Winning Trust Under Fire

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Once you realize that they have the same wants, needs, and desires that we do, you’ll establish the trust of the local population. You will be successful. You’ll not always be successful; sometimes there are some external factors that may prohibit that when you get into some of the more extremist ideologies but that is the exception.


In war, soldiers often pursue the negative aim of imposing one nation’s will upon another through the force of arms. However, at the conclusion of a war, or during activities other than combat, a soldier’s primary purpose can become much different: to influence the will of others positively, using constructive means. Military forces often pursue positive actions essential to reassure allies, influence neutrals, and dissuade potential adversaries. Influencing a nation or a cultural group depends on winning the trust of those who can influence others. As such, any soldier or military leader who cannot win the trust of key influencers risks failing to accomplish the mission.

How do service members build trust with key indigenous stakeholders—influencers—in the current security environment? In this article, I will describe
conclusions from a research project that set out to answer this question. The research consisted of a study of interviews in the Combat Studies Institute’s “Operational Leadership Experiences” (OLE) collection (all interview excerpts in this article are taken from OLE collection transcripts). I looked for ways soldiers and members of other services reported they had built confidence and gained trust over time. From their experiences, I sought to create a generalized model that future forces could apply to this difficult mission. My goal was to ground the model in real-world experience in Iraq and Afghanistan and to make it easy to understand. Moreover, I wanted to create a starting point for a deeper discussion on this critical skill set.

My research indicated that in Iraq and Afghanistan, forces often created and then applied incremental confidence-building measures to win trust over time, while taking into account the cultural context. (For the purposes of this research, confidence building is conceived as a contributor to gaining trust.) Generally, I found these confidence-building measures fell into three categories, which I will call physical measures, communication measures, and relationship measures. A model based on my findings could assist in training soldiers and leaders so they could improve their ability to build trust in often challenging and ambiguous operational environments.

The Importance of Establishing Trust

National-level policy documents, such as Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, describe the need for forces to conduct a wide array of missions. Many require the operational flexibility to build relationships as well as apply military lethal force. Therefore, soldiers and leaders can expect to take on roles that require gaining trust to achieve the nation’s policy goals and to protect its vital interests.

At the tactical level, building trust often becomes critical to personal survival and mission accomplishment. In Afghanistan today, both combat and noncombat units interact with host-nation military, police, or local leaders daily to build legitimacy and set the conditions for a secure environment. What makes this even more of a burden is that in counterinsurgency, discerning whether a person is friend, foe, or fence sitter is not easy. Ideally, when soldiers gain trust at the tactical level, they can reassure those on their side and win over the undecided, and this leads to denying adversaries the support of the populace.

When soldiers assume an embedded trainer or advisor role, they should have the ability to gain trust so they can train and prepare their partner forces for combat. When the partner forces begin to execute real-world missions, they and the advisors must have already established high levels of mutual trust. If trust is inadequate, the stresses of combat can further impair how effective the partners are in fighting together.

Soldiers sometimes serve with interagency partners to help improve quality-of-life conditions. For example, members of reconstruction, development, or agribusiness teams need to gain trust. Without the trust of the populace, determining which projects to execute and garnering local support to help complete them will be difficult. In fact, the projects these teams execute are a vehicle to winning trust and building legitimacy.

At the operational and strategic levels, commanders continually conduct key leader engagements with civilian stakeholders and military counterparts to set the conditions for mission accomplishment. When building partner capacity, fostering military-to-military relationships, enabling civil authorities, or conducting counterinsurgency, strategic- and operational-level leaders must earn trust from a wide array of stakeholders to accomplish their missions and further national objectives. Without establishing mutual trust, even though senior leaders will talk, they may not truly communicate.

Moreover, because complex coalition operations are the norm and will be into the future, partners need glue that can hold a coalition together—trust is that glue. In long-standing coalition relationships, such as between the United States and the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, trust already is established. This trust provides the foundation for successful interoperability during crises. However, for trust to endure, the parties must engage with each other and continually work on understanding each other’s perspectives.

For new or nontraditional coalitions, replacing uncertainty with trust becomes even more critical. In many roles, and at many levels, soldiers and leaders must succeed in winning trust before they can accomplish missions.
A Research Methodology for Identifying How to Win Trust

This research started with a wide aperture and narrowed its focus as it progressed. I began by analyzing 2,515 transcribed interviews from the OLE collection to find experiences related to gaining trust where the experiences had occurred in the five years from 2008-2012. I found 67 interviews that met these criteria, which I analyzed and coded line by line to determine the specific behaviors reported to contribute to building confidence and gaining trust. From this data, I constructed a generalized model of confidence-building measures with specific examples in each category. Then I compared and contrasted the model with findings reported on this subject in academic literature.

Subsequently, I conducted in-depth interviews with subject matter experts who had interacted regularly with host-nation soldiers or civilians. They provided additional accounts of confidence-building activities, based on numerous deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, or both. I used the interviews with the subject matter experts to further validate and improve the initial model. The result is a holistic model based on rich accounts of how military members gained the trust of stakeholders in operational environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

A Definition of Trust

According to Denise M. Rousseau et al., trust is “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.” Contemporary literature in the field of psychology indicates that trust is a complex human phenomenon with many variables and facets, and as such, scholars view it in very different ways. From a biopsychological view, trust is a series of specific chemical and neurological responses in the brain. A person’s distrust, conditional trust, or trust releases certain chemicals in the brain and stimulates different areas to store perception memories.

Humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers have stated that all people have a need for safety, empathy, and acceptance. When people encounter others who treat them respectfully and positively, positive relationships begin to form. From the view of humanistic psychology, trust involves a human connection that results from deep and genuine interactions at a personal level.

According to cognitive-behavioral psychology experts Jesse H. Wright, Monica Ramirez Basco, and Michael E. Thase, when humans interact, their relationships proceed through stages: (a) event, (b) cognitive appraisal (including automatic thoughts), (c) emotion, and (d) behavior. From this perspective, trust develops during cognitive appraisal, affects the felt emotion, and eventually manifests in an individual’s behavior. Cognitive-behavioral psychology experts believe that looking at what comes before, during, and after a behavior allows a person to gain adequate contextual understanding, evaluate the situation, and restructure thoughts and emotions. Moving from distrust to trust requires a new cognitive appraisal and a shift in individual judgment.

Confidence-Building Measures

At the height of the Cold War, psychologist Charles E. Osgood wrote about an idea he called graduated reduction in tension, in which the Soviet Union and the United States could reduce tension in the arms race. His approach called for small conciliatory gestures that would walk back the conflict from the precipice of war on a global scale. One such small measure, the telephone hotline between the White House and the Kremlin, became a major factor in averting nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

As acceptance of Osgood’s ideas grew, international relations and political science scholars, such as Michael Krepon, called these approaches confidence-building measures, or confidence- and security-building measures. International agreements such as those from the Stockholm Conference (1986) and the Declaration of Helsinki (1975) codified confidence-building measures as formal political agreements. These measures took many different forms, such as inspections, notifications, economic assistance, structured communication, and nonthreatening interactions. After the Cold War, scholars such as Landau and Landau began to apply the idea of confidence-building measures to new areas, such as structured mediation.

When viewed holistically, the literature on the subject of trust indicates that, as a very human phenomenon, trust is not easy to understand. My research proceeded based on the assumption that if the concept of confidence-building measures was a valid way to approach conflict resolution, then the idea could have
merit in the context of soldiers asked to win trust in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**A Model for Winning Trust**

The model constructed from this research represents one valid way for soldiers and leaders at all levels to approach winning trust, with an emphasis on confidence building at the tactical level. The research findings indicated that three important variables formed the trust equation: (1) the context of each situation, (2) time, and (3) the confidence-building measures employed. The results also indicated that three main types of confidence-building measures were involved: (1) physical measures, (2) communication measures, and (3) relationship measures (see figure 1).

**Context**

I found that understanding the context was an extremely important theme in the overall success of confidence building. Understanding the cultural factors set the conditions for success. I found that personal factors such as one’s ability or one’s experiences during other deployments could affect how effective trust-building efforts were.

For example, Maj. Paul Madden, interviewed for the OLE collection in 2009, describes how the personal experiences of one of his soldiers limited that soldier’s ability to build trust:

> Our warrant officer was a young private in Desert Storm so he hated going out there. He still didn’t trust them [the Iraqis]. We kind of had to drag him. ... He didn’t trust those guys. ... He went out there but he never really enjoyed it because of the experience he had with those guys before.

It is important to note that a thorough understanding of context included understanding the degree of permissiveness in a given operational environment.
Overall, confidence and trust were highly dependent on context; understanding specific variances in places, people, and situations played a critical role.  

**Time**

Time emerged as an important theme in the overall success of building confidence and winning trust. Activities could lead to a substantial relationship of trust in just a few weeks or in as many as seven months. Usually, however, forces needed about two to three months to establish a foundation. If partners went through an initial period of high enemy activity together, they would bond more quickly. The importance of the time variable is expressed by Maj. Andrew Bellocchio in his 2011 OLE interview:

> You have to live as close as you can to it and spend as much time as you can with them [indigenous stakeholders]. It’s also a trust thing; it builds the trust. They feel you’re not just reporting on them but they see you’re trying to help them; you’re with them and part of the team. That does make a difference. I think it speeds up the relationship you can have with them. Just contact time; you have to live with them and work with them.

Additionally, because the perception of time often varies between individuals and cultures, one could expect the time variable to differ in each situation. Overall, the findings indicated that soldiers should dedicate a significant amount of time if they are to establish a true relationship of trust.

**Confidence-Building Measures**

The findings indicated that confidence-building measures generally fell into three categories: (1) physical, (2) communication, and (3) relationship measures (see figure 2). It is important to note that the boundaries of these categories are flexible. Depending on the circumstances, their relationships and influences on each other can vary in unexpected ways.

**Physical measures.** Physical confidence-building measures, activities that demonstrate positive intention, were the most often employed and the most effective. The findings indicated that within the category of physical measures, the progression from conducting partnered activities to having the host-nation stakeholders lead the activities was critical, as was helping the population meet their basic human needs. One of the more interesting and unexpected findings was that soldiers reported participation in sports such as soccer or other physical training with their partners dramatically increased the trust in the relationship. Maj. Jason Moulton, interviewed for the OLE collection in 2010, describes interaction with the Iraqis:

> For me it was very enjoyable; I played soccer quite a bit on their helipad … . It let them see that we were just like them; that we wanted to do the same things they wanted to do. I wanted to let people who think other thoughts about the U.S. in general see that we were on the same page as them. It paid dividends when you try to actually go talk to them about doing things and convince them that they need to approach new avenues on how to do things. I think it helped a lot.

Of particular interest was a confidence-building measure in which soldiers would take an unobtrusive security posture. The interviews indicated that taking off body armor or helmets, for instance, or keeping weapons out of sight, would communicate trust to other parties.

However, the research subjects were careful to note that even though a relaxed posture communicates trust, soldiers need to remain aware of the risks they take. Soldiers must balance the need for personal force protection with the need to build confidence and win trust. This is a difficult dilemma and one where soldiers must apply their own professional judgment. Overall, in gaining trust, the research indicated that actions often speak louder than words.

**Communication measures.** Communication measures—activities to exchange information, ideas, and perspectives—emerged as the next major category. In a situation where parties in a conflict speak different languages, measures to build communication are critical, and translators become the lynchpin that holds the relationship together. The interviews indicated that the selection, vetting, and retention of the best interpreters were critical to success.

The time it takes to train a soldier in a foreign language can be very long; however, even learning a few words or phrases in the local language was reported as beneficial to building trust. For example, when asked by an OLE interviewer in 2011 what parts of his
Figure 2. Examples of Confidence-Building Measures

**Physical**
- Conducting partnered activities
- Sharing experiences
- Having partners lead activities
- Colocating or living with partners
- Meeting basic needs (security, food and water assistance, economic aid, medical support)
- Maintaining unobtrusive security posture but balancing it with the need for personal protection
- Sharing risk
- Providing security
- Participating in sports or physical exercise together
- Assisting vulnerable populations
- Supporting development projects
- Training together
- Setting conditions for sustainable jobs
- Shopping at local markets
- Conducting discovery actions

**Communication**
- Opening lines of communication
- Using interpreters as cultural advisors
- Using the native language
- Sharing intelligence and information
- Having regular meetings
- Asking questions
- Listening
- Handling requests
- Holding conferences
- Negotiating agreements
- Keeping promises
- Providing answers
- Acting as an intermediary
- Planning together
- Identifying problems
- Solving problems
- Engaging continually
- Having follow-up discussions
- Seeking an understanding of local conditions

**Relationship**
- Sharing food or drink
- Building rapport
- Getting to know partners personally
- Having positive social interactions
- Overcoming significant challenges together
- Showing respect
- Building camaraderie
- Understanding personalities
- Reinforcing existing institutions
- Displaying patience
- Making amends
- Interacting as peers
- Allowing partners to demonstrate their skills and expertise
- Learning from partners
- Coping with politics
- Enabling local governance
predeployment training were most beneficial, Maj. Robert L. Reed answered,

The language. To gain their respect right off the bat was the main thing we needed to do because they [the indigenous stakeholders] don’t trust you from anything; they don’t know you. As soon as you can gain their respect they’ll do anything for you. To be able to go in there and [speak] just the key phrases like, “Hello. How are you? How is your day?” Things like that were huge.31

Overall, the findings suggested that for confidence building to succeed, a soldier should open the lines of communication, speak as well as listen, and help identify and solve problems using appropriate communication tools.32

**Relationship measures.** Relationship measures are activities that improve interpersonal connections. They can range from sharing food or drink, to learning about the other person, to showing patience and understanding. Professionally, a service member should strive to learn from the other party and accept a way of doing things that may be inconsistent with how the service member personally believes things should happen.33 For example, in a 2010 OLE interview, Maj. Taly Velez explained,

Our reception in the Aburisha Brigade turned out to be a good one, mainly, if I should say, [it] was due to us taking the time to build relationships with them and not dictate how things were going to be. Once we gained their trust, they were willing to do anything for us. I think that was what made our and their success a great one.34

When asked what recommendation he would make to Army, Velez said, “Personal relationships. That’s probably the key to everything.”35

Soldiers may want to consider sharing some personal details about their lives, treating local people as peers, and most important, admitting when they have made a mistake. If relationships between any two humans involve a continual give and take, with risk and reward, relationships in this context are no different.36
Do’s and Don’ts of Confidence Building

In the interviews I conducted with subject matter experts, I asked them to detail advice they would give to soldiers needing to build confidence and win trust. This open-ended question produced some interesting and insightful rules of thumb, compiled in figure 3. Soldiers could find this simple list of do’s and don’ts valuable when trying to build confidence.37

Behaviors and attitudes soldiers should adopt include keeping an open mind and planning to change and learn—these stood out among the experts’ responses. Among the behaviors and attitudes to avoid are assuming that indigenous people share one’s thoughts (sometimes called mirror-imaging), rushing people, or talking down to them because they do not speak English—these were emphasized consistently by the experts. Overall, the lesson for would-be confidence builders is that to gain trust, soldiers should treat others as they would like to be treated.38

Conclusion

Human emotion is often hard to fully understand, and even more troublesome to influence or change. Earning the trust of another is a complex endeavor, and many unknowable factors could contribute to success or failure. Therefore, this, or any model of how to build trust, can never be without flaws. Soldiers must apply sound professional judgment that is appropriate for the context of the situation and based on their own experience, training, and intuition. This model provides one way by which a soldier can choose to build confidence and win trust.

It is very unlikely that all future conflicts to which the United States deploys its soldiers will be a carbon copy of Iraq or Afghanistan. However, the nature of conflict and the range of military operations short of full-scale combat will necessitate that soldiers are as skilled in building relationships as they are in employing brute military force.

Overall, I found that if soldiers understand context and apply physical, communication, and relationship measures over time to build confidence, they can succeed in winning the trust of key stakeholders, even in the most complex and challenging environments. Establishing trust is and will remain an essential function, critical to the Army’s ability to win in a complex world.

Figure 3. Confidence-Building Rules of Thumb

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19. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.


30. Ibid.


33. Ibid.


35. Ibid.


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.