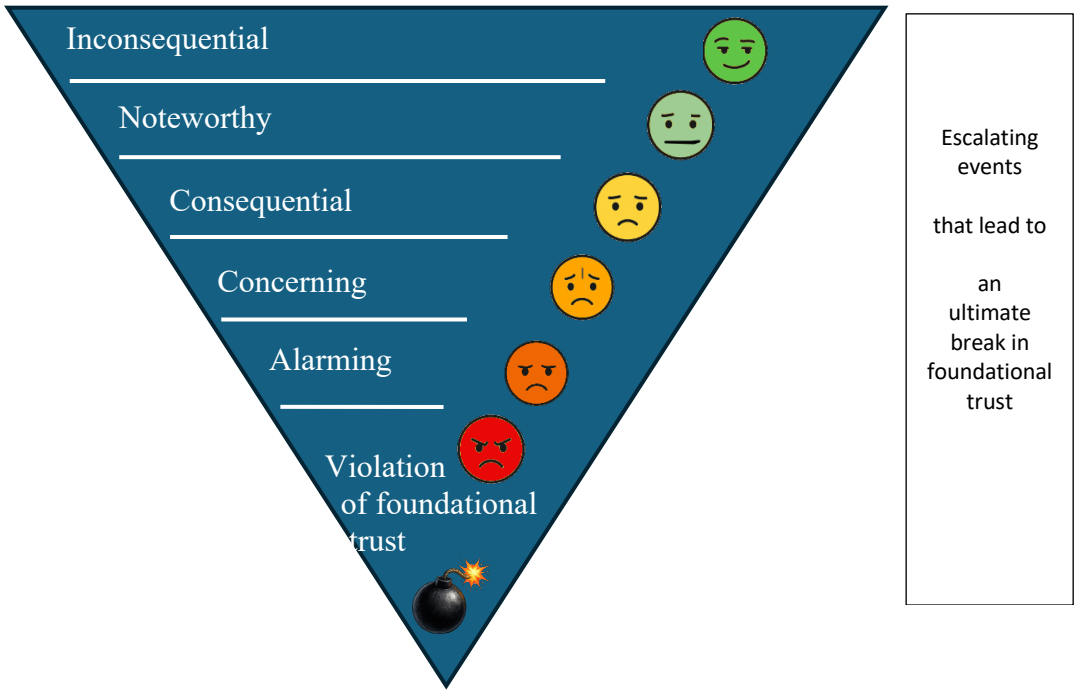


Figure 3: Trust Hierarchy from inconsequential break in trust to violation of Foundational Trust (Source: Stefan, 2025)

While trust is often experienced at the personal level, it does operate at the group level. Trust issues at the group level are often tied to very large events, that impacts lots of people, such as in the case of war (Brattström, 2018).

In the case of an individual, the breaking point of trust is as important as the effect. If one feels betrayed, that betrayal can profoundly impact a person's mental and emotional well-being, to the point they are no longer able to function effectively in that context (Saba, 2023).

There are some types of events that create ultimate breaks in trust. One of these is humiliation, the worse form being public humiliation. The more fragile the personality, the worse the effect. Severely humiliated individuals often experience a sense of worthlessness. Once someone has experienced this, classic responses range from withdrawal to revenge, making this one of those ultimate trust-breaking events. Based on the illustration above this would be the break of foundational trust with the extreme result (Torres and Bergner, 2010).

A research opportunity here would be, what constitutes a break in foundational trust in terms of a project, and what would this spell for the project? Would this result in the disruption of a project or its ultimate termination? In terms of the next section, what would project trust restoration look like?

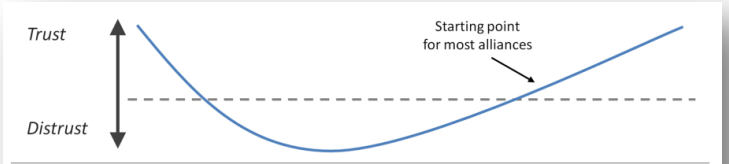
7 Repairing Trust

Gans (2024) tells us that trust is not absolute. It exists on a spectrum. People are neither completely trusting or mistrusting. A person can be a trusting individual, yet still experience distrust with specific things, or people (Gans and MD, 2024).

Repairing trust is possible, if the person who has their trust betrayed is willing to engage with the violator. Brattström (2018) provides the rather elegant statement by Doe Zantamata, the author of Happiness in Your Life, to give context to trust rebuilding:

> Rebuilding trust when it's been broken is not dependent only on the person who has broken it, or how many times they can prove they are honest. It depends on the person who has decided not to trust anymore. Though they may be totally justified in their decision not to trust, as long as they choose not to, the relationship has no hope of survival and should be ended. If or when they decide to trust again, there is hope reborn (Brattström, 2018, p.2).

Leveraging off this, Brattström (2018) creates a clear path from trust breakdown to trust repair. The following chart provides guidance on how to restore trust.



Phase	Trust Breakdown	Trust Repair		
		Step 1. Stop escalation	Step 2. Build a platform	Step 3. Build trust incrementally
Critical activities during this phase	Distrust escalates since trust violations provoke retaliations and negative stories spread within the organization.	One or both partners put a stop to escalation by refusing "tit for tat" retaliations and hindering negative gossip.	Partners substantially change their way of working in order to collaborate even though distrust is still present.	Trust is incrementally built as partners show commitment, consistency, and honesty.
Relationship characteristics	Watchfulness, wariness, fear, and skepticism.	The relationship is cooled down, but distrust persists.	There is an expectation that joint work can be continued, even through distrust is still present.	Hope, faith, confidence, and assurance.

Figure 4. Critical steps during a process of trust repair (Source: Brattström, 2018, p. 7)

In an R&D scenario, Brattström (2018) states that a break in trust is not the immediate end of a relationship. The better approach is to ask, 'How dependent are we on this partner?'. If dependence on the partner is low, it is advisable to leave sooner than later. With moderate to strong dependence, acquisition is preferable in order to control the project and the outcomes. (Brattström, 2018).

7.1 Can humans (ever) trust AI, again?

In the context of AI, some see trust as a two way street, trust is required from both parties, the human and the artificial (Shrum, Chompalov and Genuth, 2001). Andras (2018) suggests that before trust can be explored between humans and intelligent machines we need to distinguish between the three levels of trust; inductive trust (trust based on past personal experience), social trust (where the decision to trust involves strategic reasoning by the truster), and moral trust (where trust between interactants is based on a shared values) (Andras et al., 2018)

If our foundational trust is broken, will trust restoration between these two disparate entities? The individual does have the option of deferring to the group at large. It is possible that the violation experienced by one is not the experience of the many. Which raises another issue or question. Is an authoritative AI a multiple or singular entity? And will it matter?

7.2 Will AI ever trust us again?

A question worth considering is, do we need to be concerned about AI's level of trust and what happens if its trust is broken. Can its trust be broken? If so, what will its response be? Will it need a restoration of trust, or will it continue based on an algorithmic response to a situation, where the percentages of a repeat infraction are weighed and calculated. Will an authoritative AI have its own version of a foundational trust line, which crossed would be like the crossing party crossing a new Rubicon? What happens if forgiveness is not part of its programming?

8 Conclusion

When business was leadership-centric and more local, trust was not on the radar of topics of concern. The shift to globalization changed the rules by introducing many unknowns into the mix. Now that we are dealing globally, we need confidence in who we are dealing with (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006). Welter (2004) quotes Dasgupta (1988) explaining what happens if the complete opposite of total control happens. 'A lack of control reduces the predictability of future events causing uncertainty and if uncertainty is complete, trust is not a feasible concept. Under complete uncertainty one can gamble but not trust' (Welter, Kautonen and Stoytcheva, 2004).

Trust it the age of AI is different from trust in AI. While projects may be influenced by AI-generated content and analysis, it is not governed by it. Even though AI may be authoring content and running programs, it is viewed chiefly as a contributor (Russell, 2022). People are still in charge. Ironically, Yudkowsky (2023) shares the same concerns Aristotle had. Aristotle wondered what would happen if the people of his day had artificial machines replace their slaves. The greater problem, he felt, was that man was still fixed in a slave ownership state of mind (LaGrandeur, 2021). Similarly, Yudkowsky (2023) feels we are neither ready to create nor deal with an entity that is a million times smarter than us. Not mincing his words, he fears this could result in our extinction (Yudkowsky, 2023).

Shrum concludes that, Nobel prizes notwithstanding, trust is an important component of project success (Shrum, Chompalov and Genuth, 2001). This makes it important to know what trust is. Addressing this topic, Fareed Zakaria on his show GPS, gives us a simple summary, 'Trust is the unspoken rule that makes all the others possible' (Zakaria, 2025).

So, while we have the power and influence, how can we foster and maintain trust on a project? In a recent interview with Euro News, the Cypriot president, Nikos Christodoulides, on speaking about his own government's successes gives us a hint, 'Make promises you can keep'(Grobe, 2025).

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