

Trustworthy or Accountable: Which is Better?

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What is the relationship between trust and accountability? The answer is not as straightforward as might commonly be assumed. In the supervisory relationship, it is not enough that supervisors and supervisees prove themselves trustworthy by demonstrating their accountability to each other. Trust is both more complicated and more interesting than that. Trust between two people is essentially a relationship. It grows and deepens through the willingness of both to take risks and make themselves vulnerable to each other. Trust involves risk because both open themselves to outcomes that neither can predict with certainty. Accountability, by contrast, is the obligation to provide a reckoning of one's actions to another. It contributes to trust but does not tell the whole story.

LEARNING TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY FROM CON ARTISTS

Let me begin by drawing upon a narrative that may be familiar to many readers but may never have been associated with supervision, trust, or accountability. In the 1973 film *The Sting*, two con artists wish to play a confidence game on a notorious crime boss who recently ordered a hit on one

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of their friends.¹ Henry Gondorff and Johnny Hooker team up to pull off an elaborate scheme—a “sting”—on Doyle Lonnegan. Gondorff has been in the con business a long time; Hooker is a rookie who wants to advance in it. You might say that Gondorff is the supervisor, and Hooker is his protégé. The scheme they concoct requires that Hooker pose as someone he is not. He must win Lonnegan's confidence so that the mobster will follow Hooker's advice and wager a significant sum of money on a horse race, money that the pair will eventually take. Gondorff and Hooker set up a fake gambling parlor. Hooker pretends to Lonnegan that he has an accomplice who can delay the race announcements just long enough to know which horse won before a bet is placed. Thus Lonnegan will be able to bet on a sure winner, all the while unaware that the entire operation is a charade.

How does Lonnegan, an otherwise ruthless and untrusting man, come to believe what Hooker is telling him and agree to follow his lead? Hooker poses as one of Gondorff's protégés who holds a grudge and wants to get back at Gondorff by taking a lot of money off of him. He spins a story about past mistreatment. Lonnegan is inclined to trust Hooker's story because he himself holds a grudge against Gondorff for besting him at a high stakes card game. He therefore trusts Hooker in the way that people do who share mutual enemies. It is not so much trust in Hooker that motivates Lonnegan as it is his intense and insatiable desire for revenge.

Lonnegan does insist, however, upon testing out the “con” Hooker wants him to help pull on Gondorff. He agrees to place an initial bet for a small amount of money just to see that the system works. He bets on the horse Hooker tells him to bet on, and it wins, and Lonnegan is satisfied. Just to be thoroughly assured that Hooker can be held accountable, however, Lonnegan demands to meet Hooker's accomplice. Hooker arranges for Lonnegan to meet the man who supposedly has insider knowledge of the races. This meeting, too, of course, is a charade, but Lonnegan believes what he sees and concludes that he has satisfactorily checked out the whole operation. He agrees to place half a million dollars on the next horse race in order to take Gondorff for everything he's got. Hooker and Gondorff have successfully conned their mark. Shortly after handing over the money for his bet, the gambling parlor is raided by friends of Gondorff and Hooker pretending to be police, and Lonnegan is hustled out of the place without being able to collect his money back.

Doyle Lonnegan is a character who places trust where he should not. His flaw is not simply that he is too trusting and, therefore, gets himself duped. Anyone can be lured into misplaced trust by being deceived. His flaw, rather,

lies in the fact that he entrusts himself to a scheme whose players he does not take the time to get to know. In the film, he never really establishes a relationship with Hooker. Instead, he focuses on the system Hooker presents and its operations. Satisfied that everything seems to work as it is supposed to, he invests in the betting scheme. Lonnegan places his trust in procedures rather than people.

TRUSTING CREDENTIALS IS NOT ENOUGH

In contrast, the film offers a very different portrayal of Gondorff's and Hooker's evolving trust relationship. Gondorff has not met Hooker before they join forces to pull off the con on Lonnegan. He takes his time getting to know the rookie. Hooker had been mentored by Luther, the grifter who was killed. This relationship is his initial "in" with Gondorff. When Hooker shows up at Gondorff's doorstep eager to meet and team up with the legendary con artist about whom he has heard so much, he doesn't make it past Gondorff's partner until he offers up Luther's name. "Are you Hooker?" she asks, "Why didn't you say so?" Credentials are often important to the establishment of trust because people want to know that the other is familiar, known by someone they also know.

But credentials are not enough. Hooker may know the right people and come bearing a positive reputation, but these are just his ticket in the door. Unlike Lonnegan, Gondorff is more careful about who he agrees to team up with. Throughout their initial meeting (throughout which, incidentally, Gondorff is shaking off a hangover from the night before), the older man bides his time and clearly sizes the youngster up. He teases the overeager Hooker, who wants to get started right away before the pair even figures out whether they are well suited to work together. He quizzes Hooker, asking him how much he knows about Lonnegan. Hooker has to give a little recital of Lonnegan's record in the mob before Gondorff is satisfied that he knows enough about the man they are up against to be a credible partner. He also assesses Hooker's seriousness and commitment to the task that lies ahead. He tries to figure out whether the younger man's goals are realistic or whether he will blow the job by pressing for more gain and glory than they can reasonably expect. "Don't be coming back afterward saying it isn't enough because it's all we're gonna get."

Gondorff eventually approves Hooker and agrees to teach him how to pull off the big con. Immediately after, he becomes Gondorff's right-hand

man. Hooker, however, lies to him. Word has spread that someone passed counterfeit bills off to the police to get out of a scrape; that was Hooker. Gondorff wants to be sure that he hasn't teamed up with a bad risk, so he asks Hooker about the counterfeiting. Hooker denies it. A bit later, Hooker discovers that someone, presumably from Lonnegan's mob, is tailing him. Again he fails to share this information with Gondorff, even when pressed. In other words, despite having been accepted and entrusted by the very mentor he wanted to study under, Hooker consistently proves himself to be an untrustworthy student. He is one of those students who is smart, highly capable, and a good learner, but also cocky, irresponsible, and evasive. He doesn't yet know what it really means to work as a team in the con business. Does Gondorff realize this? Does he suspect that Hooker may be holding out on him? Or has he naively agreed to mentor someone he should never have entrusted with so much responsibility?

THE RISKINESS OF CAUTIOUS TRUSTING

It turns out that Gondorff has hedged his bets about Hooker all along. A wise mentor, he trusts but is not overly trusting. He puts a safety net in place. Unbeknownst to Hooker, he assigns a colleague to follow him and make sure the young man remains unscathed. He admonishes Hooker when the truth about the counterfeiting and the tail on him come out. "What else haven't you been telling me? ... You just won't learn, will you? I'm teaching you things maybe five people know." He even issues a direct lesson to his student about trust relationships: "You can't play your friends like marks." As a supervisor, Gondorff grants a great deal of responsibility to Hooker—nearly enough for Hooker to ruin the whole plan if he were rash enough to do so. Yet all the while, Gondorff works to ensure Hooker's safety and the safety of the whole operation. Gondorff effectively creates the conditions necessary for Hooker to grow into trustworthiness. One glance between them toward the end of the film tells it all: when Hooker shows up with Lonnegan at the betting place unscathed, having realized that his mentor protected him, there is obvious relief on Gondorff's face and gratitude on Hooker's.

The Sting, a film whose very theme is confidence, teaches us a lot about trust. The relationship between Gondorff and Hooker shows us what real trust is like: We do not always have the luxury of choosing to trust only those people who have in some prior way already proven themselves to us. We are not always given partners who can demonstrate with clarity the qualities of

honesty, fidelity, and responsibility that make up the trustworthiness we hope they possess. We are not always provided a detailed accounting of their history. More realistically, we have to accept people as they are, with all their mix of virtues and vices and a track record that may be checkered. We have to take a risk with them, extending perhaps more responsibility than they are ready for, but judging that risk to be acceptable. Trusting someone is like going out on a limb. You cannot know with absolute certainty how things will turn out, but you wager some of your security in exchange for the payoff that a closer relationship will bring.

For his part, Johnny Hooker has to learn to trust Henry Gondorff as well. Gondorff does not appear at first glance, or even second glance, to be someone who makes a trustworthy mentor. Not only is he passed out on the floor next to his bed when Hooker first encounters him, but it comes out that the reason he has been out of the business for so long is that he blew it on a big job. "Don't kid yourself, friend, I still know how," he maintains, but his current position managing a shabby amusement park hardly conveys confidence. Only through little hints and exchanges does Hooker slowly learn that, despite all appearances, Gondorff is still a capable operator who can teach him things. And the lessons are not what he expects at first. Hooker is caught off guard when Gondorff guesses that one of Lonnegan's men may be tailing him. "I didn't see anyone," Hooker protests, to which Gondorff replies, "You never do, kid." At one point in their conversation, Hooker realizes that Gondorff feels apprehensive toward the job they are about to undertake. "You're afraid of [Lonnegan], aren't you?" Hooker says with dismay. But Gondorff simply concurs, "Right down to my socks, buddy," as if to say that self-assurance does not eliminate all fear, and that a little fear in a professional may even be a salutary thing. As Hooker continues to try to minimize the threat Lonnegan poses, saying with bluster that "He's not as tough as he thinks," Gondorff calmly replies, "Neither are we." Gondorff is teaching Hooker humility. He is also teaching his student that appearances can be deceiving and that it is possible to place trust in someone who is imperfect and has failed in the past. Those who at first seem the most unlikely of mentors because of their flaws and vulnerability may turn out to be the very ones who are safe to trust.

MUTUAL VULNERABILITY AND TRUST

Gondorff and Hooker become mentor and protégé because they are willing to risk being in relationship with each other even before they have complete

assurance that the risk will prove worthwhile. At first tentative with each other, engaging in a sort of dance, they learn to "read" each other. That is, they learn where the other's strengths and weaknesses lie and how much they can expect of the other. They are vulnerable—in this case, the mentor even more than the protégé—and this helps their mutual trust to grow. They learn that it is all right to risk honesty and that it is also acceptable to hedge a bit against the other's potential dishonesty, just in case. They show us what the lived experience of trust is like: trusting another person is a complex mix of caution, calculation, and stepping out in faith. There are some things you want to know about the other person right from the start. Can anyone else I know vouch for him? Does she have a record of coming through for others? Does he genuinely appreciate what is at stake in my trusting him and in him trusting me? But there are other things you can never know. You do not know whether greed might get the better of the other person. You cannot prevent the other person from listening to the counsel of third parties and even disregarding you at times. You cannot be sure she will not make a decision you dislike. But you have to entrust yourself anyway. You wager that, even if he surprises you, he will do so because he has your best interest at heart. This is what it means to trust someone after all and not merely to count on them to come through precisely the way you stipulated.

Is this not how many trust relationships, including supervisory relationships, develop? When we trust, we yield a part of ourselves to another person. We give the person something we care about for her safekeeping. We hope it will remain safe in her hands, but we also assume she will take care of it the best way she knows how. Simply put, trust involves allowing for discretion. We allow the people we trust to make decisions about the well-being of the things with which we entrust them. We trust them to exercise good judgment in these decisions. The reality of genuine trust is that usually the end is open; part of what we are putting our faith in is the other's ability to act in ways we cannot fully predict. Sometimes that might mean acting in ways we did not expect and could not stipulate ahead of time. The most trustworthy people may even surprise.

The most trusting supervisors do not merely look to see that their students did what they said they would do. Supervisors who place the most trust in their students are ones who are open to outcomes they may not have expected. They may even hope that their students will break with procedure and come up with something even better than expected. This openness, so ineliminable in real trust, is the reason I argue that trust and accountability are

not the same thing. When we trust others, we do not do so only because their performance conforms to what was promised. “Trustworthy” has become so synonymous with “faithful” that we forget that it does not merely mean having a record of discharging responsibilities consistently. In other words, a trustworthy person is not just someone who can produce a faithful accounting that passes inspection.

With respect to students under our supervision, we are not simply hoping that they will produce a faithful reckoning of their responsibilities—although this is understandably desirable, especially at the beginning of a supervisory relationship. The behaviors that produce a good accounting are important. We certainly do not wish for the opposite, that is, for a student who is inconsistent, quirky, and unreliable. But we also wish to be able to give our most trusted students discretion with respect to their duties. We want to be able to hand them something and see where they go with it. For in those cases, we are entrusting ourselves to them, not to the practices and procedures laid out before them.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Trust—or, more precisely, a lack of trust—is a topic of widespread conversation these days among those who worry about institutions and their leaders. Many bemoan its seeming decline among today’s practitioners. A common response to the apparent crisis in trust is to put increased effort into trying to make practitioners, and those who would become the next generation of practitioners, more trustworthy. Regulatory schemes, assessment plans, and third-party audits proliferate. Greater trustworthiness is widely assumed to be secured through greater accountability. If we could only keep better tabs on what people are doing in their work, the thinking goes, then we would be assured in placing our trust in them. So accountants are subject to more audits, health care providers to more documentation, ministers to more safe church rules, and teachers and students to more assessments, to name just a few examples of the proliferating new forms of accountability. As British philosophers Neil Manson and Onora O’Neill write:

in place of trust [skeptics] look for stronger forms of accountability. In effect they concentrate on improving trustworthiness, and suggest that we can forget about trust. The currently favoured methods for improving trustworthiness advocate stricter and stronger systems of accountability that clarify powers, obligations and rights, imposed by formal contracts and codes, backed by monitoring and inspection of performance, by sanc-

tions for failure...and by redress for those who are let down...Systems of accountability are seen as ensuring that institutional and professional action meets acceptable standards.²

In contrast to today’s stricter, stronger, formal systems of accountability, interpersonal trust may seem hopelessly quaint. Even worse, talk about trust may sound to some like advocacy for the paternalism of the past. In an earlier era, when we could not keep tabs on everything professionals were up to, we simply trusted in the persons themselves. We assumed that “father knew best” and would operate with our best interests in mind. This way of deciding whom to trust appeared to work, at least for a while, and forestalled the crisis of trust.

Accountability as a “Second Order Obligation”

There are two problems with equating trust with paternalism and trustworthiness with accountability. First, trust does not have to be bestowed blindly. There are smarter and dumber forms of trust, and it is important to learn to distinguish between them. I and others are not advocating a return to the unintelligent or blind placing of trust in practitioners qua practitioners. A full discussion of smart trust is beyond the scope of this article, but there are ways to learn to practice it.³ Second, it is false to assume that accountability is preferable to trust just because it reveals more and seems to provide more evidence of assurance. Accountability is really only trust one step removed. Let me explain.

Accountability means that I am entrusted with a responsibility for which I have to give an account. Anybody who is held accountable for their practice has, in effect, a dual obligation. Their first obligation is a direct one; they must answer directly to the people they serve or to their jobs. A nurse, for example, is obliged to care for his patients in a competent manner; a student is obliged to study her course material. At the same time, however, they have an obligation to provide an accounting of how they have met their responsibilities. The nurse does not just provide care but must also account for his competent caring. He answers to someone else, by filling out a chart or making a report to a supervisor. The student must not only learn the material but also demonstrate what she has learned. She takes tests and submits work for evaluation. She is thereby answerable both to herself and to her teacher. Almost everyone employed or taught or supervised has this dual set of obligations.

Another way of saying this is that accountability is always a “second order obligation.”⁴ The first order obligation is to do the job; the second order obligation is to show that the job was done. Manson and O’Neill outline this

multi-step structure of accountability (expressed in the sort of language with which philosophers are fond): “X ought to be done by A; B has a right to X being done by A; A has a further obligation to render an account of success or failure in doing X to C.”⁶ So, for example, “Pastoral care ought to be provided by Chaplain A; Patient B has a right to pastoral care being provided by Chaplain A; Chaplain A has a further obligation to render an account of her success or failure in providing pastoral care to Supervisor C.” Both obligations are important. Primary obligations can never, of course, be neglected, as they are primary. But secondary obligations are also important, and increasingly so in this era of heightened emphasis on accountability.

Dual Obligations

In a typical structure of accountability, the obligation to account for one’s work is often rendered to a third party rather than back to the person in the primary relationship. Although the nurse and his patient probably have a pretty good idea about what competent caring is, they do not get to define it all by themselves. The nurse is accountable to a nursing supervisor who has set standards for the patient’s competent care. As for the student, she may well have established her own internalized criteria for what constitutes good learning, but she also must demonstrate what she has learned to the person who designed the syllabus and set its goals. In chaplaincy training programs, chaplains in training make verbatim reports to their groups and their supervisors, who assess the nature and quality of their patient interactions. In other words, a third party has usually set standards to which we are held accountable. This third party (“C” in Hanson and O’Neill’s terms) is, in turn, responsible for holding us accountable. And, I should say, in the case of misconduct, third parties also apply sanctions and a means of redress for those who are harmed.

Tensions can arise when those entrusted to do good work have to balance these dual obligations. Under pressure to provide an accounting of their work, for example, they may neglect their primary obligation in favor of taking the time to fulfill their secondary obligation. Like teachers who learn to “teach to the test” in order to produce high test scores and thereby show their superiors they are effective teachers, the focus on rendering an accounting of practice can overtake practice itself. Good work can become neglected in the effort to demonstrate good work. The stronger and stricter our systems of accountability become, the greater becomes the danger that we feel more obligated to the parties holding us accountable than to those we serve. We

have probably all felt at one time or other the pressure to make sure our practice looks good and places well within its respective scoring system. Under this sort of pressure, we can start making our practice conform to whatever the scoring standards are. Practice can actually ironically begin to suffer as practitioners strive to make it ever more presentable to those holding them accountable.

DECIDING WHOM TO TRUST

Let us turn our perspective, however, to those who have to decide whether to trust us. Will they be able to make this decision simply by asking for a better accounting of our practice? Is accountability the same as trust? Does it replace the need for trust? If the structure I have outlined for accountability is accurate, our answer must be: accountability cannot necessarily replace trust. If accountability is always second order, then so too is the trust that accountability generates. If someone trusts me on the basis of the accounting I have been able to provide, then properly speaking, they do not trust me, but rather the party holding me to account. In the terms used above, if what B wants is not just X service but also assurance that A has done X well, then B is not only trusting A but also trusting that C will hold A responsible. Sometimes B wants the assurance as much as the service. B trusts the account of A’s practice, not really the practice itself. In fact, properly speaking, B trusts the method or procedure C uses to evaluate the account of A’s work.

Let us take an example from the world of financial services. If I know little about investments but have just sold my house and have a sum of money to invest in a retirement account, I must choose a person or organization that knows something about long-term investing to entrust my money to. I can study the track record and past performance of the organization by reading their materials and talking to others who have invested with them. But in order to trust that the record is accurate and the materials authentic, chances are I rely heavily on the fact that the organization gets audited on a regular basis by independent auditors. My assurance, in other words, really comes from another party whom I trust as a source of second-order information.

Or take the ministry. Members of a search committee hoping to select someone good to be the church’s next minister probably interview their candidates directly. But they also trust in the ecclesiastical body charged with endorsing ministers, including their candidates. If a candidate were to have a history of misconduct, the search committee would hope that such informa-

tion would have been discovered, filed somewhere, and passed on as necessary. They hope not to have to place confidence in the candidate alone but also in the processes by which candidates are vetted. As Manson and O'Neill put it: "Those who rely on systems of accountability in effect place their trust in second-order systems for controlling and securing the reliable performance of primary tasks, and in those who devise and revise such systems of accountability."⁶ But this is not really replacing trust. It is simply placing trust at the next level. "Pushing trust one stage, or several stages, back does not eliminate the need to place or refuse trust, and to do so intelligently."⁷

Therefore accountability is one part of trust but not a substitute for it. Systems put into place for accountability in various practices and professions give us a lot of information, but we can never eliminate the need for interpersonal trust when we rely on them. In the case of my investment, I simply bestow trust in the auditors in addition to the investors themselves. In the case of the search committee members, they not only have to trust their candidate but also the diocese or presbytery or other ecclesial body and in that body's vigilance in tracking cases of misconduct and sharing information appropriately. (The committee may also legitimately hope that misconduct has been adequately prevented through effective systems of ministerial formation and training.) Good systems for accountability do provide a lot of evidence upon which we can base decisions about whom to trust, but it is still the case that other human beings produce that evidence and design the ways by which it gets collected. In short, there will always remain multiple people we have to trust.

TRUSTING PEOPLE MORE THAN PROCEDURES

Doyle Lonnegan did not just trust the wrong people; he failed to trust people. Instead, he trusted the procedure that had been set in place to provide an accounting of the horse race betting operation. In effect, he "audited" the operation by looking at a sample of it. He placed a test bet and got a satisfactory result, one that squared with what he had expected. The practice in question appeared to do what it said it would, and therefore he concluded that Hooker was someone who could be held accountable. This gave Lonnegan the confidence to trust Hooker and thereby go on to bet an even bigger sum. The problem was that there was no true relationship between the reliability of the practice and the trustworthiness of the practitioner. Hooker was fully accountable but not at all trustworthy! The fake horse racing

scheme in the film is an extreme example of a practice made to look good when it was not good at all. The "practitioner" totally fabricated the results of his practice, but he answered to what was asked of him. The problem was that Lonnegan asked the wrong things of him. Therefore, Lonnegan's approach is an extreme example of holding someone accountable without trusting them. In other words, he attempted to substitute accountability for trust.

In the end, there is no substitute for trust. Accountability is important because it gives us much-needed evidence of other people's reliability, which is especially valuable in situations where we cannot establish primary relationships with them. But first-order interpersonal trust will always be important too. As the film's central relationship between Gondorff and Hooker shows, trust is not necessarily easy, but it proves sturdier in the end and even more fruitful. Hopefully we have not yet considered it obsolete in our own practices of ministerial formation and supervision.

NOTES

1. *The Sting*. 1973. Directed by George Roy Hill. Zanuck/Brown Productions and Universal Pictures. The point of using this film is not to recommend the con business, but to reflect on the trust relationships it depicts.
2. Neil C. Manson and Onora O'Neill, *Rethinking Informed Consent* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162–3. See chapter 7, "Trust, Accountability, and Transparency."
3. See my chapter on "The Practice of Trust" in *Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).
4. Manson and O'Neill, *Rethinking Informed Consent*, 182.
5. *Ibid.*, 182.
6. *Ibid.*, 163.
7. *Ibid.*, 163.