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Profiles of Trust:
Who to Turn To,
And for What

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When seeking help from their network, top managers don't leave it to chance. They think strategically about what type of advice to seek from what type of person.

BY CATHLEEN MCGRATH AND DEONE ZELL

BELEAGUERED EXECUTIVES WELL KNOW that “it’s lonely at the top.” Despite craving, as all humans do, a select group of other people with whom they can let down their guards, top managers must also project an image of professionalism and strength. Yet as responsibilities and pressures rise, their need for a support network — typically, to provide candid feedback — only increases. It becomes vital that they be able turn to those they trust, receiving what they need from individuals who, they believe, will not later betray them.

Trust, which we define as the willingness to take risk or be vulnerable to another person when there is something of importance to be lost,¹ plays a key role in the effective functioning of both society and individual organizations. In society, trust leads, for example, to civic engagement² and the development of social capital.³ At the organizational level, trust reduces transaction costs, increases sociability and serves as the basis for cooperation.⁴

Access to a trusted informal network of support is paramount not only for leaders’ performances but also for their mental states.⁵ Having colleagues they can confide in improves their decision making, garners resources and reduces stress. According to Mayer et al.,⁶ the development of trust depends on the degree to which executives perceive the presence of three critical attributes — ability, benevolence and integrity — within their support networks, and their ability to match these qualities with the type of support they seek in any particu-



THE LEADING QUESTION

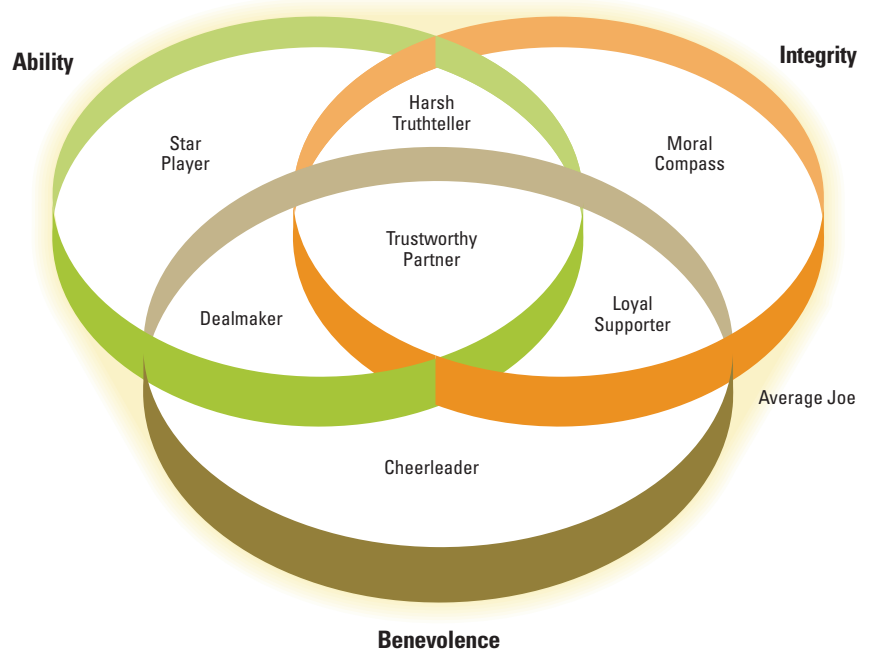
When a top manager needs personal support, who does he or she turn to?

FINDINGS

- ▶ Four different kinds of support may be requested, each having high or low informational complexity and high or low emotional demand.
- ▶ Executives require a support network of eight types of individuals (“profiles”) with whom to match the assistance being sought.
- ▶ These profiles reflect differing combinations of the three facets of trust — ability, integrity and benevolence (“he/she has my interests at heart”).

THE EIGHT PROFILES OF TRUST

Top managers seek several types of help, and to get it they turn to eight types of people — each with different amounts of ability, integrity and benevolence (meaning: has their interests at heart). Smart managers know what kinds of support each of these “profiles” can best provide.



lar situation. Making the wrong match can be costly. Seeking strategic advice, for instance, from an expert number cruncher may produce a formulaic solution, and asking for emotional support from a brilliant but aloof strategist could be fruitless and unwise. Those executives who make the correct match may most effectively obtain the resources they need. (See “Executives’ Need for Social Support.”)

We build on the work of Mayer et al.⁷ to investigate the relationship between support-seeking behavior and these three facets of trust — ability, benevolence and integrity — by investigating the support networks of 50 senior executives at a Fortune 50 technology firm. (See “About the Research.”) Specifically, we develop eight profiles of executives’ network contacts based on all combina-

complexity and extent of emotional demand.

Raw information is primarily data. Characterized by low informational complexity as well as low emotional demand, raw information consists of facts and figures that help executives accomplish work on a daily basis, such as budgetary numbers, meeting dates, competitors’ activities or inventory levels. It is considered the most explicit form of assistance and presumably is also the easiest to obtain via technology.

Actionable advice involves recommendations or suggestions aimed at getting something done. While it entails low emotional demands, actionable advice carries high informational complexity, as in addressing issues of process. For example, an executive may ask a contact about the best way to obtain important sales numbers (e.g., whether to go through official sales channels, the intranet or a particularly in-the-know individual). Although actionable advice typically encompasses data, it also draws out the contact’s experience.

Emotional support, which by definition entails a high level of emotional demand, is usually of low informational complexity. When individuals seek emotional support, they are not necessarily looking for data, solutions or advice as much as someone to listen and help them work through difficult issues at an affective, rather than purely cognitive, level.

Finally, *strategic or political help* calls on the emotional support of contacts as well as their insight. It is high in informational complexity because of the many “moving parts” that need to be considered, and it is high in emotional demand because of the psychological exposure incurred and high stakes faced by the person seeking assistance. Political or strategic help is often critical to individuals attempting to obtain or use power and influence. Examples include advice regarding the best way to enlist the support of key individuals, when to diffuse news of layoffs throughout the company, or the best sales pitch to a possible venture partner.

Profiles of Trust

When top managers reach out for these kinds of personal support, they become vulnerable to bad advice or betrayal. Thus it is important that they match the individual network contact to the type of advice they seek, especially regarding

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This article presents data collected by studying the informal networks of 50 senior leaders across business units and regions in a Fortune 50 technology company. The project was conducted in collaboration with a leadership team that was investigating the impact of social networks on executive performance. The team was specifically interested in examining the criteria that executives use to build their networks and use them strategically.

We developed an online survey to gauge leaders’ attitudes about the value of networking, and we included a modified traditional social-network survey in which respondents were asked to list people from whom they sought different types of advice. For each contact, respondents provided the contact’s geographic location, industry affiliation, hierarchical level, location in the supply chain and an assessment of the contact’s trustworthiness. Findings showed that senior leaders believe strongly in the value of networking both as a means to learn about industry trends and as a way to manage knowledge. Trust emerged as a central issue for executives — a reflection of their attempts to balance their roles and responsibilities as leaders with managing their own personal and career needs in an uncertain environment. This article builds on these themes by developing profiles of trust and matching them to the specific types of support that executives seek.

tions of these three key facets. We then examine the degree to which each profile is sought for the main types of personal support — raw information, actionable advice, strategic or political help, and emotional support — that executives seek in the course of accomplishing organizational objectives and advancing their careers. We argue that each of the four types of support requires different aspects of trust.

Dimensions of Top Managers’ Support

Top managers seek different types of personal support, which vary according to their level of informational

how the contact's "trustworthiness" manifests itself.

Deciding whether or not a potential contact is trustworthy is not a one-dimensional exercise. Rather, as Mayer et al.⁸ describe it, trust is a function of how "trusters" perceive the qualities of their contacts, or "trustees." Specifically, trusters evaluate potential trustees mainly in terms of three basic facets — ability, benevolence and integrity. *Ability* refers to the skill or expertise that enables a party to have influence in a specific domain, though not necessarily in others. Someone high in technical ability or quantitative skills, for example, may not be as skilled in creative thinking or writing. *Benevolence* is the degree to which a trustee is believed to want to do good for the truster — that is, whether the trustee has the truster's best interests at heart. *Integrity* is defined as the trustee's perceived adherence to a set of principles that the truster finds acceptable.

Of course, not everyone possesses high levels of ability, benevolence and integrity. But there may be times when the support being sought doesn't require equal ratings or even high ratings in all three facets. To further explore this idea, we describe contacts as exhibiting one of eight profiles based on their levels of ability, benevolence and integrity. These profiles are called Trustworthy Partner, Harsh Truthteller, Moral Compass, Loyal Supporter, Star Player, Average Joe, Dealmaker and Cheerleader. (See "The Eight Profiles of Trust," p. 75.)

Harsh Truthtellers These people are sought out for their honesty, even if their message initially causes pain. Ironically, by doling out tough love — saying what needs to be said, not necessarily what people want to hear — they may be doing more good for the support-seeker than he or she realizes.

Moral Compasses These individuals are respected by the support-seeker not for their brilliance or benevolence but for their unwavering sense of right and wrong. A manager may seek their guidance when faced with a thorny ethical dilemma.

Loyal Supporters With their hearts in the right place, these people's values are closely aligned with

EXECUTIVES' NEED FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT

As managers move up the organizational hierarchy, their roles and responsibilities change.ⁱ They spend less time supervising internally and more time networking externally, building relationships with customers, clients, vendors and consultants.ⁱⁱ The issues they deal with (such as promoting the company, replacing an executive or acquiring another company) become increasingly sensitive, thus requiring skills in diplomacy and emotional intelligence. Despite their inevitable desire to reach out to others for assistance in dealing with such burdens, managers worry about revealing the vulnerabilities or weaknesses of themselves or their organization. Therefore, the criteria they use to screen members of their support network become more stringent.

While executives realize that seeking personal support may make them vulnerable, they also know it is crucial for their success. Scholars have long recognized the importance of such support, in the form of social relations, as a key factor in health. House et al.ⁱⁱⁱ provide a rich review of the social support and health literature. More recently, scholars have focused on the impact of support networks on organizational effectiveness. Pavett and Lau^{iv} discuss social support in its many forms, including emotional help, information support, instrumental support and appraisal. House et al.^v highlight the importance of the functional content of social relationships, while Wellman and Wortley^{vi} identify the forms of social support as emotional aid, small services, large services, financial aid and companionship.

those of the support-seeker, and their integrity and honor are highly prized. Support-seekers feel safe with Loyal Supporters, who are not intimidating because they are clearly sympathetic. Even if these contacts are not experts in the subject matter of concern, support-seekers may not mind when loyalty is what they happen to need most.

Star Players These people have superior ability. They are experts renowned for their talent but not necessarily for their "people skills." They also may not share the value set of the support-seeker. However, when managers have a specific problem that needs to be solved, they turn to these people for advice because they know it will be first-rate.

Average Joes These are people with moderate levels of ability, benevolence and integrity. They don't stand out in any way but nevertheless may be useful to have around for accomplishing particular tasks.

Dealmakers These people "get things done," often directly and unceremoniously, in a manner reminiscent of, say, a Tony Soprano. They want to help and are well equipped to do so, though sometimes in ways that clash with the support-seeker's values. Still, their methods may work in the interest of support-seekers, who may reluctantly but gratefully accept their assistance (e.g., when the

dealmaker pulls strings to bump them up in the queue for a promotion).

Cheerleaders These people provide unconditional support. They may not be the most brilliant of colleagues or even share the support-seeker's values, but support-seekers turn to Cheerleaders when they are feeling low and need an emotional boost. Their value lies not in their expertise or moral sanctity but in their willingness to "be there," no questions asked, to lend moral support.

Trustworthy Partners Because they "have it all," Trustworthy Partners represent enormous value for the support-seeker — they are capable, have high integrity and have the support-seeker's best interests at heart. They may or may not be friends of the support-seeker, but they are nevertheless likely to be in high demand and of limited availability. Support-seekers may be selective in what they bring to the attention of Trustworthy Partners (i.e., they may go to them for big problems, not for workaday matters).

Executives are likely to build a support network based on different types of relationships with different people (who span the above eight profiles) to obtain the specific kind of support needed at a particular time.⁹ Support sought varies along informational and emotional dimensions. Thus when executives require support that is high in informational complexity — that is, actionable advice or strategic/political help — they will seek out those contacts who they perceive to have high ability. They will also look to contacts with high integrity, as their aligned values will increase the chance that the information will be appropriate. Similarly, when executives seek support that is high in emotionality — emotional support or strategic or political help — they will look to those contacts considered to have high benevolence and integrity.

In particular, executives in need of actionable advice will most often turn to Trustworthy Partners or Harsh Truthtellers, given their high levels of ability and integrity. For strategic or political help, Trustworthy Partners are sought because of their high levels of ability, benevolence and integrity. Seekers of emotional support will look to Loyal

Supporters and Trustworthy Partners because of their high levels of benevolence and integrity. Finally, executives will be willing to go to virtually any of their contacts for raw information; because its informational and emotional demands are low, the three facets of trust are less critical.

A Case Study

We tested the above propositions by examining the support networks of executives in a Fortune 50 technology firm with a diverse product portfolio. In fall 2005, we gathered data from 50 of the organization's leaders — vice presidents, directors, general managers and other executives — who were part of a senior leadership development program. An online survey yielded data on 661 contacts who respondents trusted enough to go to for personal support.

In tabulating how often each of the eight profiles were sought for each type of support, we found statistically significant differences. (See "Where Managers Turn for Help.")

While the Trustworthy Partner was the preferred provider of actionable advice (at 86%) and of strategic or political help (57%), considerable assistance also came from the Harsh Truthteller, who despite this profile's low benevolence often provided both actionable advice (73%) and strategic or political help (45%). Third and fourth in line to provide actionable advice and strategic or political help were Loyal Supporters and Moral Compasses. In the case of emotional support, as the previous analysis would predict, benevolence and integrity were important but ability was not; this points to Loyal Supporters (78%), who weighed in heavier than Trustworthy Partners. Even the Average Joes had a use, as managers turned to them for raw information most often (78%), despite their relatively low levels of ability, benevolence and integrity.

We found that when executives perceived their contacts to have high levels of ability, they tended to seek both types of support that require high informational complexity — actionable advice and political support — from them. When executives perceived their contacts to have high benevolence, they tended to seek both types of support that require high emotionality — strategic and political

help and emotional support (they were also more likely to seek actionable advice from those people). Finally, when executives perceived their contacts to have high integrity, they were more likely to seek support that required either high informational complexity or emotionality — actionable advice, strategic or political help, and emotional support. Interestingly, there seemed to be a negative relationship between all three facets of trust and the seeking of raw information.

Respondents also reported on the impact of each contact on their careers. Not surprisingly, Trustworthy Partners were reported to be the most influential contacts, with 47% making “a great difference” in managers’ careers. Harsh Truthtellers and Loyal Supporters, at 19% each, were tied for second.

To summarize, our findings reveal that the people executives want most in their support networks are Trustworthy Partners — individuals with high levels of all three facets of trust. Next, executives seek Harsh Truthtellers for their brutal honesty, followed by Loyal Supporters for their devotion and Moral Compasses for their admirable ethics. Star Players, recognized for their ability, are noticeably underrepresented, suggesting that ability alone is not enough. Interestingly, Dealmakers and Cheerleaders are virtually absent, likely because of their less-than-stellar levels of integrity. When executives seek emotional support, they shun the Harsh Truthtellers and turn to the Loyal Supporters, presumably because these individuals represent a safe place to land. For raw information, executives turn to Average Joes, likely because the information they provide does not require superior levels of any of the three facets.

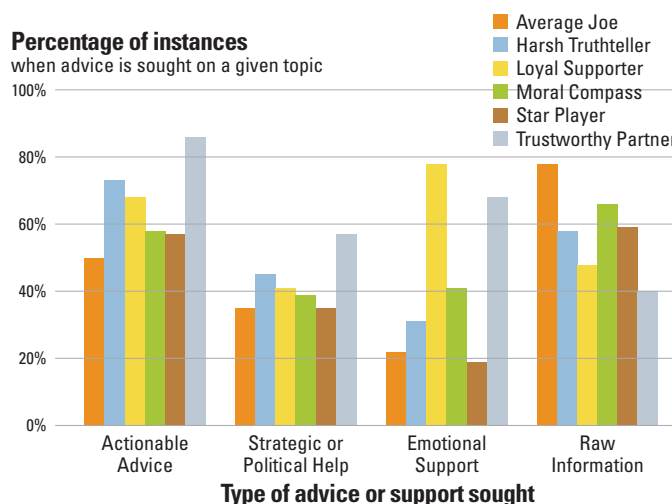
Seeking Support Strategically

In their 2003 study of interpersonal trust in knowledge-sharing networks, Abrams et al. intentionally omitted integrity (focusing only on ability and benevolence) because, they reasoned, “it is not clear that seeking a person out for information or advice is contingent on that person following a particular set of principles consistently.”¹⁰ By contrast, the present study has found that high integrity is quite important when the support being sought is high in informational complexity or emotionality. It is also the characteristic most widely possessed by individuals in executives’ support networks. Thus our

WHERE MANAGERS TURN FOR HELP

Though managers almost always seek help from a mixture of supporter types, they strongly favor some types over others depending on the kind of help needed. Harsh Truthtellers, for instance, are asked for help 73% of times that actionable advice is needed, but get tapped only 31% of times when managers are seeking emotional support.

Percentage of instances
when advice is sought on a given topic



finding is consistent with Jarvenpaa et al.,¹¹ who found that for virtual teams (sometimes spread across the globe), trust was predicted by team members’ perceptions of others’ integrity.

Warren Bennis calls integrity one of the basic ingredients of leadership, along with guiding vision, passion, curiosity and daring.¹² He also notes that integrity is the basis of trust, and he adds that trust is the only characteristic that cannot be acquired but must be earned. Integrity is closely related to corporate culture, which is the set of values that guide an organization’s behaviors.¹³ An executive must have confidence that a contact will consistently act in accordance with those values in order to fulfill the organizational mission with honor. At a personal level, having one’s values and assumptions aligned with those of another individual reduces the chances that the vulnerability implicit in asking for help will be exploited.

Low levels of integrity, by contrast, likely explain the relative paucity of Dealmakers and Cheerleaders in executives’ support networks. While dealmakers may occasionally be useful, having an excess of people who are only loosely aligned with one’s personal or organizational value system could be unproductive. Similarly, individuals whose only saving grace is high benevolence may be viewed as relatively useless,

given the high-stakes, strategic and often-cutthroat interactions at the top levels. In other words, executives who have developed thick skins and strong elbows on their way to the top want ability or impeccable values, not friendliness, most of all.

Thus, as confirmed in this study, top managers think strategically about what type of advice to seek from what type of person, rather than leaving it to chance. And given that executives tend to find that the network of people they can trust is shrinking as they climb the ladder, they should be sure to utilize their network judiciously. For example, an executive might not want to seek emotional support from a Star Player, whose strong suit is ability, or to seek raw information from a Trustworthy Partner, who is better consulted for strategic advice. Clearly, top managers should carefully assess contacts in terms of their trust profile and tap them accordingly — as opposed, say, to indiscriminate and often inappropriate reliance on homophily (bonding with similar others) or friends.¹⁴

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