Hardly any aspect of human relationships is more fundamental than trust. Luhmann (1979) writes “trust, in the broadest sense of confidence in one’s expectations, is a basic fact of social life.” Trust is multi-faceted, involving competency, reliance, and integrity and is the glue that ensures society acts coherently and with purpose. In its absence, conflict and contention reign, with social action dominated by adhocracy and self-interest.

Given its centrality to effective social action, one would expect that understanding of the concept of trust was highly refined. Yet, the literature reveals a notion of complexity, disparate dimensions and meaning. Rousseau et al. (1998: 394) conclude there is “no universally accepted scholarly definition of trust.” However, these authors recognize the conditions necessary for trust to arise. First, there must be a condition of risk; trust would not be necessary if actions could be taken with complete certainty. Second, trust requires a state of interdependence; the interests of one party cannot be achieved without reliance upon another. Taken together, these conditions produce definitions such as ”undertaking a risky course of action on the confident expectation that all persons involved in the action will act competently and dutifully” (Lewis & Weigert 1985, p. 971).

In addition to risk and interdependence, other assumptions regarding trust include:

- Trust is dynamic and can move through cycles of building, stability, and dissolution. A state of trust is always tenuous and provisional.

- Trust exists as multiple variables; it can occur as an independent (causal) variable, as a dependent (effect) variable, or as an interaction variable (a moderating condition for a causal relationship).

- Trust occurs at different scales. A particular concern with regard to the role of trust and implementation of the NFP is that trust exists among individuals (e.g., citizens and resource managers) as well as at the institutional level (e.g., between citizens and the Bureau of Land Management). Trust at one level does not necessarily translate to other levels.

- Trust manifests itself in different forms. It can arise from the commonality between individuals or groups that “serve as indicators of membership in a common cultural system” (e.g., race, gender, “good old boys”). It can develop from repeated exchanges over time, perhaps initiated by self-interest or imposed by external requirements, but which “become overlaid with social expectations that carry strong expectation of trust and abstention from opportunism.” Finally, trust can arise from institutions that have become accepted social facts; e.g., we place trust in the presence of professional credentials or in the rules and regulations that government imposes.

Given the importance of trust to the functioning of society, what can be said about contemporary systems of governance in general and about the NFP and management of the region’s forests in particular? First, our fundamental system of governance, grounded in a system of checks and balances, derives from the Founding Father’s underlying distrust of government. This manifests itself in the relation among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, each acting to assess, and if necessary, constrain, actions of the others. It also recognizes that we are an interest-based, competitive society; in many ways, collaboration, networks, and partnerships are unnatural acts.

Second, over the past decades, public faith in government and in the institutions of governance has declined steadily. More than six in ten Americans feel a sense of powerlessness and disenchantment with these institutions (Wondolleck & Yaffee 2000). While 75% of Americans said they trusted the federal government in 1964, this figure...
fell to 25% by 1997. Similar declines were reported for other institutions, including universities (61 to 30%), medical institutions (73 to 29%), and major companies (55 % to 21%). The reasons underlying these declines are unclear, but appear to trace to a general sense of the inability of these institutions to solve a range of social ills.

Third, the socio-political context that brought the President of the United States and a number of his cabinet to Portland, Oregon in 1993 was one of deep divisions and distrust. These divisions lay along a number of axes; rural-urban, economic development vs. environmental protection, local vs. national control. The sum result was a high level of distrust between and among the citizenry and managing authorities, industry, and NGOs.

Finally, the NWP and the process through which it was fashioned were steeped in distrust. Both managers and citizens largely were excluded from the FEMAT process, despite promises of a more collaborative approach to forest planning. The exclusion of managers, in particular, was taken by many as an indication of a lack of trust in their ability to manage the region’s forests appropriately. Once completed, the NWP has further fostered unfulfilled expectations that have in turn exacerbated distrust; concerns regarding promised timber harvest levels, species protection, adaptive management, and a more open, collaborative approach to manage have contributed to this situation.

One implication of this legacy of distrust is that it compromises the level of social acceptability needed to successfully implement the NWP. Context is critical to trust and to fashioning social acceptability; as the above discussion suggests the socio-political context within which forest management in the region and the NWP exist is characterized as one of conflict, contention, and distrust. Irrespective of the Plan’s scientific rigor and economic feasibility, a lack of public accord with its goals and policies constrains successful implementation. Although many problems face successful implementation, a lack of trust lies at the core of opposition.

What can be done to restore a sufficient level of trust to the debate over forest management to recapture the sense of positive change the President’s Forest Conference conveyed a decade ago? First, it is important to acknowledge that trust cannot be created in a mechanistic manner; restoring trust is not equivalent to restoring riparian conditions. Trust is earned, based on action and outcomes, not rhetoric. It derives from long-term relationships in which there is a continued demonstration of good faith and follow-through. A recurring message in the literature is “do what you say you will do.” In their study of partnerships, Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000, p.149) report “Quite simply, successful partnerships kept their promise to one another in a variety of ways.”

Second, trust is a provisional quality of any relationship, requiring constant tending and attention. It is also asymmetric; while the building phase can be lengthy, it can be diminished in a moment. Also, it is not a dichotomous condition (I trust you or I don’t). Trust and distrust can exist simultaneously. We must also distinguish between personal trust, grounded in honesty, benevolence, and reciprocity and organizational trust, founded on concerns with fairness and equity. Trust can exist between individuals—e.g., local citizens and the ranger—but if the organization is perceived as untrustworthy, then it will be difficult to fashion productive relationships. In an evaluation of the adaptive management program in the NFP, one citizen commented “I trust our local district ranger to do the right thing, but I don’t trust the Forest Service to let him do it.”

Institutions can make a difference in trust building. For example, they can demonstrate an openness and willingness to engage in self-criticism; this conference represents an example of that. They can promote organizational stability and clear role expectations for employees; however, the current turmoil generated by downsizing and re-engineering act to diminish both. Although regulations provide one means of building shared understanding regarding appropriate and expected behavior, they also undermine trust by substituting formalization for flexible, context-specific management approaches. But the bottom line remains straightforward: organizations that operate openly, transparently, and honestly and that strive to follow through on their promises have an opportunity to foster the trust needed to do their job and to survive politically. Those that don’t, won’t.


SYNTHESIS REPORT - Social, Economic & Human Dimensions

Research Social Scientist, Human and Natural Resources Interaction Program, Pacific Northwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service- 3200 SW Jefferson Way, Corvallis, OR