

This case explores the issue of trust in a geographically dispersed European IT leadership team. Background to the case is provided along with graphical output from a team development tool called *The International Team Trust Indicator*. This information can be used to predict how best to more consciously steer the team towards higher levels of trust as a key factor for productivity.



The EuroPlatform Leadership Team Case

Between 2006 and 2008 the Italian based Italcas Gas SpA (IG) had been in a phase of rapid expansion in Europe, and by late 2009 it had acquired local gas distribution companies in eight countries. They had a major national presence in Spain, Portugal and Slovenia as well as regionally focused companies in the Netherlands, Romania, Germany, Austria and Croatia.

One of the first challenges was to link the IT systems across each country and a 10-member 'EuroPlatform Leadership Team' (EPLT) was responsible for guiding the European integration of new IT systems with members representing all countries.

Already established for 18 months, they had survived a number of organisational restructuring traumas and cost-cutting drives which had produced a regular see-saw between internationalisation and localisation strategies, most recently leading to renewed focus on national targets. The last restructuring programme had led to a reduction of 20% of the workforce in both Germany and Austria through early retirement. This had sparked fears in other countries that job cuts could face them next and locals were determined to show head office that they could meet national targets. Unfortunately this situation was causing an unhealthy competition between countries as each wanted to show themselves in the best light possible at the quarterly presentations for the Board. Cross-border cooperation was at an all time low. Admission of weakness was seen as dangerous. Local offices closed ranks among themselves and protected themselves from 'foreign opportunists'.

Italian expatriate managers, Andrea and Massimo, had already been sent to Portugal and Romania in order to ensure stronger IT alignment with Head Office and break down local silos. However, this policy was bringing other problems in its wake. Some senior people in the local offices saw this move as a clear sign that 'the locals can't be trusted and needed control from the centre'. The task of building trust between the expats, the local management team and their local reports in IT was slow and language difficulties were not helping to overcome defensive first impressions and misunderstandings. The effort was creating 14-hour days for both Andrea and Massimo who were beginning to burn out.

The EPLT had been considered a pioneer in the bullish 'international days' of the organisation back in 2006/7 when the acquisition process was at its peak. Their systems were the first to link the multinational structure together. However, informal conversations between the members and an external consultant suggested that the way they worked together could be improved. Some expressed concerns that the new challenges ahead – including the introduction of a common European billing system for clients – would severely test their levels of commitment to a geographically dispersed team, especially with the organisation's trust damaging move to retrench back into national silos. As one member commented, "It's tough enough to build accountability for common goals when we are so dispersed – but now our PMS [performance management system] reflects our ability to deliver nationally oriented projects and it seems that working internationally is something you're supposed to do as a hobby at weekends!"

In a series of informal conversations with the team members Marco Varini, the Italian team leader, brought to the surface the clear perception that levels of commitment to the EPLT was mixed. Marco was becoming frustrated that members were not sharing information proactively enough. "People are generally friendly with each other and help when asked, but that's the problem – you have to know who has key information, locate it and actively pull information towards you – others are not anticipating the needs of their team mates and pushing information automatically their way. Sometimes people don't even know others have valuable information 'hidden away' from the team".

Working virtually most of the time, Marco found it tough even to get everyone in the team together twice a year, but he firmly believed that "such eyeball-to-eyeball meetings help us to deal with some tougher 'soft' issues which we just can't work through in a conference call" – and trust was one of the issues he wanted to deal with at their next meeting. But how to deal with this delicate issue? Suggesting that there was a trust deficit could hurt people at a deep level and could lead to more defensiveness than before.

Some colleagues in another part of the company had used a trust diagnostic tool called the *International Team Trust Indicator* (see insert 1) as a trust x-ray to help work through some of their productivity issues related to trust. On their recommendation he arranged for everyone on the EPLT to fill in the anonymous web-based questionnaire to identify the specific behaviours and attitudes each team member needed from their colleagues if they were to trust them, and also what they were actually experiencing in this respect. These individual results were then pooled to provide an overall report for the whole team. The resulting report contains a range of graphical analysis outputs that would enable the team leader and team members to identify more precisely the nature of any trust deficits within the team—and to begin with priority areas.

Marco Varini sat pensively at his desk in Rome as he started to prepare the next EPLT team meeting in Madrid. How was he going to deal with the trust survey results he was staring at? Was he part of the problem? He had invited his external consultant & coach for a brief meeting. What could they suggest?

He went out for another espresso coffee from the machine and started drafting his notes for the meeting in Madrid.

The EuroPlatform Leadership Team

Marco Varini

Team Leader: Italian – responsible for IT Europe

Cristina Serban

Slovenian – responsible for IT in Slovenia

Thomas Brosch

German – responsible for IT in Germany

Andrea Valerio

Italian – responsible for IT in Portugal

Peter Van Son

Dutch – responsible for IT in The Netherlands

Jose Garcia

Spanish – responsible for IT in Spain

Massimo Centioni

Italian – responsible for IT in Romania

Andreas Schuster

Austrian – responsible for IT in Austria

Anika Redovnjovic

Croatian – responsible for IT in Croatia

Giuseppe Castellari

Italian – responsible for IT Italy

The International Team Trust Indicator

A team development instrument developed by WorldWork Ltd

Through an analysis of available research WorldWork has identified 10 different 'Criteria' that people from many different cultures use to decide whether to trust others (see definitions in appendix 2).

Based on these trust criteria, WorldWork has developed a process to identify levels of trust and the trust 'deficit' within any given team or work-group.

For the International Team Trust Indicator each team member completes a 50-item questionnaire on a 1-5 scale which identifies for them the behaviours and attitudes they need from their colleagues if they are to trust them, and also what they are actually experiencing in this respect.

These individual results are then pooled to provide an overall report for the team as a whole.

The report contains a range of graphical analysis options that will enable the team leader and team members to identify the nature of any trust deficits within the team.

The Indicator is suitable for multi-cultural teams that have experience of working together for at least a short time. It can be used as part of a team development process, allowing the team to address difficult and elusive aspects of team effectiveness in a constructive way.

Appendix 1 : some comments by the team members

Excerpts from one-to-one discussions with you, the consultant, over dinner in the team the evening before the bi-annual leadership team meeting in Madrid:

“Marco’s very competent but a workaholic and I’d really appreciate more selectiveness in the projects he takes on for the team. We’re overloaded at the moment on both the local front and on these international projects. He seems to say ‘yes’ to everything that’s thrown at him.” (Peter—Dutch)

“I get the impression that what we do in Slovenia is not really taken seriously. We are the smallest operation and I sometimes feel we’re lower status. We don’t have all the team specialist they do in Italy and being someone who has to cover a range of roles I just don’t have the time to focus 100% on any of the 4 projects we have running at the moment.” (Cristina—Slovenian)

“It’s pretty tough to get some hard facts and clear decisions out of Italy. It seems like an exclusive club and they keep the decision making process among themselves. The priorities seem to be changing on a daily basis and so I have no idea how to plan and set longer term targets.” (Thomas—German)

“I’m glad we’ve got the issue of trust on the agenda this time. Maybe we’ll finally get some straight answers to some straight questions.” (Peter—Dutch)

*“I think we still need to invest in building stronger relationships when we meet. We tend to work through an agenda of technical issues but perhaps it’s time we reflected a bit more on **how** we work together and build common approaches.” (José—Spanish)*

“I really have doubts about the level of sponsorship we have for the European billing project coming up. How much credibility does Marco have at the board level? He doesn’t seem to be able (or interested) to be a spokesperson for some of the real issues we have at a local level.” (Andreas—Austrian)

“With four Italians on the team – who’ve known each other for years – I’m not sure how much we are really exploring alternative perspectives in these meetings,” (Anika—Croatian)

“Technically it’s a great team – I just wish people would speak up more. Marco’s thinking tends to dominate when there are no ideas coming from the others. He drives us but perhaps gets too involved in detail” (Andrea—Italian)

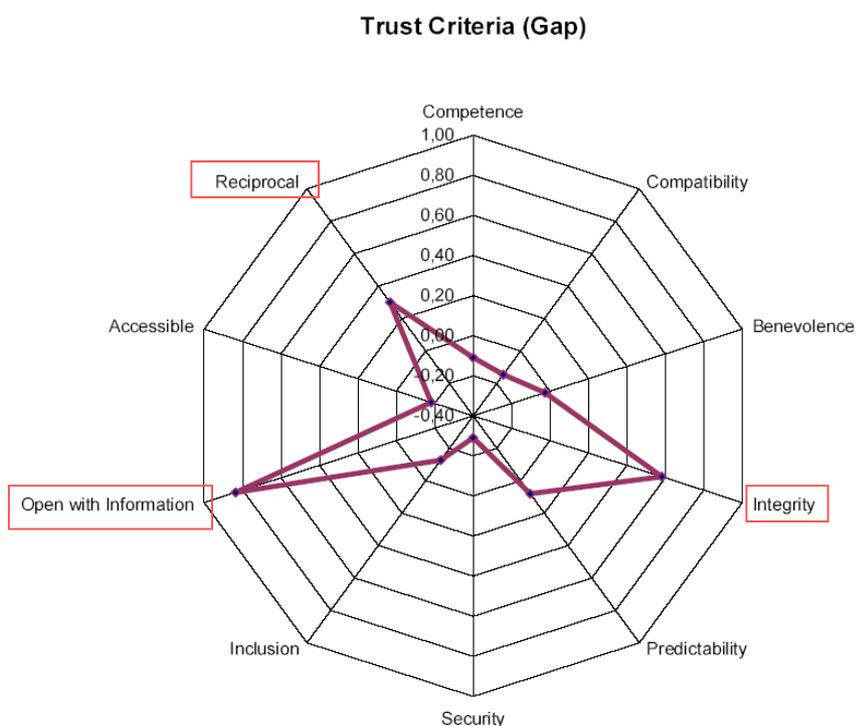
“I’m having trouble enough understanding what’s needed at a local level in Romania. This is only my 4th week in their offices and I’m still living out of a hotel.” (Massimo—Italian)

“I suspect many thoughts people have during our teleconferences are left unsaid. It would be good if we did more ‘thinking together’ rather than defending our own local track record. Some of the members are too quiet for me.” (Giuseppe—Italian)

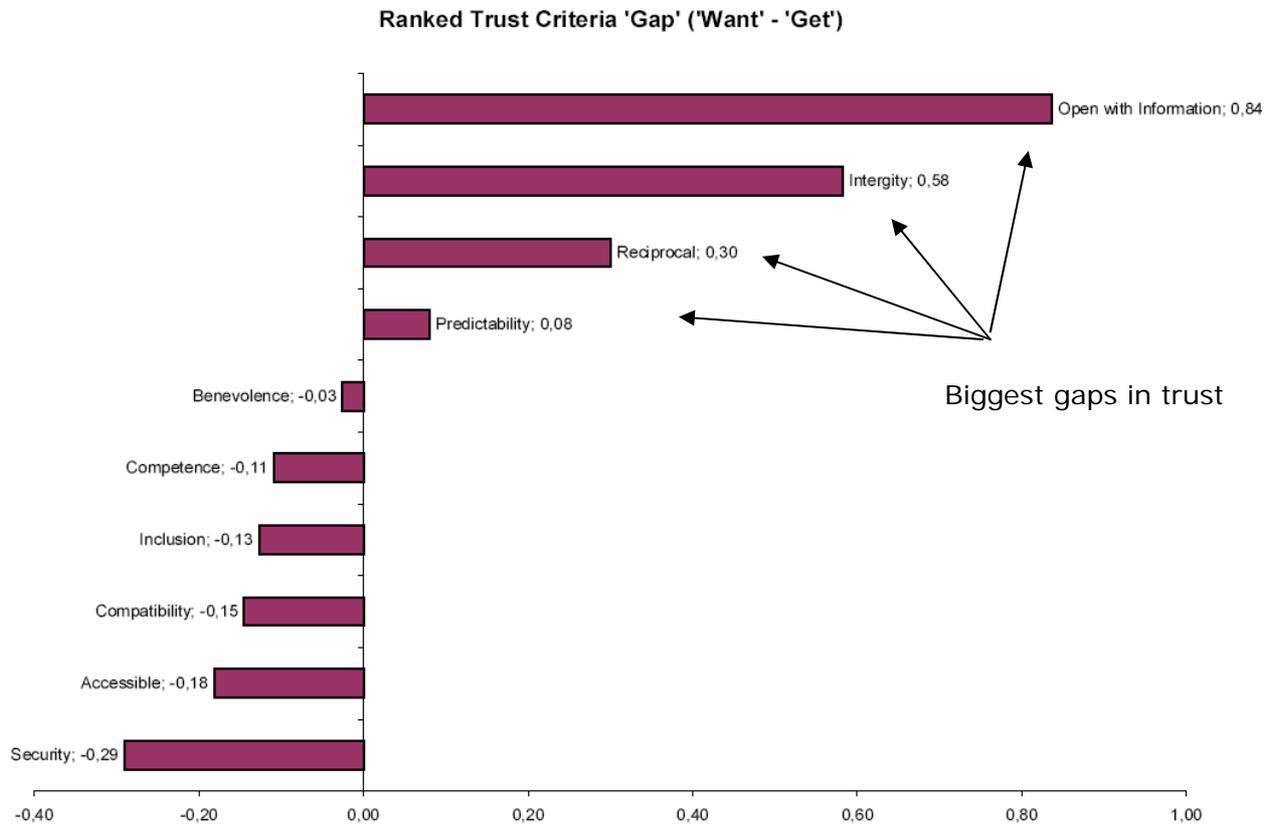
Appendix 2 : Definitions of the 10 trust criteria

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Competence | Trust based on a perception that team members are competent, and so will not let me down |
| 2. Compatibility | Trust based on background, values, approaches, interests and objectives held in common |
| 3. Good will (previously Benevolence) | Trust based on the belief that other team members are concerned about my overall welfare |
| 4. Integrity | Trust based on the fact that other team members maintain promises, are team oriented and behave towards me in accordance with a moral code |
| 5. Predictability | Trust based on the observation that the behaviour of team members is consistent over time and in different contexts |
| 6. Well being (previously Security) | Trust arising from the feeling that I have nothing to fear from the other members of the group |
| 7. Inclusion | Trust based on the observation that other group members actively include me in their social and work activities |
| 8. Open with information | Trust based on the fact that other team members share information important to the team proactively and clearly |
| 9. Accessibility | Trust based on the fact that other team members share their true feelings and I can relate to them at a personal level |
| 10. Reciprocal | Trust based on the observation that other group members are trusting and co-operative towards me |

Appendix 3: The mapping of trust gaps across the 10 criteria



Appendix 4 : Ranking of the trust gaps



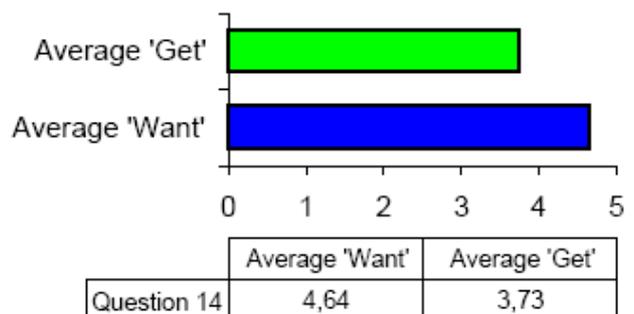
Appendix 5 : Specific trust gaps within the criteria of 'integrity'*

The members of my team or work group:

keep their promises and commitments

The members of my team or work group:

are honest and truthful



*N.B. : standard deviation scores show a high level of agreement within the team on all these results

Appendix 6 : Specific trust gaps within the criteria of 'open with information'

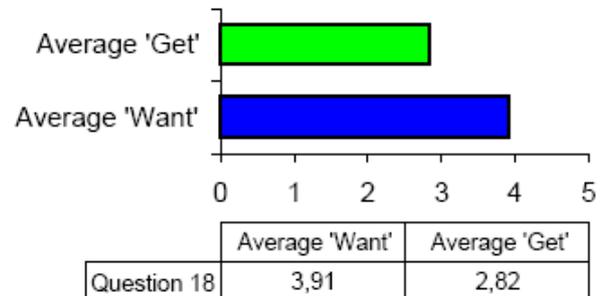
The members of my team or work group:

exchange information in a transparent and unambiguous way



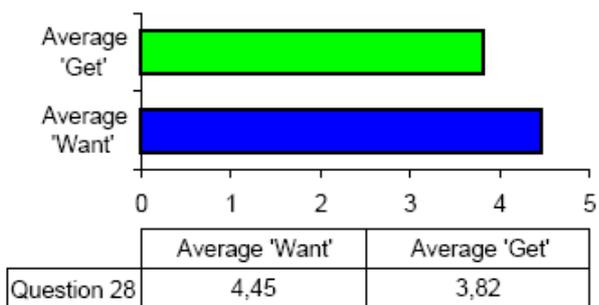
The members of my team or work group:

are open about their needs and motives



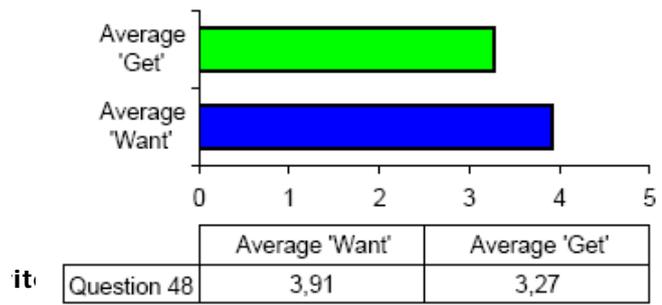
The members of my team or work group:

do not hide useful information from other members of the team



The members of my team or work group:

readily share relevant information with me



Appendix 7 : Specific trust gaps within the criteria of 'reciprocal'

The members of my team or work group:

are mutually dependent to achieve our common goals



*N.B. : standard deviation scores show a high level of agreement within the team on all these results

The Task

Your task as the consultancy supporting Marco is to organise a 10-minute meeting with him during which you will:

-  Provide a brief analysis of the potential **causes** and **responses** to the trust gaps in the International Team Trust Indicator results
-  Suggest what he could usefully do to address some of the key issues in the **next meeting in Madrid**
-  Ensure that you **influence him** sufficiently to ask for a follow up meeting with you to support him and the team on these trust issues moving forward

Don't forget that Marco may well be 'part of the problem', so you may need to plan how you will get him to recognise this in your approach to the meeting.