The Level of Trust in Academic Leadership at Saudi Universities

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Abstract

Trust is leading determinant of organisational performance including in the higher education sector. One of the foremost approaches to studying trust has been to propose two forms: cognitive and affective. The former is based on a rational objective evaluation of the subject and the latter an emotional subjective one. We examine cognitive and affective trust among faculty members at three Riyadh-based universities - Saudi Electronic University, Prince Norah University and Prince Sultan University. Using a survey instrument, a random sample of respondents (n=131) completed the survey and the data were analysed using a comparison of means. Our results show a moderately positive level of trust overall with no significant differences between levels of cognitive and affective trust. The study highlights some significant differences within subsamples. The study contributes to the body of literature on interpersonal trust within organizations and will be of specific interest to leaders and human resource professionals working in higher education. The practice implications of the present study and recommendations for future research directions are indicated.

Keywords: Trust; Academic leadership; Higher education; Faculty

INTRODUCTION

Considerable research effort has been expended in the effort to understand what makes organizations function optimally. One important domain in this endeavor concerns the concept of trust and its relationship to both job and organization-related outcomes. Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly competitive environment in what has become a globalized market for both education and research. Interest among leaders in maximizing job performance among faculty is therefore high. We examine the current levels of self-reported trust in direct supervisor among faculty members at three Riyadh-based universities, Saudi Electronic University, Prince Norah University and Prince Sultan University. We adopt the cognitive-affective conceptualization of trust (McAllister, 1995) for our survey study. The present study therefore contributes to an important research domain that will be of interest to all practitioners involved in improving organizational performance, and particularly those in higher education. We understand this is the first study to examine the levels of trust in Saudi higher education institutions. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to evaluate the current levels of trust among faculty members and establish a starting point on which to build further research and improved practice.

Why the study of trust is important

Trust has been recognized for decades as an important concept for understanding interpersonal relationships and the effective operation of organizations. The relationship with the immediate supervisor is known to be a key one, as leaders of whatever seniority play a vital role in determining organizational performance. Regardless of their seniority, leaders play an important role in determining the trust culture for individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole (McAllister, 1995; Shaw, 1997). Whether leading a small team or an entire institution, educational leaders can make the difference between a high-trust environment and a low-trust one. Trust has been described as the glue that holds an organization together (Covey & Merrill, 2006), and Hui et al. (2004, p.238) maintain that "The relationship with one's supervisor . . . may anchor the relationship with the organization and one's willingness to contribute to it." Fairholm (1994) argues that leadership becomes impossible in the absence of a unified culture of trust and that it is

essential if we want to extract followers' talent and true potential as well as their commitment and creativity. Tyler (2003) suggests that we are in an era of rapidly changing connections between groups and individuals, suggesting that the need for social trust that goes beyond the calculative and the rational is greater than ever.

Ingroup-Outgroup Trust

Not all workplace trust is derived from a one-on-one relationship between leader and follower. Some trust is group based; specifically, membership of either the ingroup or the outgroup. This group-based trust is presumptive in that it is automatically assigned to individuals due to their ingroup membership and the assumption that they share a set of values gained from a national culture. Research evidence suggests that willingness to trust is greater among individuals of the same nationality. In a research study using World Values Survey data, it was found that 95% of respondents across 50 countries trusted ingroup members more than outgroup members (Delhey & Welzel, 2012). This finding is particularly significant in countries in the Gulf region, where a large proportion of the workforce comprises non-nationals. This is also true for the higher education systems in these countries. The significance of ingroup-outgroup trust is understood to be particularly high in Saudi Arabia, as it is a strongly collectivist country. Ingroup membership and the presumptive trust that goes with it may account for the phenomenon of *wasta* in the kingdom, which is the practice of prioritising blood relations and personal networks. This is not the same as saying that Saudi nationals do not trust colleagues from other countries, but that the nature of the trust is somewhat different.

Cognitive-Affective Trust

This brings us to the theory of cognitive and affective trust, which holds that there are two forms of trust. Cognitive trust is objective and based on perceptions of reliability and dependability. This type of trust emerges when we think the person being trusted is going to complete their tasks reliably. It also relates to ability, integrity, credibility, and competence. Cognitive trust occurs after a rational evaluation of a person's performance through a careful, methodical thought process and so develops over time (Erdem & Ozen, 2003).

Cognitive trust results from, for example, perceptions of a leader's abilities and character (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995).

In contrast, affective trust is subjective and based on emotion rather than rationality. Affective trust is built through individuals expressing care and concern in an authentic way (McAllister, 1995) and encompasses commitment, altruism, attentive listening, and benevolence. We have affective trust in someone when we believe that that person is genuine and well-intentioned.

It is not the case that the trust you have in someone is either one or the other form; there can be a mix of the two present in the relationship. It has also been suggested that before affective trust can develop, there needs to be a kernel of cognitive trust in place (McAllister, 1995). In the early stages of a trust relationship, it may be necessary to draw on either previous shared work experiences or even a person's reputation (Webber, 2008). Neurological studies of the brain processes involved in making trust decisions offer evidence to support the cognitive-affective trust thesis (Adolphs, 2002; Haas et al., 2015).

Trust and Culture

Academic researchers have proposed that trust and culture are related and that trust forms differently according to important cultural values. As Doney et al. (1998) argue, the development of trust is not a uniform, universal process, and "whether and how trust is established depend upon the societal norms and values that guide people's behaviour and beliefs" (p.601). Perhaps the most important cultural dimension discussed in trust and culture research is individualism-collectivism. Countries in the Gulf region are among the most collectivist societies in the world. One consequence of this is that whereas relationships in the West are formed on the basis of written agreements, in a country such as Saudi Arabia trust relationships are formed at the interpersonal level because this is particularly important in Saudi culture (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993); there, a spoken commitment is seen as more crucial than paperwork. It has been proposed that countries and their cultures can be classed as high trust or low trust (Fukuyama, 1995), and others have added a medium-trust level (Ward et al., 2014). Trust in family is universally

high, whereas trust in strangers and/or foreigners varies greatly from one country to the next.

The Outcomes of Trust

Let us consider further why trust is important. In other words, what are the outcomes associated with high and low trust? Academic studies have found a wide range of positive outcomes associated with a high-trust organization. The existence of trust is an overwhelmingly positive thing. Few if any researchers have reported negative outcomes arising from the presence of trust in relationships or in an organization as a whole. Trust predicts individuals' job satisfaction (Tosun & Özkan, 2023), their organizational commitment, and their organizational citizenship behaviours, including a willingness to speak up about the challenges they face. It also predicts how likely they are to leave the organization, as well as their job performance (Deluga, 1995; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Flaherty & Pappas, 2000; Ozyilmaz et al., 2018; Robinson, 1996). Trust has been found to increase employee engagement and reduce job stress (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2013). It has also been found to promote knowledge-sharing behaviours (Reychav & Sharkie, 2010). Individuals who have a trusting relationship with their immediate supervisor enjoy more autonomy in their work and feel supported (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In high-trust environments, there is less need for monitoring and control, which could reduce costs (Meng, 2015). Conversely, where there is a lack of trust between employee and supervisor job performance suffers (Al Rfoa et al., 2023). At the organizational level, studies have shown that high-trust organizations benefit from increased revenues and profits (Davis et al., 2000; Simons & McLean Parks, 2002). Trust has also been identified as a source of competitive advantage for an organization (Barney & Hansen, 1994). To sum up, a healthy organization needs trust to reach its potential.

Developing Trust

An organization's culture relates to its core values, goals, sense of identity, and working practices (Schein, 1996). So, the next question is: What needs to be put in place for trust to develop? One route to greater trust is through leadership style. Applying transformational leadership practices is associated with both cognitive and affective trust (Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

With transformational leadership, leaders engage with and influence others by paying genuine attention to their needs, lifting their motivation, and providing an ethical decision-making framework (Newton et al., 2021). Leaders need to create a personal connection with their teams because as individuals' seniority increases, their perceived trustworthiness reduces (Desteno cited in O'Hara, 2014). Leaders are more likely to gain trust if they are transparent and truthful, share information on performance and issues being discussed at senior levels, whether good or bad, and avoid giving orders and instead use encouragement. These qualities are associated with authentic leadership, a style understood to promote trust in leadership (Baquero, 2023; Kleynhans et al., 2021). It is important to emphasize that a leader should share the goals of team members (O'Hara, 2014). In addition to leadership style, organizational culture can influence levels of trust. Trust is developed through ethical ideals and practices. Developing a reputation for trustworthiness will influence the way an organization is perceived, both externally (customers, students, etc.) and internally (employees) (Dyer & Chu, 2011). Transparency comprised of accountability, openness, and knowledge sharing has also been proposed as an organizational characteristic likely to develop trust (Peterson-More, (2023). Evidence suggests there is also a role for teams in building trust in organizations. If individuals identify with the team to which they belong, then they also trust the organization as a whole (Dumitru & Schoop, 2016).

Measuring Trust

With trust established as an important concept in organizational leadership, it is not surprising that researchers and human resource practitioners seek to measure it. A variety of forms of trust have been considered for measurement, including general or national trust, interpersonal trust, trust between organizations, and trust between organizations and their customers. As with other organizationally significant constructs, trust is normally measured through surveys. Our concern here is intra-organizational trust, specifically the interpersonal trust between individuals and their immediate supervisors. A range of instruments are available, so it was important to consider the reliability and validity of these alternatives (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The choice of instrument will also depend on the conceptualization of trust the researcher is adopting. This paper adopts to measure the interpersonal trust between faculty member and direct supervisor

using the affective-cognitive model of trust (McAllister, 1995), and thus requires an instrument that measures both these forms.

METHODS

The study applied quantitative methods. Specifically, a survey was conducted using McAllister's (1995) 11-item survey instrument (see Appendix) to measure affective and cognitive trust among faculty members working at three universities based in the city of Riyadh. Two of the institutions (Saudi Electronic University and Prince Norah University) are public universities, and the third (Prince Sultan University) is a private sector university. The General Authority for Statistics in Saudi Arabia reports that the faculties at the two public universities had 2,649 members and the private university had 522. The survey questionnaire was distributed electronically via email to randomly selected members of the faculty population, meaning each faculty member had an equal chance of being selected. The 11 trust items in the survey were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree.' To maintain appropriate ethical standards, the principle of informed consent was applied, and it was made clear that participation in the study was both voluntary and anonymous. A total of 520 individuals were randomly chosen to receive a link to the survey and 131 complete questionnaires were included in the analysis, indicating a response rate of just over 25%. In addition to the 11 items of the trust instrument, the survey recorded sex, job role, work type, public/private status of the university, respondent's length of service, and respondent's nationality (Saudi/non-Saudi).

Study Sample

Descriptive statistics showed that the sample was 58.8% male and 41.2% female. Roles included assistant lecturer (8%), lecturer (29%), senior lecturer (36.6%), administration (6.9%), and professor (21.4%). Regarding the type of work undertaken, 56.5% described their role as teaching and research, 34.4% as teaching and administrative, and 9.2% as administrative. For the public/private split, 90.8% were at a public university, with the remaining 9.2% at the private university. Length of service broke down as 22.1% having 5 years or less, 18.3% between 6 and 10 years, and 59.5% having 11 or more

years. Finally, 78.6% of respondents were Saudi nationals, and 21.4% had another nationality.

Reliability of Trust Measures

Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the reliability of the measures used for affective, cognitive, and combined trust. As with other studies using this instrument (e.g., Algarni, 2021; Holste & Fields, 2010; McAllister, 1995), reliability was high, with each subscale having an α of .86 and the combined items an α of .91 (see TABLE 1). A Cronbach's alpha of .7 is seen as the baseline for reliability, which this study comfortably exceeded.

TABLE 1:*RELIABILITY ANALYSIS OF THE TRUST ITEMS*

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
Affective trust	.86	5
Cognitive trust	.86	6
Combined trust	.91	11

RESULTS

Comparison of Means

A comparison of means was undertaken to measure trust levels for the two forms of trust (affective and cognitive) and for the two combined (see TABLE 2). Firstly, the results showed no major difference between the sexes. Male respondents reported slightly higher affective trust than cognitive trust and the reverse was true for females. The role subsamples did, however, display some notable differences. For example, assistant lecturers and senior lecturers returned relatively high scores for affective trust, although the reason for this is unclear. The nature of an individual's role (teaching/research/administration) recorded lower levels of trust among staff in a predominantly administrative role compared to those with teaching and research roles or teaching and administrative roles, although the administrative subsample was too small (n=12) to draw firm conclusions. For university type (public/private), there was a higher response rate from public universities with the private subsample being small (n=12). There were no important differences recorded for this variable. Length of service results show no indication that trust increases with the time spent at an organization. The nationality variable recorded the highest level of either form of trust across all

variables. Those reporting nationality as non-Saudi had a particularly high level of affective trust in their superior.

TABLE 2:*COMPARISON OF MEANS*

Sex	n	ABT mean	CBT mean	Overall mean
Male	77	2.61	2.44	2.50
Female	54	2.47	2.63	2.56
Total	131	2.55	2.50	2.52
Role	n	ABT mean	CBT mean	Overall mean
Assistant lecturer	8	2.77	2.69	2.73
Lecturer	38	2.39	2.57	2.49
Senior lecturer	48	2.74	2.66	2.70
Administration	9	2.07	2.15	2.11
Professor	28	2.54	2.19	2.41
Total	131	2.55	2.50	2.52
Type of role	n	ABT mean	CBT mean	Overall mean
Teaching and research	74	2.70	2.59	2.64
Administrative	12	2.20	2.31	2.26
Teaching and administrative	45	2.52	2.53	2.53
Total	131	2.55	2.50	2.52
Type of university	n	ABT mean	CBT mean	Overall mean
Public	119	2.56	2.49	2.52
Private	12	2.52	2.63	2.58
Total	131	2.55	2.50	2.52
Length of service	n	ABT mean	CBT mean	Overall mean
5 years or less	29	2.55	2.58	2.57
Between 6 and 10 years	24	2.34	2.47	2.41
11 or more years	78	2.62	2.48	2.54
Total	131	2.55	2.50	2.52
Nationality	n	ABT mean	CBT mean	Overall mean
Saudi	103	2.49	2.51	2.5
Non-Saudi	28	2.80	2.45	2.6
Total	131	2.55	2.50	2.52

DISCUSSION

This study examines the levels of trust among faculty members at three universities in Riyadh. Specifically, we measure the level of interpersonal trust between faculty members and their immediate supervisors/ direct leaders. We focus on this direction of interpersonal trust as it has been identified as a significant trust referent for job-related outcomes (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Overall, in our study the levels of trust could be described as moderate, with a combined mean of 2.52 on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The study found relatedly uniform levels of trust among subsamples with some anomalies, mainly in small subsamples, such as the significantly lower trust seen in the administration subsample.

Direct comparisons with prior studies using the same instrumentation are problematic as the results are likely to be highly context dependent. While trust among faculty has attracted research interest in a range of settings (Laufer et al., 2024) no directly comparable study using the same methods could be found. In his study of engineers working in Saudi petrochemical companies, Algarni (2021) reported a mean of 2.42 for affective and 2.38 for cognitive trust in immediate supervisors, slightly lower than the present study. Among a U.S. sample of hospital employees, the mean score for cognitive trust was 2.59 and for affective trust was 2.45 (Colquitt et al., 2012). Cheung et al. (2017) found a mean score of 2.27 for subordinates' trust in supervisors at Hong Kong-based service companies. Other studies have recorded higher scores but without a close match on items used (Farid et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2009; Luo & Lee, 2013). While there is an absence of comparable studies from higher education studies, the comparisons we are able to make point to our results being broadly in line with prior research but certainly not indicating a high trust environment at the interpersonal level. The results also confirm scope for improved interpersonal trust between faculty and their direct supervisors at Saudi universities.

The present study has its limitations. Firstly, sample size could have been larger particularly to improve the statistical power of subsample analysis. Furthermore, personal and organizational outcomes such as turnover intention, job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviours could have been added to the questionnaire to investigate their relationships with trust. Finally, the present study is limited by its focus on interpersonal trust between faculty

members and their immediate supervisor whereas the literature suggests that trust is a multi-level, multi-directional concept.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has contributed to the body of work on trust in supervisors. Specifically, it offers the first application of cognitive and affective trust scales to Saudi faculty members to establish current levels of trust. Although there were few notable differences between the subsamples in levels of cognitive and affective trust, the study did find that when compared to other samples, this sample of faculty members at Saudi universities reported a moderate-to-high level of both forms of trust. The study is limited by its sample size, meaning that some of the subsamples are very small. A further limitation is that performance outcomes were not measured, so the study is limited to a description of trust levels. The main implication for higher education leaders is that there appears to be room for improvement in levels of trust among faculty members in Saudi Arabia. Leaders should develop a sense of camaraderie, family, and overall good feeling to develop affective trust. The flow of objective information within a faculty, for example, through the use of dashboarding, would encourage cognitive trust. Leaders should consider their own leadership styles as some styles are understood to cultivate trust in followers. Transformational leadership practices (Algarni, 2021) and an authentic leadership style (Baquero, 2023; Kleynhans et al., 2021) has been proposed for this purpose.

Several future research directions are indicated. Further research is required to understand trust within the context of Saudi higher education, preferably with larger samples. The present study provides a basis on which to examine a series of relationships between trust and job-related outcomes such as turnover intention, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and engagement. Furthermore, recognizing that trust is a multi-level, multi-directional concept, other forms of trust such as trust in organization, or intra-faculty trust would enrich understanding of how trust affects not just individual performance but the performance of the institution as a whole.

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Appendix: McAllister's Affect-based Cognition-based trust scale

Affect-based trust

- We have a sharing relationship. We can both freely share our ideas, feelings, and hopes.

- I can talk freely to this individual about difficulties I am having at work and know that he will want to listen.

- We would both feel a sense of loss if one of us was transferred and we could no longer work together.

- If I shared my problems with this person, I know he would respond constructively and caringly.

- I would have to say that we have both made considerable emotional investments in our working relationship.

Cognition-based trust

- This person approaches his job with professionalism and dedication.

- Given this person's track record, I see no reason to doubt his competence and preparation for the job.

- I can rely on this person not to make my job more difficult by careless work.

- Most people, even those who aren't close friends of this individual, trust and respect him as a co-worker.

- Other work associates of mine who must interact with this individual consider him to be trustworthy.

- If people knew more about this individual and his/her background, they would be more concerned and monitor his performance more closely.