

Trust Subversion Analysis

Using Office Communicator to Build Organizational Trust

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ABSTRACT

Microsoft is a leading software manufacturer that was founded in 1975 and has experienced tremendous revenue and organizational growth in its 35 year history. As a company, and as individuals, we value integrity, honesty, openness, personal excellence, constructive self-criticism, continual self-improvement, and mutual respect. All of these values contribute to building organizational trust. To help insure that high organizational trust is achieved to meet these expectations, we are experimenting in the Office Communicator and Design group with Trust Subversion Analysis as a new management approach that helps us learn how to identify behaviors, actions, and language to augment trust-building communication within the organization.

Keywords

Trust, Communication, Office Communicator, TRIZ, Subversion

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, an effort dubbed “42Projects” was initiated as an experiment within the Windows Security Test Team to stimulate innovation by empowering employees to contribute in more meaningful ways. The overall goal was to liberate the tremendous talent and motivation on the team by exploring the relationship between people, culture and innovation. Out of that exploration came the awareness that organizational trust is a key to unlocking that potential and encouraging high job satisfaction. Our working premise was that leadership can and should work to improve trust throughout the organization, and that increased trust levels will increase Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB’s)¹, which in turn, will lead to increased levels of innovation and employee happiness.

“In a recent University of British Columbia report, economists found that trust in management is the most valued determinant of job satisfaction. They state that a small increase in trust of management is like getting a 36 percent pay increase. Conversely, the researchers found that if that same amount of trust is lost, the

decline in employee job satisfaction is like taking a 36 percent pay cut.”²

After further exposure to the importance of organizational trust, a “42Trust” project was started to learn more about the topic of trust and experiment with ways to improve it within an organization like Microsoft.

2. PROCESS

In 2008, 42Trust was started as part of the 42Projects initiative to focus on trust and identifying trust-building behaviors that could be encouraged within the organization. The first step was to brainstorm a list of organizational trust factors. The resulting list of trust factors were grouped into more general trust-building behaviors and via a pairwise comparison Trust Game these behaviors were prioritized by employees.

While the list of prioritized trust-building behaviors was interesting, it was not clear how they could actively drive trust behavior changes. The team did try using a wiki-based “Trust Playbook” to help share information and that was helpful in some cases. However, the overall sense was the information was useful, but not very actionable.

Subvert to Revert

In experimenting with ways to make these trust-building behaviors more actionable, we turned to the concepts of The Theory of Inventive Problem Solving (TRIZ)³ and the Subversion Analysis technique in particular.

The basic premise behind TRIZ is that systematic and inventive problem solving is possible because “Somebody someplace has already solved this problem (or one very similar to it.). Creativity is now finding that solution and adapting it to a particular

¹ The OCB’s encompass Altruism, Courtesy, Conscientiousness, Sportsmanship and Civic Virtue

² The HR Executive’s Role in Rebuilding Trust, Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina,
<http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/story.jsp?storyId=12160414>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TRIZ>

problem.”⁴ Since Genrich Altshuller originated the concept of TRIZ in the 1940’s, TRIZ has evolved to encompass many tools and techniques for systematically solving problems. One TRIZ technique in particular, Subversion Analysis, seemed to have application in making trust-building behaviors more actionable.

Subversion Analysis uses the tactic of subverting the desirable outcome and making it the goal of the inventive problem solving technique. Unlike traditional brainstorming which focuses on random idea generation, Subversion Analysis establishes a target goal and then focuses on inventing actions to reliably achieve that goal. The subversion is that the target goal is the opposite of what you want to happen. Out of identifying the subversive actions comes the opportunity to devise improvements that can be used to eliminate or mitigate those actions. This results in an improvement of the desirable goal, a reduced opportunity for the undesirable goal to occur or both.

Subversion Analysis Applied to Trust Behaviors

In any business situation, there is the opportunity for subversive actions to occur that result in the trust-eroding behaviors (the opposite of trust-building behaviors) that can reduce organizational trust. The original idea we had was that if trust-eroding behaviors are viewed as “organizational defects”, then problem solving techniques like Subversion Analysis could be applied to help resolve those defects. This led us to the concept of “Trust Subversion Analysis”.

Trust Subversion Analysis

An infant starts out trusting, but over time learns to distrust from experience. Similarly, a new employee in an organization typically wants to start out trusting, but really starts with a level of trust that has been shaped by previous life and organizational experiences. Their experiences in the new organization will either help them gain a higher level of trust or they will continue to reinforce or even increase their base level of distrust.

If an organization is going to reestablish a climate of trust, there must be a reversion⁵ from distrust. We are experimenting with how to systematically accomplish that goal.

Trust Subversion Analysis Process

- Start with a specific business situation
- Select a trust-building behavior to improve
- Subvert that trust-building behavior by making the opposite trust-eroding behavior the improvement goal
- Perform a subversion analysis exercise in which participants intentionally invent the subversive actions that will make the trust-eroding behavior occur reliably.

⁴ TRIZ – What is TRIZ?, http://www.triz-journal.com/archives/what_is_triz/

⁵ The American Heritage Dictionary definition of "reversion" is "to return to a former condition, belief, or interest".

Prioritize the subversive actions based on their observed frequency and impact within the organization and a specific business context.

Focus on the highest priority subversive actions and create individual and organizational improvements (“reversive actions”) that prevent/mitigate them.

For each “business context and trust-eroding behavior” permutation, capture the subversive actions and prevention/mitigation improvements and use them to extend an organizational TrustBOK⁶ (Trust Body of Knowledge). In the spirit of TRIZ and the notion that somebody someplace has solved this problem, this will help build the TrustBOK as an information resource for other employees and organizations to leverage and avoid “reinventing the wheel”.

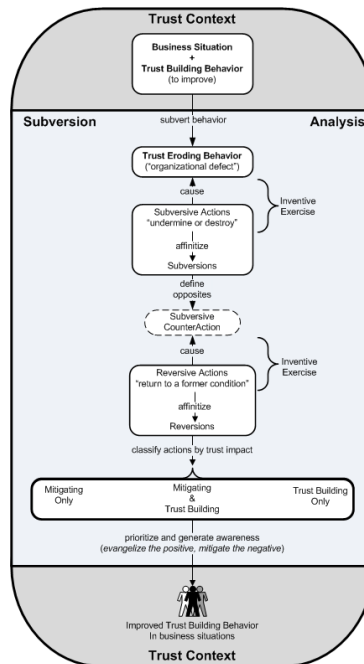


Figure 1 - Trust Subversion Analysis Flow

2.1 Language Analysis

Once the subversive actions have been identified and agreed upon, the next step is to identify language associated with the actions.

Start with a specific action in a business situation

Participants identify language associated with that action in that situation.

Use the [cool name for Sam’s cool add-in] to instrument Office Communicator to track language usage. Identify trust building and trust eroding terms.

⁶ A TrustBOK is an information repository that is implemented in a library, database, Wiki, etc.

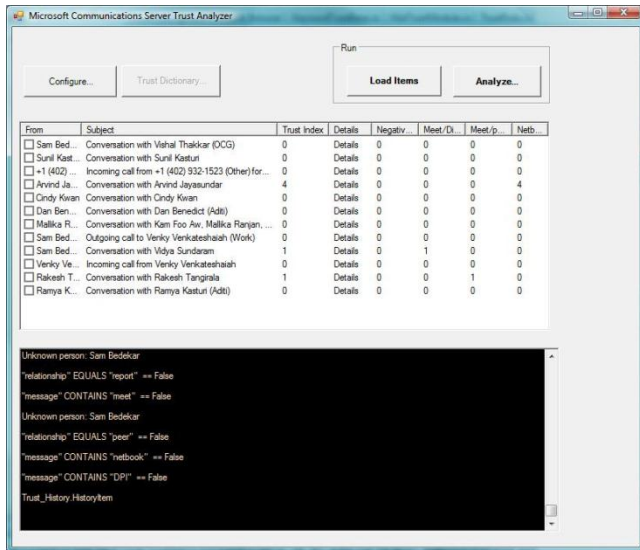


Figure 2 - Office Communicator Trust Add-In

Trust Subversion Analysis Example

Summary

17 participants from the Microsoft Office Communicator and Human Resources teams participated in the following example of Trust Subversion Analysis. During a one hour session, 78 subversion actions were “invented” for the trust-eroding goal of “Demonstrate a Lack of Respect” in a Team Meeting. Using affinity analysis and simple multi-voting, the highest priority subversions were identified as “Dominate”, “Not be inclusive”, and “Not paying attention/listening”. The exercise was then reversed to invent actions that would accomplish the opposite: “Do not dominate”, “Be inclusive”, and “Pay attention”. In all, 76 reversive actions were identified by the participants. A post exercise editing process normalized the action wording and removed redundancies.

Partial Exercise Results

Business Situation – Team Meeting

Trust-Eroding Behavior “Goal” = Demonstrate a Lack of Respect

Partial list of subversive actions identified by participants to reliably “Demonstrate a Lack of Respect” in a Team Meeting (identified via Subversion Analysis):

- Berate another person
- Mock another person’s comments
- Continually interrupt the meeting
- Cut short the conversation

- Run the meeting over the scheduled time
- Dismiss another person’s input (ex. opinions, ideas) without explanation
- Display aggressive or negative body language
- Consistently show up late to the meeting
- Pull seniority on another person
- Talk over one another
- Say something with a condescending tone
- Exclude people from the discussion
- Do not ask for other opinions or ideas
- Conduct a side conversation during the meeting
- Talk too much
- Repeatedly refer to another person by the wrong name
- Do not engage in the meeting (i.e. listen, pay attention)
- Show no interest when other people are talking (ex. surf the web, check email)

After an affinity exercise to identify the general subversive actions, each participant voted on the top three they have observed within the context of a Team Meeting based on frequency and impact. The highest priority subversive actions were: **“Dominate”**, **“Not be inclusive”**, and **“Not paying attention/listening”**

After defining the subversive counteractions of **“Do not dominate”**, **“Be inclusive”** and **“Pay attention/listen”**, the participants focused on inventing actions to counteract these key subversions. The goal was to identify actions that would prevent or mitigate the subversions of the “Demonstrate Respect” trust-building behavior.

As an example, the following actions were identified for accomplishing “Be inclusive” and grouped by the Team Meeting role targeted by each:

Everyone

- Consider everyone’s point of view
- Know the role of people in the meeting

- Respect everyone’s input (ex. opinions, ideas)
- Respect the meeting schedule (ex. start and stop time, duration)
- Say a person’s first name and ask their opinion
- Share your lunch with everyone

Meeting Leader

- Invite everyone that is necessary
- Discuss shared meeting goals at the start
- Provide background information for new meeting attendees
- Actively encourage everyone to participate
- Actively request another person’s input (ex. opinions, ideas)
- Actively seek alternate opinions
- Give everyone a chance to express their opinions and ideas
- Let everyone speak
- Make decisions through voting (ex. majority, consensus)

Attendees

- Understand shared meeting goals at the start

The results of the Trust Subversion Analysis exercise are both the trust-eroding and trust-building actions for a trust behavior in a specific business situation. Understanding both the trust-eroding and trust-building actions helps Microsoft employees become aware of their own trust-related actions and the actions of others.

With this awareness, Microsoft employees now have the opportunity to adopt specific actions that build trust and avoid those that can erode trust. For the benefit of Microsoft, and the Office Communications and Design Group, the ultimate goal is to build trust in the organization above and beyond the current trust baseline. Therefore, employees are encouraged to adopt the actions that will help increase the overall level of organizational trust before adopting the actions that simply mitigate the trust-eroding behaviors, maintaining the current level of trust at best and potentially lowering it even more.

It is rare to find specific actions that could build long-term trust based only one occurrence. One example is

“Vigorously defend a colleague’s right to express an alternate opinion“. In most cases, trust-building actions will mitigate one occurrence and only build long-term trust through consistent and predictable application. For example, a trust-building action like “Give everyone the chance to express their opinions and ideas” applied in one meeting might mitigate an erosion of trust in the meeting leader *during that meeting*. However, if the person leading that meeting doesn’t apply the action consistently and predictably in all of the other meetings they lead, the level of trust they gain based on their adoption of this specific trust-building action will likely not increase and persist above its current level. Therefore, the general guidance on most trust-building actions is if they are going to be adopted, they must be applied consistently to accomplish a long-term improvement in trust levels for both the individual and their organization.

The long term goal of this management innovation experiment is to use this increased awareness to encourage the behavior changes required to achieve high organizational trust and help teams across Microsoft uphold the corporate values.

3. CHALLENGES AND FIXES

Challenge: Getting participants to allocate time for Trust Subversion Analysis in a busy software development cycle.

Fix: Demonstrate the benefits of a Trust Subversion Analysis exercise to encourage participation. Consider using the regular weekly “42Projects” meeting to conduct Trust Subversion Analysis exercises. Participation is always voluntary, but free pizza is often used as an incentive.

Challenge: Subversion Analysis trust beyond the base level of trust a person had when they joined Microsoft.

Fix: If a new employee joins Microsoft with a strong perspective of distrust based on prior life and organizational experiences, additional training and trust-building exercises are used to minimize this “distrust baggage” and set the stage for them to become more trusting.

Challenge: Someone observes another person or group performing a subversive action that will result

in trust-eroding behavior. What should they do? If they point out what the other people are doing that erodes trust, will there be consequences? Does that inhibit them from pointing out the actions and trying to change the trust-eroding behavior? How does all this influence their perception of trust in the other people and how does that impact organizational trust in the long run?

Fix: The “pointing out an action to improve trust vs. a negative consequence for pointing it out” dilemma is the kind of contradictions that the TRIZ 40 Inventive Principles are designed to help solve. One of the 40 Inventive Principles is “Preliminary anti-action” which covers “if it will be necessary to do an action with both harmful and useful effects, this action should be replaced with anti-actions to control harmful effects”. An anti-action is performing an opposite action in advance to counteract the potential impact of doing what you plan to do. In this case, an anti-action could be to propose organizational training that covers the observed trust-eroding behavior and encourage everyone’s participation.

Challenge: A person is aware of the actions that lead to trust-eroding behaviors and what they can do to avoid them. If that person has a concern about the consequences of trying a trust-building improvement, would that sufficiently inhibit them from trying it? For example, if they knew that withholding important information causes the “lack of transparency” trust-eroding behavior, but they also knew that trust-building behavior of telling their manager everything would cause their boss to strongly overreact, would that inhibit them from doing so? If that is the case, what would the resulting impact of that hesitancy be on the opportunity to increase overall organizational trust?

Fix: Create an organizational code word like “full disclosure” that someone can say before they describe all the important information they know. Train everyone who could be a recipient of that information that when they hear those code words, they will understand the other person is trying to be fully transparent and increase trust between them...so react accordingly.

4. BENEFITS

Gaining awareness of what were trust-building and what were trust-eroding actions helped people

reconsider what they do in different business situation and to recognize them in the actions of other people. As an example of how awareness can influence, a Test Lead that went through the Trust Subversion exercise focused on “Demonstrate Respect in a Team Meeting” had this feedback: *“I found it is very useful. I didn’t realize some behaviors are not respectful to other people such as occasionally checking email, not including everyone in the discussion during team meeting etc. Now I pay attention to them during my team meeting. I mentioned such experiment to my team and it is fresh to them. I will do similar stuff in my team to help build up a respectful team environment.”*

Armed with the awareness of the trust-eroding and trust-building actions, we are in the process of creating a method for employees to watch for these actions and record a tally of their occurrence across a wide variety of business situations. By analyzing the impact and frequency of trust-related actions, we will be able to prioritize them and determine which should be promoted for further awareness.

Taking this analysis one step further, we are also working on identifying words and phrases that provide evidence of trust-building and trust-eroding actions. For example, terms like “thank you”, “excuse me” and “I’d like your opinion” are all words and phrases that align with the trust-building behavior of “Demonstrate respect”. As part of the Office Communicator and Design Group, we are experimenting with tools to automatically measure and analyze the words and phrases that an individual uses in their own conversations. The individual is then informed about the language choices they tend to make and whether these help to build or erode trust. This awareness provides an opportunity for the individual to make a behavior change.

5. LESSONS LEARNED

- It is possible to implement a systematic improvement process that can result in increased organizational trust.
- A TrustBOK establishes organizational awareness of subversive actions that result in trust-eroding behaviors in different business contexts. It also establishes the list of

reversive actions that result in trust-building behaviors. This becomes a helpful baseline for existing employees and an opportunity for new employees to learn from the previous experiences of the organization.

- Familiarize yourself with the basic concepts of TRIZ and Subversion Analysis to aid in the Trust Subversion Analysis exercises.

6. REFERENCES

[1] TBD