

## **Trust in Change Managers: The Role of Affect**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The aims of the study are to explore what meanings organizational actors and researchers invest in the term trust, to provide insights from a qualitative perspective of employees' trust in their supervisors and in organizational management when change occurs, and to highlight the affective components of trust in this context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A social constructionist platform is used to explore how organizational actors form perceptions of the trustworthiness of managers of change and what emotions result. 24 participants from different organizations and hierarchical positions were interviewed on a variety of change experiences.

**Findings** – Positive and negative emotions were related to trust in the ability, benevolence and integrity of immediate supervisors and more senior change managers. The emotions were more intense for distrust than for trust. Some participants referred to challenges to their own integrity. Perceptions of organizational justice during change were important contributors to the creation and erosion of trust in management.

**Research limitations/implications** – The relevance of propensity to trust and pre-existing levels of trust were not investigated and researching these factors, particularly in longitudinal studies, will provide a clearer picture of emotional responses to the perceived trustworthiness of change managers. Exploring cross-cultural issues in the trustworthiness of change leaders would add depth to the field.

**Practical implications** – Developing trust in management through transparency, other fair practices and a positive organizational culture will help to gain commitment to organizational change.

**Originality/value** – This study adds to the scant literature on qualitative investigations of trust, emotions and organizational change by presenting insights from an analysis of employees' trust in the ability, benevolence and integrity of their own supervisors and those of more senior management in a range of organizations and types of change.

**Key words** Trust, Trustworthiness, Affect, Change, Managers, Qualitative research

**Paper type** Research paper

### **Introduction**

When change is announced in an organization staff *hope* that the outcomes for themselves (and at times for others too) will be favourable. Some might *expect* the outcomes to be positive and that their supervisor and/or higher levels of management will take their needs into account. The level of *trust* therefore becomes a critical factor in influencing how the employees think, feel and act with respect to the current change. Previous studies have shown trust in leaders to be an important element of organizational change, either as an antecedent or as a consequence of relationships at work (Neves and Caetano, 2009; Saunders and Thornhill, 2003). Many authors have identified organizational justice as a key ingredient in the development and decline of trust in management (e.g. Chory and Hubbell, 2008; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011) and change is one context that heightens perceptions of fairness (Hopkins and Weathington, 2006; Lines *et al.*, 2005).

In scholarly studies, the construct of trust has been conceptualized as operating on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels (e.g. Lewicki *et al.* 2006; McAllister, 1995). As a word in common parlance, trust is a social construction that aids in sensemaking about relationships and decision-making (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Sensemaking is primarily a cognitive process of seeking to understand the world and people around us (Weick, 1995). Adabor (2005) argues that trust advances (or retreats) as part of an incremental sensemaking process in which each new action of others provides added information on their trustworthiness and influences the future behaviour of the trustor. As a “mixture of retrospect and prospect” (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 413), sensemaking occurs when “Communication, interaction, feedback and self-reflection combine and recombine in fluid networked, evolving social worlds” (Magala, 2009, p. 46). Relationships have emotional components of varying intensity and, according to Weick (1995), emotion often accompanies sensemaking as events unfold. He argues that a process of sensemaking begins or is reconstituted when there is an

“interruption” (for example, an organizational change) and this triggers a response which is “infused with feeling” (p. 45).

The affective element of trust has, however, been understudied (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006; Young and Daniel, 2003) even though Simpson (2007, p. 264) maintains that in any form of relationship, “Trust involves the juxtaposition of people’s loftiest hopes and aspirations with their deepest worries and fears.” Organizational change evokes emotional reactions with respect to both processes and outcomes and can be a major contributor to employee commitment or resistance to change (Piderit, 2000; Smollan, 2011). Perceptions of the roles of leaders are often pivotal (Szabla, 2007) and their trustworthiness is an important element in employees’ affective responses to change.

Definitions of trust have seldom been in agreement in literature on social psychology (Simpson, 2007), sociology (Barbalet, 2009) or management/organizational behaviour (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; Schoorman *et al.*, 2007). Another feature of the literature is that the bulk of studies of trust are quantitative investigations in which differing constructs have been operationalized as measures. There is scant qualitative research into the perceived trustworthiness of leaders and, in particular, how the emotional dimensions of trust influence commitment or resistance to change.

The nature of the trustee has varied across studies. Researchers have surveyed trust of employees in the immediate supervisor (Chory and Hubell, 2008; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011), in a “proximal leader” and a “distal leader” (Frazier *et al.*, 2010), in management (Clark and Payne, 1997), in the immediate supervisor and in supervisors as a group (Shamir and Lapidot, 2003), in co-workers (Gill *et al.*, 2005) and in co-managers (McAllister, 1995). In studies of organizational change, Neves and Caetano (2009) focused on trust in the immediate supervisor, Lines *et al.* (2005), Hopkins and Weathington (2006) and Pugh *et al.* (2003)

concentrated on trust in management and Ferres *et al.* (2005) investigated trust in management and trust in peers.

The aims of this article are threefold: to explore what meanings organizational actors and researchers invest in the term trust, to provide insights from a qualitative perspective of employees' trust in their supervisors and in organizational management when change occurs, and to highlight the affective components of trust in this context.

## **Literature review**

### *The meaning of trust*

Overviews of trust in organizational relationships (e.g. Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006; Lewicki *et al.*, 2006; Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; Schoorman *et al.*, 2007) reveal a multitude of constructions of trust and the identification of many aspects of it, for example, the cognitive, affective and behavioural elements, trustor propensity, perceived trustee characteristics, the intra- and inter-organizational positions of trustor and trustee and the causes and consequences of trust relationships and actions.

An early definition by Rotter (1967, p. 664) held trust to be “a generalized expectancy that the verbal statements of others can be relied upon.” According to Gurtman (1992, p. 989), it is an individual's belief in the sincerity, benevolence or truthfulness of others, whereas McAllister (1995, p. 25) defines it as “the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of the words, actions, and decisions of another.” One of the most influential definitions is that provided by Mayer *et al.* (1995, p. 712), who see trust as:

the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or confront that other party.

It is notable, as Lewicki *et al.* (1998) point out, that some authors regard distrust as the opposite of trust and in quantitative studies they form opposites on a unipolar scale. If trust is

the expectation that others will be concerned for our welfare, distrust can be conceived as the expectation that others will not be acting in our best interests, or worse, will do us harm. However, Lewicki *et al.* conceptualize trust and distrust as two distinct but related constructs which can be measured on bipolar scales. The trustor can trust the trustee in some ways but not in others. As Lewicki *et al.* (2006) put it, the issue becomes who can be trusted to do what. For example, an employee could trust a supervisor to be concerned for the welfare of staff but distrust him/her to recommend salary increases, or to trust that supervisor to show considerable technical ability in managing a change but act without benevolence or integrity. This degree of ambivalence, they assert, is quite realistic given the complexity of organizational relationships and the degree to which trust fluctuates over time. Low trust may be based on little prior knowledge of the trustee, and this may evolve into a higher level of trust or distrust as experience in the relationship presents new information that cues a further round of sensemaking (Adabor, 2005).

The initial focus on the personality of the trustor (Gurtman, 1992; Rotter, 1967) was supplemented by investigations into the perceived trustworthiness of the trustee and a number of dimensions have been proposed. Table 1 contains those dimensions proposed by four sets of researchers and interpreted by Dietz and Den Hartog (2006) following their meta-analysis of 14 measures. Similar dimensional terms are presented in rows.

Authors	Gurtman, 1992	Mayer et al., 1995	McAllister, 1995	Clark and Payne, 1997	Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006
Focus of trust perceptions		Intra- and inter-organizational trust	Managers' trust in peers	Employees' trust in management	Trust in organizational relationships
Dimensions of trustworthiness		Ability	Competence	Competence	Ability
	Benevolence	Benevolence	Care/concern	Loyalty/ benevolence Respect shown	Benevolence
	Truthfulness Sincerity	Integrity		Integrity Openness	Integrity
			Reliability/ Dependability Responsibility	Consistency	Predictability

**Table I: Dimensions of trustworthiness**

It is noteworthy that most authors, apart from Gurtman (1992), list ability or competence as one variable, and that all embrace some element of what was early on termed “character” (see Colquitt *et al.*, 2007 and Mayer *et al.*, 1995). Gurtman (1992) separates truthfulness from sincerity while Clark and Payne (1997) distinguish between integrity and openness. Dietz and Den Hartog (2006) conclude after their meta-analysis that trustworthiness can be condensed into four dimensions – ability, benevolence, integrity and predictability. However, Mayer *et al.* (1995) regard consistency as an element of integrity (in one sense this would mean treating people equally and therefore fairly) and predictability to be an insufficient basis for trust. Trustworthiness terms become very important when quantitative researchers build them into measures and their qualitative colleagues incorporate them into interview questions or interpret respondent comments as reflections on elements of trustworthiness.

Researchers have contrasted trust with cynicism and argue that despite some common ground they are separate constructs. Dean *et al.* (1998) propose that one difference is that organizational cynicism is a negative and pessimistic attitude based on experience, whereas trust, defined as the willingness to be vulnerable, may be due to a lack of experience. Some studies of change have included measures of both trust and cynicism (e.g. Pugh *et al.*, 2003; Stanley *et al.*, 2005) with strong degrees of fit between them. The latter group of authors conclude that cynicism might be a sufficient condition for distrust but not a necessary one.

### *Trust and emotions*

Many interpersonal organizational relationships have affective elements. Some studies of trust note the warmth and affection that infuse trusting relationships and the feelings of pain that erupt when trust is damaged. Lewicki *et al.* (2006) point out that some constructions of trust focus on a rational, calculative approach but that others include affective elements. With

respect to the latter, Lewis and Weigert (1985) note the central importance of emotion in trust; McAllister (1995) distinguishes between cognition-based trust and affect-based trust with some level of the former being necessary for the evolution of the latter; Cummings and Bromiley (1996) assert that cognition, emotion and intention are distinct but inter-related facets of trust and Young and Daniel's (2003) model of affectual trust proposes that different emotions surface in the building, sustaining and enjoyment of relationships. Barbalet (2009) observes that trust-related emotions may be rational or irrational, as they are in other aspects of human relationships and Weick (1995) notes that emotion can be woven into sensemaking processes as actors come to terms with new information about relationships. It is noticeable that breaches of trust unleash powerful emotions (Lewis and Weigert, 1985) when tangible outcomes are unfavourable for the trustor and his or her sense of identity is threatened.

### *Trust and fairness*

It is unsurprising that many studies of trust incorporate the concept of fairness. The term benevolence implies that the trustee will look after the interests of the trustor, and, as Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) have suggested, people tend to view decisions through an injustice lens when outcomes are unfavourable. Fairness is often seen as an outcome of integrity in that management decisions are unbiased and honest (Colquitt and Rodell, 2011). Clark and Payne's (1997) use fairness in their definition of consistency, which is one of Leventhal's (1980) rules of procedural justice.

A widely-used taxonomy of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001) has identified four distinct but inter-related types. *Distributive justice* refers to the fairness of decision outcomes in organizations that include remuneration, benefits, workload and workspace. Perceptions of *procedural justice* are based on evaluations of the processes that led to the decisions and are enhanced when staff members participate in decision-making (Lines *et al.*, 2005). What is

termed interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986) was later separated into *informational justice* (perceptions of the fullness, timeliness and accuracy of information about processes and outcomes) and *interpersonal justice* (the respect and sensitivity with which managers communicate both processes and outcomes of decisions)(Bies, 2005; Colquitt, 2001; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2007). *Systemic justice* is an overarching concept that encompasses all these types of justice in one organization and forms part of the organizational culture (Beugré and Baron, 2001). Fairness Heuristic Theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001) proposes that in the absence of evidence to trust managers or the organization, the employee uses perceptions of justice as proxies and focuses on what type of justice seems to be most salient at the time. Studies have demonstrated how employees' perceptions of different types of fairness are strongly related to trust in their immediate supervisors (Chory and Hubbell, 2008; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011), in the immediate supervisor and higher-level management (Frazier *et al.*, 2010) and in the overall management of the organization (Vanhala *et al.*, 2011). Studies of organizational change have demonstrated how perceptions of justice and injustice have emotional overtones that contribute to commitment and resistance to change (e.g. Barclay *et al.*, 2005; Saunders and Thornhill, 2003; Smollan, 2012).

Another construct of relevance to studies of trust is the psychological contract, an employee's perception of mutual obligations (Chaudry *et al.*, 2011; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). In a 32-item list of psychological contract items valued most by employees, Lester and Kickul (2001) found that participants ranked trust and respect, open and honest communication, and fair treatment as second, third and fourth in importance and competent management as eighth. When perceived promises are not kept by the immediate supervisor or the organization, employees tend to react very negatively (Robinson, 1996; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). These unintended breaches or deliberate violations of the psychological contract are viewed by employees as unfair (Kickul *et al.*, 2002). Anger, shock, frustration,

fear and feelings of betrayal can result when employees believe that the trust they have placed in management has been shattered. Betrayal, according to Elangovan and Shapiro (1998, p. 546) is a “voluntary violation of mutually known pivotal expectations of the trustor by the trusted party (trustee), which has the potential to threaten the well-being of the trustor.” As Lewis and Weigert (1985, p. 971) contend, “the emotional outrage” that occurs is testimony to how the “betrayal of trust strikes a deadly blow at the foundation of the relationship itself.”

### *Organizational change, emotions and trust*

Organizational change is one context where emotions surface because of the impact of positive and negative outcomes, both tangible and socio-emotional, and the processes that led to them (Piderit, 2000; Smollan, 2012; Szabla, 2007). Lines *et al.* (2005) point out that in times of change issues of trust in management become salient as employees expect or hope that their needs will be taken into account. Atkinson and Butcher (2003, p. 285) argue that “While trust appears to build incrementally, mistrust has a more ‘catastrophic quality’”. Organizational change is one area where trust in management can disappear suddenly, with telling consequences.

In varying contexts of organizational change, some empirical studies have focused on trust in an individual supervisor while others have examined trust in management in general. Neves and Caetano (2009) demonstrated how trust in their supervisors’ competence, concern and reliability led to affective commitment in employees, reduced turnover intentions, spurred more organizational citizenship behaviours and improved performance. Korsgaard *et al.* (2002) reported that procedural justice perceptions raised levels of trust in management, while Ferres *et al.*, (2005) discovered that employees trust in management was related to perceptions of transformational leadership and procedural justice.

In terms of the emotional aspects of change, Paterson and Cary (2002) found that the anxiety of downsizing lowered trust in management but that interactional justice raised it. Lines *et al.* (2005) discovered that trust in management increased through participation in decision-making but dropped when employees experienced emotional strain. Oreg (2006) only examined trust in management's ability, which he found reduced cognitive, affective and behavioural forms of resistance to change.

In a qualitative study of conflict and change (Cohen *et al.*, 2006, p. 323), one of the respondents said that the supervisor "has been a very good leader. He's got a lot of integrity and you can trust that if he tells you something in his office, it's the same thing he's going to say behind closed doors." In a rare qualitative study focused on trust, justice, emotions and change, Saunders and Thornhill (2003), commented that respondents who judged themselves as trusting felt that they were valued and respected by senior management. This reinforces the notion that processes of change have socio-emotional as well more tangible outcomes. Given the paucity of qualitative research, a new study was designed to shed further light on the affective aspects of trust in individual supervisors and the management of the organization in different change contexts.

## **Methods**

### *The social construction of trust and trustworthiness*

This article adopts a social constructionist perspective. Employees in organizations, including managers, develop their own versions of 'reality' from the many experiences they have had (Schwandt, 2003). Some of these experiences lead to perceptions of the trustworthiness of their leaders or of the organization itself (Barbalet, 2009; Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Vanhala *et al.*, 2011). Employees' views are not only based on their own interactions with their immediate supervisors or with other levels of management, but also from their exposure to

workplace discourses on trust (Shamir and Lapidot, 2003). Conversations about managerial actions contribute to constructions of organizational justice, as Lamertz (2002) discovered, and discourses about managerial trustworthiness likewise help to inform follower opinions of leaders. Trustworthiness terms become very important when quantitative researchers build them into measures and their qualitative colleagues analyze interview data and discourses within organizations.

The few qualitative investigations of trust in supervisors or organizational management reflect the constructions of the researchers in the nature of the questions they asked or the interpretations they made of their respondents' answers. In their study, Young and Daniel (2003) studiously avoided using the word trust and noted that it was infrequently used by their respondents. They chose instead to analyze the responses using their own constructs of trustworthiness (including management's lack of sympathy, concern or competence) and the emotions that were generated. In another study, Saunders and Thornhill (2003) first asked respondents in a restructured organization to sort 40 cards of positive and negative emotions into those they felt and did not feel about the change. Cards containing the terms "trusting" and "mistrustful" were also included. Following this classification, respondents engaged in an unstructured interview on their three strongest emotions and what had elicited them. The authors then analyzed responses in terms of whether the respondents had chosen the trusting or mistrustful card or neither.

While social constructionism lies comfortably in the interpretive methodological field it is clear that positivist approaches are not devoid of processes of social construction. Quantitative researchers choose a construct to study, such as trust or trustworthiness, define it, and develop their own measures or adopt those created by others, to demonstrate cause and effect relationships. Some go even further. For example, in developing their instruments on trust, Vanhala *et al.* (2011) and Shamir and Lapidot (2003) used different types of focus

groups to identify key concepts. Academic discourses of trust (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003) reveal the lack of agreement on definitions of trust (see Barbalet, 2009; Rousseau et al, 1998; Schoorman *et al.*, 2007), and in investigating the dimensions of trust that researchers use, it is evident that they have chosen to invest their questionnaire items with meanings that are socially constructed.. Furthermore, as Kvale (2002, p. 304) argues, “A construct and its measurement are validated when the discourse about their relationship is persuasive to the community of researchers.”

The range of questions included in surveys on trust in management can vary substantially, but regardless of the breadth and depth of the trust measures, researchers make claims for their relevance. For example, the instruments of Cummings and Bromiley (1996) and of Vanhala *et al.* (2011) contain about 60 items on trust. Clark and Payne (1997) created 26 items for each of the cognitive, affective and behavioural levels of trust workers have in management but then eliminated the affective questions (phrased as, “How happy are you with this situation?”) because of the high correlations between the belief and affect items. Shamir and Lapidot (2003) asked 28 questions on supervisor trustworthiness and nine on supervisors as a category. In their meta-analysis of 14 measures of trust in various organizational relationships, Dietz and Den Hartog (2006) applied their own interpretations of how the items corresponded to dimensions of trustworthiness.

In contrast, other authors have incorporated only a few trust measures into multi-factor surveys of organizational change with Morgan and Zeffane (2003) using one question to measure trust in management, Oreg (2006, p. 87) relying on three items to measure trust in the *ability* of “the leader of this change” or in “the organization’s management” and Korsgaard *et al.* (2002) and Lines *et al.* (2005) using the same four items from the Roberts and O’Reilly (1974) instrument.

It thus becomes clear that the meanings quantitative researchers attach to the words “trust” and “trustworthiness”, and how they measure them, are subject to processes of social construction, an issue that Kvale (2002) points out is an inherent but often over-looked feature of quantitative studies.

Regardless of the paradigm wars that have been fought, or are still being fought (Denzin, 2010), neither quantitative nor qualitative forms of research are value free. Rather, they are laden with the socially-constructed terms that the different advocates use in researching trust in managers of change. Organizational actors, who are the participants in research studies, then apply their own socially-constructed meanings of trustworthiness but these may be strongly influenced by the language used by the researcher. Alvesson (2003, p. 25) therefore cautions scholars against using “a definitive theoretical formulation and privileged vocabulary for grasping it.”

#### *Participants, procedures and data analysis*

As part of a research study into affective responses to change, 24 participants in New Zealand were recruited through a number of management consultants. They were from different ethnic groups (16 White, two Maori, three Pacific Island and three Asian) and comprised 11 women and 13 men who were in their 30s, 40s and 50s and who had worked in a variety of functional roles, hierarchical levels, industries and organizations. The changes they reported on included mergers and acquisitions, restructuring, downsizing, job redesign, relocation and cultural change.

The semi-structured interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were designed to surface the participants’ emotional responses to an organizational change, their cognitive antecedents and behavioural consequences. Early questions were asked, *inter alia*, about the scale and speed of the change, the outcomes for the participant and other staff and the

relevance of personality and previous experience of change. Given the relationships between organizational justice and trust discussed by scholars, questions were asked about their perceptions of justice (distributive, procedural, informational and interpersonal) and the emotions these elicited.

Towards the end of the interview three questions were posed that directly related to issues of trust:

*How well was the change managed by your manager and more senior managers?*

*How did their leadership ability affect how you thought, felt and behaved in terms of the change?*

*Did the way they managed the change affect your perceptions of how trustworthy they were?*

The first two questions did not use the word trust but were designed to elicit comments on the perceived ability of change managers and the consequences for the participants. The third, on trustworthiness, was designed to focus on the perceived benevolence and integrity of these managers. These three dimensions are the essence of the research studies of Mayer and colleagues (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Mayer and Davis, 1999; Schoorman *et al.*, 2007) and have also been used in studies by other quantitative researchers (e.g. Colquitt and Rodell, 2011; Frazier *et al.*, 2010; Gill *et al.*, 2005; Shamir and Lapidot, 2003).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants were given codes from the alphabet in the order in which they were interviewed. Comments were made on the transcripts that related specifically to the questions above and other responses that reflected some facet of trust. To facilitate analysis, tables were drawn up on ability, benevolence and integrity. It became clear in analyzing the transcripts that participants could clearly distinguish between their trust in their own supervisors from trust in higher levels of management and both were included in the tables.

Two further features were added to the tables. While they had not been asked to comment on employee perceptions of management trustworthiness, a number of participants chose to do so. Secondly, an unexpected series of responses surfaced with respect to participant's comments on their own levels of trustworthiness, mostly with reference to the concept of integrity.

## **Findings**

The findings focus directly on trust rather than on justice, except where questions on the latter elicited answers to the former. They are firstly divided into the three dimensions of trustworthiness devised by Mayer *et al.* (1995), ability, benevolence and integrity, and then categorized as the participants' trust in their immediate supervisors, their trust in more senior management and their perception of other employees' trust in the organization. Summaries of participants' remarks are accompanied by a series of tables in each section which contain selected quotes that highlight both trust and distrust in the context of organizational change. To provide some degree of context, more detail is provided on one or two participants' experience in each section and the emotions that arose in terms of trustworthiness. Towards the end of the findings a section on participant responses is included that was not initially foreseen – the participants perceptions of their own level of integrity as part of a management team and the emotions thus triggered.

### *Trust in ability*

*The participants' trust in their immediate supervisors:* The word ability was constructed by participants in several ways. Some took it to mean the technical knowledge and skills of their bosses in managing change while others viewed it as involving issues of inter-personal communication, consultation and decision-making. Given that the question on

ability was asked before that on trust, it was unsurprising that some participants chose to include matters of benevolence and integrity in judging how ably their supervisors had managed the change under discussion. For example, some participants valued the support given to them by their supervisors which could be interpreted either as a sign of benevolence or as a means of achieving effective outcomes. Positive emotional reactions tended to involve muted forms of admiration and contentment.

Trust	Distrust
<p>She handled the change “on the whole pretty well, primarily because she took a lot of advice”. (E)</p> <p>His leadership was “strong” because he “managed to keep the team cohesive, kept us focused on our objective as a team.” (O)</p>	<p>“He was a crap manager...He wasn’t very competent...just bumbled along and hoped things worked out...He was supposed to consult with one business unit and he simply didn’t do it...and I had this overwhelming sense of responsibility that if he didn’t do, I had to do it.” (B)</p>

**Table II: The participants’ trust in the ability of their immediate supervisors**

Comments on the inefficiency of their bosses tended to produce more marked affective reactions. For example, B was a human resources officer involved in a major downsizing initiative in a large service organization. She believed that she had been allocated responsibilities that were well beyond her experience and her ability to deal with them. For example, she claimed to have worked several 90 hour weeks and to have handled over 1000 redundancies notices herself. She spoke of her anxiety and anger when overloaded with difficult tasks and unrealistic expectations and the guilt she had felt if she had not achieved the tasks she had been set. Despite her manager’s perceived competence, she alleged, with some degree of ambivalence, that he was not untrustworthy, simply naïve.

*The participants’ trust in more senior management:* There were both positive and negative comments about how the participants’ more senior managers had managed the change. Some remarks were directly concerned with specific high level managers, others with more senior management in general. Here, too, the emotion associated with trustworthiness was one of satisfaction and was of lower intensity than the frustration and anger expressed at managerial incompetence.

Trust	Distrust
<p>“They [the senior management of the acquired organization] showed huge leadership in being able to step back from their personal situation and recognize that we couldn’t afford as a sector to lose this talent.” (P)</p> <p>“It [the sale of the business] was handled as well as could be expected given the imperatives from the owners.” (C)</p>	<p>“Nobody [in the acquiring organization] was talking to us about why these things were happening...we did not believe the change was going to be effective.” (P)</p> <p>“There was no clear framework or guidelines... there was no real project management in that organization.” (B)</p> <p>“Things were taken too far. Too many people were taken out in the restructuring. Too many mistakes were made...I’d give it a six out of ten.” (F)</p> <p>“We lost trust and then lost respect and then didn’t have any confidence in her ability to lead.” (O)</p>

**Table III: The participants’ trust in the ability of more senior management**

As a senior manager, P spoke glowingly of how the management of her public sector organization, which had been merged with a bigger entity, had succeeded in retaining key members of staff. The admiration she showed for the elements of the change for which they were responsible was in marked contrast to the anger she felt towards the management of the bigger agency that was in control after the merger. She also showed a considerable degree of frustration that the larger organization showed little understanding of the functions and culture of the smaller unit and made unilateral decisions about structure and resourcing.

*The participants’ perceptions of the employees’ trust in the organization:* Only one offered a reflection on other employees’ views of how well the organization had managed a change. In a position of middle management of a manufacturing organization, F remembered how frustrated and dissatisfied staff (at various levels) had felt when the executives of the holding company and their consultants had returned to the overseas head office after the announcement of a major restructuring that involved some downsizing. Despite some consultation, according to F, local input appeared to have been ignored, and the management and staff of the New Zealand subsidiary were required to figure out the details. The lack of clarity and the uncertainty it produced were most unwelcome.

Trust	Distrust
	“All of the people who had the knowledge about how the structure was supposed to work left. Either the senior managers went back to Australia or left, or the consultants buggered off as well, so you were left with nobody who really understood how this thing was supposed to work.” (F)

**Table IV: The participants’ perceptions of the employees’ trust in the ability of the organization**

*Trust in benevolence*

*The participants’ trust in their immediate supervisors:* A number of managers took comfort from the psychological and tangible support provided by their supervisors and particularly appreciated it when they sought to protect their interests. The positive emotions experienced were in stark contrast to the anger, resentment and fear reported by participants whose managers showed considerable disrespect. A few of those who were in management positions were somewhat disappointed that their supervisors had not given them sufficient support and encouragement, particularly when they were experiencing difficulties in managing the emotions of more junior level staff.

Trust	Distrust
“He wanted to do right by me...he did his best to accommodate me.” (C) “He would always do the best that he could for me...He was always instantly concerned to do something about it. He’d know I was down...so I think he was very helpful.” (F)	“He can be a proper bastard when he wants to.” (C) “He always called himself a benevolent despot...so I questioned everything he did.” (D) “Our direct manager was quite a hostile sort of guy...his best form of defence was to attack.” (K) “He yelled, ranted and raved... I was devastated...so the emotions were anger, frustration.” (M)

**Table V: The participants’ trust in the benevolence of their immediate supervisors**

The comments of C in the table reflect the ambivalence he felt about his boss’ benevolence. L had been in a human resources role in a growing professional services firm but, as a result of a structural change, she was told that she would have to share a job role with another colleague for an undefined period of time until a permanent appointment would be made. This created a great deal of anxiety and led her to question her ability to succeed,

but she believed that her supervisor was oblivious to the affect on her. During the period of waiting she experienced “emotional turmoil” and when the other staff member resigned and L was finally allocated the role, she referred to the “euphoric ending.”

*The participants’ trust in more senior management:* Those who believed that senior management was concerned for the welfare of their employees made favourable comments that indicated some warmth, but in contrast, there were highly negative emotional reactions when management was seen as lacking empathy or concern for staff. An interesting observation of one participant was that her organization never set out to consciously hurt people but at times did so out of neglect or lack of awareness.

Trust	Distrust
<p>“They [departmental management] cared about their people deeply; they were really gutted when this happened.” (B)</p> <p>“Our managers were really conscious of looking after people personally...people were helped into roles...and wanted some security, so I think they looked after us pretty well.” (P)</p>	<p>“Senior management were completely cut off from and insensitive to the junior work force and just made stupid comments to the media. They just didn’t think about the staff...they never listened to them.” (B)</p> <p>“It was big brother [management of the acquiring organization] stomping on little brother...they were a bunch of bastards.” (P)</p> <p>“They were vain, arrogant and petty people.” (A)</p>

**Table VI: The participants’ trust in the benevolence of more senior management**

Both B and P had positive views of some levels of management but were highly critical of others. In the major redundancy exercise in B’s company, she felt that the management of one department was really concerned about the well-being of the staff but at the most senior levels of the organization complete disregard was shown to employees. B decided that she needed to contact all members to be made redundant before the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) announced redundancies to the media in contravention of an agreed company protocol. This led to an even heavier workload which she resented. Similarly, P was lavish in her praise for the management of her own unit but intensely angry at how the larger organization had destroyed the culture of the smaller one after the merger.

*The participants’ perceptions of the employees’ trust in the organization:* Two participants who were in senior human resources positions reflected on how trust in the

organization's benevolence was low. In Q's service organization the company had redesigned jobs roles and staff had to apply for the new roles, with some being made redundant. While waiting to hear if they had been successful, many staff members who perceived little real change were anxious about the outcome and angry at management for putting them through the process. In the second case, one high technology firm had been acquired by W's company and he believed that the previous owners had cared little for the welfare of the employees. He was frustrated that this lack of faith in management had been redirected at the new owners because it took considerable effort and time in regaining employee trust. Given that participants had not been directly questioned on staff perceptions of the benevolence of the organization, it was unsurprising that there were no positive comments in this area.

Trust	Distrust
	<p>“There were people in your office yelling and screaming, ‘Why are you putting us through all this stress!’” (Q)</p> <p>Some staff were “strongly opposed to it and could have thought they were being singled out or victimized... sometimes management is assumed to have no emotions and to be hard and callous and uncaring, sometimes by disaffected members of the workforce... They would have been deeply scarred [by previous owners]” (W).</p>

**Table VII: The participants' perceptions of the employees' trust in the benevolence of the organization**

*Trust in integrity*

*The participants' trust in their immediate supervisors:* There were positive, negative and ambivalent comments about the integrity of the participants' bosses. Some interviewees were content that their managers had been honest with them (and other members of staff) and this enhanced their own commitment to the change.

Trust	Distrust
<p>“He announced it [downsizing], he owned it, he was the one who was in the gun... He shifted his diary so he could make the announcement himself...He wanted to be the one that was seen to be driving it, he didn't want to do it but he decided that he had to.” (G)</p>	<p>“He never once looked me in the eye and that raised all sorts of questions for me because it was so unlike him.”</p> <p>“You'd never really have a straight conversation with</p>

<p>“We had a very open and transparent and honest relationship.” (H)</p>	<p>him.” (K)          “My supervisor lied to me...she had tried to gain advantage for herself and some of her favourites. She betrayed trust.” (X)</p>
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**Table VIII: The participants’ trust in the integrity of their immediate supervisors**

As the senior human resources executive in a retail organization, G expressed admiration for the general manager who took charge of a branch closure and the ensuing redundancies. In contrast, expressions of disgust and anger accompanied remarks about the lack of integrity of some supervisors. Several participants intuitively felt that their supervisors had been reasonably honest in some ways but were restrained by more senior management from being completely open. For example, A noted that during and after the acquisition of his professional services firm his boss appeared to be reluctant to share information. He believed that he was acting on instructions from the new head office and that he had previously had an “unrealistically high level of trust” in him. He was, however, saddened that he could no longer rely on his supervisor to be upfront with him and his colleagues. He had also become despondent that his supervisor had for a long time not done what he had promised to do despite constant reminding, but he was gratified when his boss finally delivered on his commitments.

Anger was reserved for those participants who believed their managers had lied to them. X was incensed at the lack of integrity of his boss, a departmental manager in a local council organization. He believed that he had been overlooked for a promotion in what appeared to him to be a case of nepotism, but when he confronted her she denied it. He could not restrain his emotions in the meeting and consequently broke into tears. His supervisor then patted him on the back and tried to coax him to “say a prayer together”. This transparently disingenuous act spurred him to hand in his resignation shortly afterwards.

*The participants' trust in more senior management:* Only one participant (K) focused on a positive aspect of trust in senior management and another (F) couched it in somewhat ambivalent terms.

Trust	Distrust
<p>“I had a good relationship with the CEO so I felt he was being honest with me.” (K)</p> <p>“There was no deceitfulness...There certainly was political, manipulative behaviour on the part of some, but it didn't go so far as to lead to a sense of distrust.” (F)</p>	<p>“Some cynical decisions were made with the intent to pull the wool over the employees eyes and it annoyed me because they thought that the employees were so stupid that they couldn't see it, and that just really pissed me off.” (B)</p> <p>“Am I really seeing what's happening? Is it a smokescreen? Where's the loophole?” (L)</p> <p>“They camouflaged the information and did not give the full intent of the review...and they actually broke the protocol...they sent out information before it had gone through the steering committee or that was out of sync with what was supposed to happen...The organization wasn't practising what it preached and I just thought it was being hypocritical.” (O)</p>

**Table IX: The participants' trust in the integrity of more senior management**

Negative responses were more prevalent and were accompanied by intense emotion. O was faced with the possibility of her own redundancy when her public sector agency was restructured and roles were redesigned. While she was pleased with the flow of information early on in the process she became more anxious as the information dried up. Initial consultation and union representation created an aura of transparency but this was later undermined by unilateral managerial action.

*The participants' perceptions of the employees' trust in the organization:* In assessing the reactions of other staff, some of the interviewees detected a lack of trust in the integrity of management. In B's case she claimed that a programme of outsourcing and redundancies had not been well explained to the workforce, which had been called on vote on important issues that were not understood. R had been appointed to a newly-created human resources role to facilitate a number of simultaneous changes. Despite many attempts to create a new culture of transparency, she was faced with staff who distrusted management for a long while before they began to see the benefit of some of the changes.

Trust	Distrust
	<p>“People were suspicious, and they felt betrayed. They felt it was another management trick...there was a real lack of trust in management. It was mainly because of the slash and burn disguised as a touchy-feely caring programme...it left a huge amount of cynicism...and less trust in the organisation.” (B)</p> <p>“People were saying ‘there’s no transparency; we never know how it’s assessed.’ It was all fragmented and closed door. So we were dealing with people who had no faith in a system because they didn’t understand it, they didn’t know how it worked and there was no trust that anything would improve.” (R)</p> <p>“People said ‘you’ve moved the goalposts’...so that may have led to misgivings from some staff about trust in management.” (W)</p>

**Table X: The participants’ perceptions of the employees’ trust in the benevolence of the organization**

As the senior human resource manager of one company acquiring another, W admitted that this had been one of the most difficult experiences of organizational change he had encountered. One of the reasons, he suggested, was that in their previous organization management had never discussed decisions with employees but simply announced them. What complicated matters was that in the early stages of the takeover it was initially believed that no staff would be retrenched. When it later became apparent to the new management that this was necessary, employee trust eroded even further and commitment to various changes declined.

*The participants’ perceptions of their own integrity:* An unexpected element of the findings surfaced in the interviews – the participants’ reflections on one element of their own trustworthiness in the change process, their own integrity, and, for some it was the collective integrity of the management team of which they were a member. These views emerged at various stages of the interview in response to questions on how they reacted emotionally to change. What soon became apparent in the data analysis was the dilemma about confidentiality. As members of a management team they were expected to maintain strict confidentiality about upcoming changes or aspects of them. For some this evoked feelings of discomfort but others felt guilt and shame that they were not able to communicate as much as

others would have liked. In contrast, some managers felt a degree of pride that they had acted with integrity throughout.

Trust	Distrust
<p>“It was very transparent. There was a good degree of discussion and consultation.” (E)</p> <p>“The biggest risk in this organisation regarding the number of people, and the layers of people that needed to be involved, was managing confidentiality...Trust is something that we thrive on.” (G)</p> <p>“The team was completely behind it and I think that was because it was a very transparent process and there were no hidden agendas.” (S)</p>	<p>“I felt bad that I had to go and spout this stuff because I knew it wasn’t really the whole story. That I had to kind of cloak it in really nice terms. I felt compromised. I felt a bit dirty...like I had been sullied.” (B)</p> <p>“It was a difficult time because frankly you know you're telling lies and because there's stuff there that you know about that you cannot just come out and divulge...People know there's stuff going on. They see people looking round the factory in suits and they see lawyers in the office. They perceive something is up and so they ask you questions and you can't answer them. As I say, you've got to tell them lies.” (C)</p> <p>“There was a lack of trusting...while we debated openly there was stuff going on behind closed doors so there was a trust issue there...There was some sneaky stuff done...I have a high reliance on personal integrity and tend to look at people based on that as well.” (M)</p>

**Table XI: The participants’ perceptions of their own integrity**

C was a senior manager of a company that was about to be acquired by another and his division was to be transferred to a new site. While negotiations were in progress management had been asked to keep matters confidential which created some degree of strain. He admitted that he had tried to avoid situations where he would have to lie but could not escape all of them.

## Discussion

The study confirms previous research (e.g. Korsgaard *et al.*, 2002; Neves and Caetano, 2009) that the perceived trustworthiness of managers before, during and after change has important consequences for the organization. For example, the study found that perceptions of distrust contributed to higher turnover and stress and lower commitment to change. It also demonstrated that the key dimensions of trustworthiness identified by Mayer *et al.* (1995), ability, benevolence and integrity, are highly relevant constructs when those involved in

organizational change try to make sense of it and the personal relationships that are interwoven in it.

Since sensemaking embraces emotion (Weick, 1995), the participants' affective reactions to perceived managerial trustworthiness are reminders that responses to change and trust operate on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006; McAllister, 1995; Szabla, 2007). Emotional reactions appeared to be far more intense for beliefs about the benevolence and integrity of management than those about ability, and for distrust rather than for trust.

An interesting finding was that several participants reported ambivalent responses to aspects of trustworthiness. Firstly, some clearly distinguished between trust in supervisors and trust in higher management, or, in the case of mergers and acquisitions, between trust in the management of each organization. In addition, even with reference to the trustworthiness of one referent (e.g. the immediate supervisor), there were positive and negative perceptions within and between the three dimensions of trustworthiness. This ambivalence has clearly been signalled by Lewicki *et al.* (1998, 2006), who assert that trust and distrust can co-exist and by Piderit (2000), who avers that resistance to change can produce many ambivalent reactions within and between cognitive, affective and behavioural responses.

What also became apparent in the current study was that elements of organizational justice contribute to perceptions of trustworthiness in the context of change. Hopkins and Weathington (2006) found that trust (incorporating integrity and benevolence) mediated perceptions of distributive and procedural justice in survivors of downsizing. In their empirical study (unrelated to organizational change), Colquitt and Rodell (2011) found a reciprocal relationship between justice (particularly informational and interpersonal justice) and benevolence and integrity, but not ability. The current round of interviews also revealed the complex relationships between trust and justice. It is useful to note that informational and

procedural justice often become meaningful when management is the referent and integrity is a key dimension of trustworthiness. In major changes employees see senior levels of management as responsible for providing honest and full information. When decisions are made “behind closed doors”, as a number of participants remarked or implied, employees doubt management’s integrity and anger and frustration prevail. Some who were managers felt guilty that they had participated in this lack of transparency and unhappy that their own integrity had thus been compromised. Interpersonal justice is seen when staff believe they have been treated with respect (Bies, 2005) and this was closely connected to perceptions of the benevolence of individual supervisors. These points of difference show that employees tend to hold the organization responsible for the outcomes and procedures of major decisions but trust their own managers, within organizational constraints, to look after the interests of their subordinates and treat them respectfully.

Quantitative studies of trust and organizational change indicate that when trust breaks down intense emotions may surface. The anger, anxiety and disappointment that breaches and violations of the psychological contract triggered in the current study mirrored the findings of previous empirical studies (e.g. Pugh *et al.*, 2003; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). The term betrayal was used by three participants in this study and is indicative of the negative reactions that Elangovan and Shapiro (1998) propose in their model of betrayal that focuses on both integrity and benevolence.

Given that little prior qualitative research exists on the affective dimensions of the perceived trustworthiness of change leaders, this article has made a useful contribution to the literature. Whereas as Saunders and Thornhill (2003) show the relevance of the emotions of trust in one organization facing structural change, the current study reveals that trust is a key component of many different types of change initiatives. In addition, the focus of Saunders and Thornhill’s study is on trust in the overall management of the organization, while the

current study produces insights into trust in immediate supervisors, trust in more senior managers (either specific individuals or members of a collective body), and concerns about the participants' own sense of integrity.

While both quantitative and qualitative studies demonstrate how emotional the affective dimensions of trust can be, employee narratives are able to show more nuances, ambivalence and idiosyncratic contradictions. Thus participant B could maintain that her supervisor was supportive but did not notice when she said she was drowning in overwork and F could admit that despite organizational politics there was no deception. Interviews are also able to capture, in ways that survey items cannot, the more vehement and poignant expressions of emotion, such as B's fury at the CEO and A's disgust with the executive team of an acquiring organization.

### **Limitations and implications for research**

This study documents employees' affective responses to the perceived trustworthiness of both their own managers and higher levels of change leadership. However, it was seldom clear what levels of trustworthiness were in existence before the change took place, and how they altered during and after the change. Existing levels of distrust and cynicism may influence employees to contemplate upcoming changes with suspicion (Pugh *et al.*, 2003; Stanley *et al.*, 2005). Lewicki *et al.* (2006) point out that trust evolves over time as events occur and that insight flows from experience. Longitudinal studies, such as those conducted on trust and justice by Colquitt and Rodell (2011), and on the impact of change to psychological contracts (Chaudry *et al.*, 2011; Robinson, 1996) and to remuneration systems (Mayer and Davis, 1999), will provide additional perspectives on how and why trust levels vary when changes are introduced. Interviews or diary records are also ways to report on how levels of trust and emotions change over time.

The propensity to trust can be seen as a dispositional aspect of how the trustor views the trustee (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006; Rotter, 1967) and has been incorporated into instruments to measure trust in organizations (e.g. Colquitt and Rodell, 2007; Mayer and Davis; 1999). Colquitt *et al.* (2007) conclude from their meta-analysis that propensity is to some extent a relevant factor in evaluations of trustworthiness. The issue in organizational change is whether actors are predisposed to trust or distrust other actors, or the organization itself. From a conceptual standpoint, the more naïve and the more optimistic people are the more they are likely to trust others to manage change with ability, benevolence or integrity. However, Gurtman (1992) suggests that gullibility does not automatically lead to trust and Schoorman *et al.* (2007), propose that propensity to trust is a feature of the early stages of a relationship but becomes less relevant with experience. In the current study no effort was made to investigate dispositional trust although some respondents did appear to be very cynical about organizational change. B, whose affect-laden comments are reported in the findings, had worked in a number of organizations after resigning from the company she referred to in the interview. At the end of the interview she reflected, “I don’t think I’ve ever known a change process that added something, it’s always taking away and it’s always pitched positively and people always know that’s a crock.” However, it would be making an assumption to suggest that B was predisposed to being distrustful. While quantitative researchers have produced mixed results on the impact on propensity to trust (see Colquitt *et al.*, 2007), there appears to be no literature on the issue in qualitative studies.

Finally, the issues of nationality and ethnicity were not explored in analyzing the participants’ perception of trustworthiness. In conceptual models Doney *et al.* (1998) propose that trust in intra- and inter-organizational relationships is partly an outcome of cross-cultural issues and Van der Zee *et al.* (2009) argue that perceptions of trust may be influenced by cultural factors that relate to both work group diversity and minority team member views of

the organization. Prior studies have shown that trust in organizational settings is imbued with cultural issues (Chan *et al.*, 2008) that can influence perceptions of organizational change, particularly in international acquisitions (e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2012). Future studies of trust and change would benefit from an examination of the trustor's perceptions of the trustee and how these are influenced by intercultural factors.

### **Implications for practice**

Ideally, supervisors and more senior managers who are able to gain the trust of their staff by demonstrating ability, benevolence and integrity will also obtain their commitment to a change. Yet the political nature of organizational relationships and the complexities of change processes often militate against this possibility. In the context of downsizing, for example, it is necessary for management to prepare detailed plans before announcing some of the details. Issues of confidentiality then become muddled with questions of who trusts whom to do what. For example, if answers to queries as to who will be laid off are not forthcoming, the staff may distrust the integrity of management or of individual managers and possibly question their ability and benevolence as well. Managers in this study showed the constraints placed on them in discussing aspects of change with staff and the ethical dilemmas these produced. There is no easy way to resolve these issues at the personal or organizational level.

However, organizations can actively seek to create fair workplaces and embed fair practices in the organizational culture so that justice becomes systemic (Beugré and Baron, 2001). This should help to develop perceptions of managerial trustworthiness. As participant G remarked of his company, "Trust is what we thrive on." Incorporating issues of trust and fairness in mission statements and training staff in transparency, communication and interpersonal skills assist in creating the right values and behaviours. However, lip service will undermine perceptions and, as Lewis and Weigert (1985, p. 971) suggest, a feeling of

betrayal, “strikes a deadly blow” to organizational relationships. Mayer and Davis (1999) believe that despite the difficulties involved in “managing” trust it can be done. In the context of change, organizations need to strive beyond competence for fairness, integrity and benevolence, communicate as much as is possible and involve staff in decision-making where they can.

## **Conclusion**

In reviewing literature on trust Lewicki *et al.* (2006) comment that much of it conceptualized trust as a static state, whereas relationships are regularly being transformed by experience. Organizational change is one context that is bound to sharpen actors’ perceptions of the nature of these relationships and their expectations or hopes that others will act with ability, benevolence and integrity. This study has contributed to the qualitative literature on organizational change by focusing on the relatively unexplored terrain of affective responses to the perceived trustworthiness of change leaders and by showing how emotion accompanies individual sensemaking processes and behaviour that are fraught with complexity and ambivalence.

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