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Conflict and Trust during Covid-19

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Introduction

Over recent years, the spheres of work and family have both changed considerably and have become more boundaryless (Allen et al., 2014), which infers a potential increase for spill-over between the two. Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) state that because of this spill-over, many employees express the need to balance their work with their family lives. At home, for example, there is a growing need for dual incomes while, at the same time, more and more people need to take care of older relatives or care for young children (Sok et al., 2014). Concurrently, for those who work in education (although all work domains have equivalent issues), increasing job pressures resulting from changing student expectations and reductions in student funding, increases the expectations placed on those working in education. Therefore, the need for a better understanding of the role that work-life balance can play in the light of protecting workers' employability is more urgent than ever before.

While many institutions have policies to help facilitate a better work-life balance, education has, been slow in promoting such policies (Lendák-Kabók, 2020). It is true that in higher education, academic staff have greater autonomy than those in other fields of education (Kai & Li, 2013) where the expectation is that teachers in schools and colleges work face-to-face with their students in a classroom. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 during the spring of 2020 paralysed countries and forced some nations into adopting draconian measures in order to stem the pandemic.

There is no doubt that the lives lost to Covid-19 are tragic. However, it has forced many institutions to re-evaluate quickly how their staff work. In higher education, senior leaders promptly cancelled face-to-face lectures and encouraged staff to transition to online teaching. However, this has caused an element of uncertainty in terms of how leaders within higher education manage their teams in the new virtual world. With individuals required to work from home, leaders need to be clear around expectations they place on staff in an education system that has had trust eroded already at a government level (Bormann & John, 2014). This raises the question: Has Covid-19 given rise to trust issues between leaders and their staff?

In order to address this question, this paper explores a conceptual model of trust and uses it as a lens to examine the impact of working from home that has been forced upon us as a consequence of Covid-19.

Conceptual framework

This paper explores the notions of trust brought about by the pandemic through the lens of Khodyakov's (2007) three-dimensional approach. The dimensions within Khodyakov's model

extend Fukuyama's (1995, 1999) existing ideas of trust – namely, *thick* and *thin* trust – by adding a third, *institutional* trust.

As Khodyakov (2007) explains *Thick trust* is the first type individuals develop in their lives. It is the trust that people have with their family members, relatives, and close friends. Thick trust is necessary for developing an optimistic attitude towards others, which makes social interaction possible. Trust, through this dimension depends on similarity and strong emotional relationships between people. Thick trust is generally restricted to those who are of the same or similar socio-economic background, which makes the development of such trust less risky (Cook, 2005). The basis for thick trust, therefore, is familiarity and similarity with a trustee. Those people who know each other well and who have a lot in common are more likely to trust each other. Thick trust often becomes automatic, and people do not even perceive it as trust. However, the opposite can also be true. The more negative information people have about a person, the less likely they are to trust this person.

In contemporary western society, people interact with others they may not know well and differ in socioeconomic status and interests. Through dealings with a range of people, we develop weak social ties that are invaluable for obtaining access to otherwise unavailable resources. For example, when we order a drink at the local coffee shop, we engage in a relationship in order to obtain access to our desired drink. Trusting members of dissimilar groups develop *thin trust*, sometimes called 'generalized trust' (Uslaner, 2002). By placing trust in people whom we know only a little, we usually expect or believe that they will comply with our expectations, and will be fair, honest, and reasonable in their dealings with us. Our expectations can depend on one's own values as well as shared ethical rules.

Trust is a necessary part of society and is needed for successful cooperation because both parties have similar needs and interests, and they recognize the importance of collaboration in achieving common goals. Thin trust, however, is riskier than thick trust, because the former is about relationships with people whose real intentions may not be clear.

Models of trust formation are often regarded as a linear phenomenon that is formed by the interaction of individuals, ostensibly forming thick or thin relationships. However, Khodyakov (2007) argues that there is a third dimension, which is *institutional trust*. This provides a more realistic view of the complexities of trust which we cannot assume to be a linear process. As a concept, institutional trust is quite different from trust in people because the concept may presuppose no encounters at all with the individual staff within organisations who are in some way "responsible" for them. For example, the responsibility for the creation and subsequent accountability for an organisations policy might be with a senior member of staff, such as a policy on admissions to a course. However, individuals may not deal with that member of staff, but a more junior one within the institution whom has to administer the policy, such as an admissions officer. It is the impersonal nature of institutions that makes the creation of institutional trust so difficult; because it is more problematic to trust some abstract concept that does not express any feelings and emotions.

Yet, trust in institutions is often more important than trust in society, because institutions can have more resources to provide people with the means of achieving certain goals. As a result, individuals are more likely to rely on institutions, but only if they perceive the organization as legitimate, competent, and able to perform its duties efficiently.

The lens of trust during Covid19

In education, the notion of professionalism has been eroded (Bormann & John, 2014). This paper is not suggesting that staff are not open to scrutiny, merely that they are subject to increasing centralised control in terms of how they teach, what they teach, and the expectations placed on them by the organization. This has been the case pre-Covid-19; however, the rapid onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions to switch quickly from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. This has seen an increase in accountability for staff, such as ensuring that students engage with online platforms at the designated time. Also, staff pedagogy is more open to scrutiny as managers can easily judge teacher's performance by accessing their online lessons. With little time, if any, to provide staff with terms of reference for engaging with online teaching and learning, most institutions were expecting staff to continue wherever possible with lessons by using a plethora of online collaboration tools.

As staff transitioned to this new way of working while concurrently developing their own skills in both information technology (IT) and online pedagogy, leaders have been less adaptable. Typically, educational institutions operate in very structured ways that provide consistency and stability for staff and students. Such structuring also inherently facilitates numerous social and community interactions throughout the day. For the well-being of everyone, keeping routines, roles, and responsibilities as consistent and as close to "normal" as possible is vital Betz, (2020). Váňová (2020) suggests that one of two positions have been adopted by operational leaders (those in middle leadership roles) regarding their engagement with staff. For some, this has resulted in the near absence of engaging with staff. Others mandated an overabundance of meetings – far beyond that of normal business requirements. This directly conflicts with Betz's (2020) advice on maintaining normality.

This paper has so far looked at the conceptual notions of trust as considered by Khodyakov (2007), particularly thick and thin trust and ideas of institutional trust. The coronavirus pandemic has required those individuals working in education to transition their learning online. While teachers have been swift to adapt to the 'new normal' of online teaching, we need to explore the extent to which leaders in education, which is largely defined by its physical presence, have adapted to leading and managing their teams online. Therefore, the following section explores how leaders have responded to the shift to the virtual world of education through Khodyakov's (2007) ideas of trust.

The need to ensure that students continue to engage in their learning is extremely important. Not only does it help to mitigate potential issues associated with isolation, but it also helps students continue to make progress with their studies. Indeed, for those who are studying subjects related to medicine and science, there is an urgent need for them to complete their studies and help with the relief effort. Whereas teaching staff have risen to the challenge, some

leaders have become over zealous with the need to have countless meetings. This is not to say that they are not important, as they provide a means of conveying important institutional information. Undeniably, the transition to holding meetings online rather than in person has the potential to increase attendance at such meetings. However, questions arise as to the value of increasing the frequency of meetings simply because of the transition to online and remote working. Feedback from participants within the education sector suggest that because of this shift to online meetings those that ordinarily happen on a half-term basis are reportedly happening weekly. This raises questions about whether these are simply a mechanism for checking on staff based on a culture of thin trust arising from a low trust environment. While Baker-McClearn et. al., (2010) suggests that staff being present in the workplace is less productive than those who work from home, Baska (2020) and Jacobs (2020) warn that there is an increased risk of staff 'burn-out' as a result of the pandemic. This is in part due to a perceived pressure to maintain the same levels of performance as pre-pandemic while working from home. Although there is an intrinsic benefit to increasing the frequency of some meetings, for example to reduce the isolation that individuals may face when working at home, they are counterproductive.

At the other end of the continuum are those who seldom engage with their staff, favouring occasional emails rather than meetings. However, this does not mean that they simply trust their staff to manage their professional lives, symbolic of thick trust. There are many possible reasons for this detachment that may include access to, or confidence with, the sudden expectation that business will continue, albeit online. Another reason may be that middle leaders lack the ability to engage with staff on an emotional level (Lambert, 2020) due to the task-orientated nature of their role. The current pandemic and subsequent lockdown provide an opportunity for some leaders to complete task-focused activities to the exclusion of engaging with staff.

Another reason for this lack of engagement is the transactional approach to leadership, which is bound by process, goals and structures (Aarons, 2006), rather than the transformational approach to leadership, which is focused more so on engaging in people and relationships in order to improve performance (Zuraik & Kelly, 2019). Given that the first-line manager is positioned in close proximity to the department's work, the way that an individual implements the leadership role can have a significant impact on the work environment and organizational commitment (McGuire & Kennerly, 2007). The leader who influences positively the work environment and fosters staff's organizational commitment stimulates greater achievement at the department level and enhances the organization's competitive advantage.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the challenges that Covid-19 has bought about in managing teams of remote workers in higher education. By using Khodyakov's (2007) three-dimensional approach to trust as a lens, it can be reasoned that there is a continuum from thin to thick trust, evident by leaders either overburdening their teams with meetings or largely disengaging from their teams. The transition to an online environment should not change a leaders' approach to meetings. In the physical work environment, we may not see individuals, particularly in higher education for a period of time due to differing academic commitments. Therefore, there is no meaningful

rationale to change the way leaders engage with staff in the virtual world, especially given the expectation that individuals will continue with their teaching commitments. If leaders have shifted their position on the continuum, then there is a case for further individual reflection to reconcile why this approach has been necessary and what impact it might have on the teams they lead. What is important is that the pandemic provides all leaders the opportunity to reflect on how they engage with their teams, so they are fully prepared when normality returns.

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