

Trust in Organisational Life



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Revealing tales about trust

Alison Donaldson



While reading a short story by Camus – ‘The Guest’ – I was struck by three themes regarding trust in human relationships: acknowledging people as people; feeling under pressure to implement unwelcome orders; and vulnerability. When I compared ‘The Guest’ with some ‘true’ stories collected for a project on ‘trust’ funded by Roffey Park Institute, I found some strong echoes of these themes. This confirmed to me that stories, both fictional and true, can do something that analytical frameworks on their own cannot, namely deepen our understanding of the dilemmas of human relating. They can also be used to stimulate useful learning conversations in organisations.

Keywords

Human relationships, trust, organisations, learning, conversations, stories, fiction, narrative, frameworks, dilemmas, complexity, context

How do we get a better understanding of how trust works within human relationships (which are, after all, the life-blood of organisations)? Do we learn mostly from our own experience, or from theories and analytical frameworks, or from stories we hear and read? Or all of the above? I will declare my bias straightaway: I have come to think that stories (whether ‘true’ or fictional) combined with reflection on our own personal experience are the richest sources of insights about human relating.

In 2015, I worked with my colleague Rob Warwick on a research project on the subject of trust, funded by Roffey Park Institute in the UK. One of our aims was to produce written stories that would help managers, practitioners and students deepen their understanding of how trust ebbs and flows in working relationships. We collected stories from a range of organisational settings (Donaldson & Warwick, 2016a and 2016b).

More recently I was reading a short story by Albert Camus – *The Guest*, or *L’Hôte* in French – and found it to be a rich and thought-provoking account about trust and human relationships.

Here I draw on both types of story before briefly considering a more analytical approach suggested by Onora O’Neill in her 2013 [TED](#) talk on trust, and comparing this with the use of stories to stimulate reflection and learning.

A tale of human relating in a tense situation

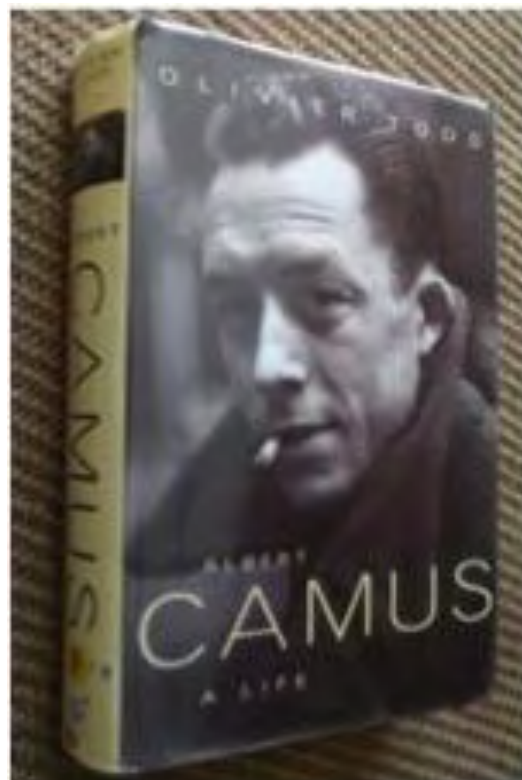
Camus' short story, *The Guest*, unfolds against the backdrop of the Algerian war of independence. The conflict was deeply disturbing to Camus, who was born in Algeria of French and Spanish parents and grew up alongside people referred to at the time as 'indigenous'. Camus' tale is a short and subtle account of trust, mistrust and vulnerability playing themselves out between three human beings of different status and cultural background: a teacher, a gendarme and an Arab prisoner. The story takes place in winter on the high plateau of Algeria

One evening, the teacher, Daru, sees two men trudging through the snow up the steep hill towards his school. One, on horseback, is an old gendarme. The other man follows on foot at the end of a rope, with head bowed. As they come into sight, Daru is lost in looking at the prisoner, who is wearing traditional apparel – a faded blue jellaba, his feet in sandals but covered with heavy woollen socks, and head wrapped in a chèche.

As soon as the men arrive, Daru invites them in to get warm and he makes them some mint tea. The gendarme (Balducci) explains that the prisoner (an Arab who is never named) has killed someone in a family quarrel and that Daru's orders are to deliver him to a prison in the next town the following day. The rest of the story unfolds over about 12 hours, with an ironic twist at the end (which I do not intend to reveal).

Throughout the story, Camus lets us see detailed interactions between the men almost as if we were there in the school with them. He describes words, looks and gestures exchanged between them, and it becomes clear that the teacher and the prisoner are watching each other's every move. Occasionally we get a glimpse of what is in Daru's mind, but mostly Camus leaves us space to imagine, or make sense of, what is going on between the three characters. For example, when Daru watches the prisoner coming up the hill, is he feeling curious, suspicious or compassionate? Perhaps all of the above.

I have chosen here to hold my magnifying glass over three scenes. To my mind, each one speaks volumes about how people relate to one another in a certain context – in this case colonial and therefore cross-cultural and power-infused. Three timeless themes emerged for me from my close reading: (i) the importance of acknowledging people as human beings, no matter what social group they belong to; (ii) facing the dilemma of having to carry out orders that seem wrong to us; and (iii) feeling vulnerable and taking risks.



Biography of Camus by Olivier Todd

Colonialism and mint tea: acknowledging people as people

In sparing words, but hinting at the full complexity of the situation, Camus relates the first encounter, just after gendarme and prisoner have entered the school:

When he held out the glass of tea to the prisoner, Daru hesitated, seeing the man's bound hands. "We can perhaps untie him." "Of course," replied Balducci, "it was for the journey." The gendarme started to get up. But Daru, putting the glass on the floor, had already knelt down by the Arab, who – without saying anything – was watching him with feverish eyes. When his hands were free, he rubbed one swollen wrist against the other, took the glass of tea and started drinking the scalding liquid in small fast sips.

Camus in Fowlie (1988) p.27



Photo by [Seagull L](#), from Shutterstock

One thing that strikes me about this scene is the way in which Daru demonstrates respect and hospitality for both his visitors, regardless of status and cultural background. He even kneels down beside the prisoner to untie his hands. (Perhaps the title of the story, "L'hôte", which means both guest and host, is a clue to the high value placed on hospitality in the society in which it is set.)

Daru's words 'perhaps we can untie him' seem not only compassionate towards the Arab but also respectful to the gendarme, whom he has known for years. And Balducci's response, 'Of course, it was for the journey', seems to have an accommodating tone – one could imagine that a gendarme on duty might have spoken in a more authoritarian way, but in this case, we sense the degree of familiarity between him and the teacher. And both speak French, using the familiar form of address, 'tu'.

Some 60 years after *The Guest* was published, with mistrust between people of white European and North African or Arab origin on the rise in some places, this small encounter seems all the more poignant. It leaves me with a tiny sense of hope, by suggesting that it is possible to acknowledge 'the other' as a human being. My hope is further reinforced when I hear about recent attempts to open up dialogue between people with conflicting views or from different backgrounds. One example is the [Public Conversations Project in Boston, USA](#), and Peter Hughes (2016) points to another one, in Melbourne, Australia.

Having explored *The Guest* in this way, I was curious to see what resonance there might be between it and the stories I recently collected from 21st century organisations. Even though 1950s Algeria seemed a long, long way from life today, the echoes were strong. For example, one of the people I interviewed in 2015, a former civil servant, explicitly mentioned trust growing *when she felt acknowledged as a person*:

"Our team was an interesting group of people and [our head of department] knew a bit about everybody. I moved flat and he knew about it. I was very tired and went on holiday and when I came back to work he came to see me. I clearly remember him dropping by my desk. It was acknowledgement of me as a person."

Conversely, I heard stories about trust collapsing when leaders failed to engage with staff as human beings. One manager working in the UK's National Health Service said:

Not long ago our Chief Executive left after 12 years, and the new Chief Executive came in with a lot of promises about doing things differently... She had a long history of NHS management, but she didn't have that people thing. I can give you an example. Along this corridor at that time, we had our Patient Experiences team, who deal with all the complaints, compliments and so on. And then we had the Recruitment team, and then my team – Patient Engagement. On that day she was due to meet myself and the head of Patient Experiences, Steve. She came to see me first, and as I was walking her down to her meeting with Steve, I said 'This is the Recruitment team.' And she said to them 'I'm not meeting with you today,' and just walked off. Not 'Oh, you're doing a great job, we're recruiting so many people, how nice to meet you all, I'll come and see you another day'.

In all these examples, we see the importance of recognising people as human beings, whatever their status or background. When today's senior managers are busy or preoccupied, it can be all too easy for them to treat people as faceless members of staff, blind to the fact that each one is a living and breathing individual with human needs ranging all the way from hunger and thirst to feeling respected as a person.

A dilemma: feeling pressure to carry out unwelcome orders

It soon becomes clear in *The Guest* that Daru is willing to challenge the order to deliver the Arab to prison next day. After a brief discussion about what the prisoner has done – killed his cousin in a fight over the loan of some grain – Daru says:

"I will not hand him over."

"It's an order, son. I repeat it."

"Alright. Repeat to them what I told you: I will not hand him over."

"No. I'll tell them nothing."

Balducci made a visible effort to reflect. He looked at the Arab and at Daru. Finally he made up his mind.

"I won't denounce you. If you want to let us down, do so, I will not denounce you. I have the order to hand over the prisoner and I'm doing it. Now you are going to sign this paper for me."

"There's no point. I'll not deny that you left him with me."

"Don't make trouble for me. [Ne sois pas méchant avec moi.] I know you will tell the truth. You come from these parts and you're a man. But you have to sign. That's the rule."

p.285

Eventually, Daru relents and signs the paper. As the gendarme moves to leave, the teacher wants to accompany him to the door but Balducci says: "No, there is no point in being polite. You have insulted me." And with a sad sniff, he looks at the Arab and turns to the door, saying to Daru "Goodbye, son."



Photo by Alison Donaldson

In this scene, as in the first, we see two people juggling obedience, trust and loyalty. Balducci seems offended yet he

parts from Daru with warm words. But he also needs to be seen to have carried out his part of the orders from above. And having obtained the signature, he leaves Daru free to choose how he handles the situation, giving the teacher a revolver with the warning: "if there is a revolt, no one is safe".

For me, both the scenes examined so far illustrate the fundamental interdependence of human beings. The gendarme and the teacher seem concerned to preserve their relationship, which means they cannot just say anything to each other. They must choose their words carefully.

Drawing parallels with our 2015 research again, another person in the National Health Service told me a story about feeling under pressure to carry out orders he disagreed with. At the time of the events described, Tim (not his real name) was working in a Primary Care Trust (PCT) that had been buying in its health and safety activities from a nearby Acute Trust (a hospital). He got on well with Ray (not his real name), who was responsible for health and safety at the hospital. Everything had been going fine, but a problem arose when relationships between the two organisations were undergoing change (the hospital was in the process of becoming a Foundation Trust). On top of that, the government was demanding budget cuts, so the PCT's Director of Finance proposed getting someone internal to take responsibility for health and safety.

Tim explained what happened next:

They just cut the relationship with the Acute Trust, and I was in the position of having to discuss this issue with Ray. And even though we had only paid a very small amount per year, Ray was going to end up losing a member of staff. So he was saying to me 'Can't you take this person on? They're valuable.' And I replied 'No, we're looking to cut funding.' So I was in this cross-organisational issue, and it was the first time I had to do something that really I felt was, one, wrong, and, two, unnecessary.

Tim clearly recalled one particular moment vividly:

I'm envisaging the meeting we actually had. Imagine a Victorian workhouse-style hospital. We were sitting in one of those rooms and I remember the sunlight streaming through the windows and me sitting there having to go through step-by-step what was going to happen and why. And I

remember Ray coming back at me with 'But this doesn't make sense.' And I'm having to both defend the decision that's been made and agree with him, because my natural inclination was to say to him 'You're absolutely right, this is really silly, I'm stuck.' But I owed some level of loyalty to my managers. It's just that horrible, hollow feeling that you get because you're delivering this rather unnecessary news. I was being pushed from behind, which is a deeply unsettling feeling. Ray and I never spoke again.

The resonance between *The Guest* and this NHS story is loud and clear. In both cases, somebody feels divided between, on the one hand, their loyalty and duty towards those who have issued the orders, and on the other hand, their sense of what is right and their sympathy with those who will ultimately be affected. A true dilemma.

A sleepless night: vulnerability and risk-taking

In *The Guest*, all three characters clearly have cause to feel vulnerable. The gendarme has put himself at risk by entrusting the Arab prisoner to Daru, who makes it clear he is reluctant to carry out the order. But Daru himself takes risks, first by refusing to obey the order and then, after the gendarme leaves, by letting the Arab eat and sleep in the same room with him, untied and free to escape. He even leaves the revolver out of reach in the classroom overnight. Not surprisingly, he has a restless night:



Photo by [Greg Paris](#) at [Morguefile.com](#)

He had got into bed after taking off all his clothes. He usually slept naked. But when he found himself in the bedroom without clothes, he hesitated. He felt vulnerable and was tempted to get dressed again.

Fowle (1988) p.293

Daru continues to lie on his bed thinking and watching the Arab. During the night the wind grows stronger. The chickens stir outside and then quieten down. And Daru listens to the breath of the Arab close to him, which has become heavier and more regular. The man's presence bothers Daru, not just because he is used to sleeping alone:

... It bothered him also because it imposed on him a kind of brotherhood which he refused under the present circumstances and which he knew very well. Men who share the same room, soldiers or prisoners, form a strange bond as if, when their armour is removed with their clothes, they came together each evening, despite their differences, in the ancient community of dreams and fatigue.

Fowle (1988) p.293

I will leave the story there so you can discover for yourself what happens next, should you wish to. Suffice to say that not only is Daru thinking about his dilemma, but he also seems acutely aware of his vulnerability and the risks he is taking.

On the theme of vulnerability, the owner of a small business told me a story about a member of staff ('Paul') who was disgruntled about decisions that had been taken about the organisation's structure. Paul had been with the company for some time, and it was reliant on him to lead an important project. The business owner sensed that Paul was feeling unappreciated and that something had to be done. He took a courageous step:

I was finding it really difficult to cut through the past history and baggage. The thing that really helped unlock it was that I decided just to completely let go of the control that I was feeling over this project. I just made my mind up that I was going to put my trust in Paul ... So we went out for a coffee and I said 'You're going to get paid more than you've asked for, you're going to get paid regardless of performance, and I'm going to completely trust you to care about my interests in this project. I'm not going to request that you are accountable to me in any particular way but just trust that you engage with me in whichever way you need to get the job done.' I just made myself completely vulnerable, basically, and it completely disarmed him! It really unlocked the situation.

This story contrasts with that of another interviewee about relationships in the NHS ambulance service, where managerial control has evidently reached a zenith:

There's a massive thing around our frontline staff not being trusted to do a good job, or feeling they're not being trusted, even if they are. It feels like a fairly autonomous job because you go from job to job and you see quite a variety of patients, and you've got your crew mates. It sounds quite nice. But now they have to press a button when they're available, they have to press another button when they get to hospital, and press another button when they've done their paperwork. If they don't do it within so many minutes they get a phone call. So they're all monitored. If you go to a control room you can see where all our ambulances are, whether they're moving, how fast they're going, who's on board. It's so Big Brother it's beyond belief.

Ambulance staff felt so closely monitored and measured that some of them started to resign, leaving the NHS with the cost of overtime and/or buying in private ambulance services.

In all these stories, we see how anyone with responsibility for human beings takes part in a balancing act between controlling and letting go. As [Henry Mintzberg \(2016\)](#) neatly puts it: "We have to measure what we can; we just cannot allow ourselves to be mesmerized by measurement—which we so often are."

How do stories work?

While I was writing this paper, somebody asked me "Does it matter that fiction is not reality?" I said "No, it doesn't" and tried to explain why. Fiction, I recall saying, can be especially evocative and thought-provoking, and it also allows us to explore with each other experiences that might be hard to approach more directly. In other words, part of the value of fiction is that it is 'not real'.

But my friend's question got me thinking more generally about how stories work.

As I see it, stories don't tell us anything. Instead, they tend to stimulate associations, insights and feelings in us. As we read, we often compare the events described with our own experience, and this may shift our thinking.

Each person will make their own connections and meaning from a story. Indeed, the same person can read a story more than once and make something different of it each time. But that is not a weakness, provided we accept that there is no one 'truth' in human affairs. It simply means that what strikes us about a story may alter as our own circumstances change.

And yet, despite their fluidity of meaning, stories can often surface themes that have general, if not universal, relevance. No doubt that is why pre-literate societies made such extensive use of myths, parables and fairy tales. In other words, good stories are not just arbitrary or subjective. They resonate for us. After all, stories are an ancient part of human life and, as Jerome Bruner observed, very young children can understand complex matters presented as stories when their powers of comprehending general concepts are almost non-existent (Sacks 1985, citing Bruner). And many adults find that books and films that have touched them stay with them all their lives.

What matters in organisational life is that stories can convey a sense of the true complexity of human experience in a way that bullet points and analytical frameworks can never really do. As we have seen here, even a short piece of dialogue can stimulate rich insights into how people trust and distrust one another.

Comparing stories with a framework

Let's now briefly ponder whether stories are more or less useful than a more analytical approach, taking Onora O'Neill's [TED talk](#) on trust as an example of the latter. O'Neill invites us to ask ourselves: "Is the person with whom I am developing a relationship honest, competent and reliable?" (O'Neill, 2013). She suggests we ask these questions in the context of a specific situation. For example, can I trust this person to post a letter for me? The person might be both competent and honest but we may not feel we can rely on them to remember. Although the criteria act more as a heuristic than a full-blown theory, they serve well as a comparison. So let's try applying them to some of the stories we encountered earlier.

1. In *The Guest*, Daru the teacher evidently does not know enough about the Arab to be sure of his honesty, competence or reliability. He has to act without that certainty. Camus doesn't spell out why Daru behaves as he does towards the prisoner, but we can surmise. Perhaps (like Camus himself) he empathised with the plight of the 'indigenous' people. Perhaps he was in the habit of treating others as human beings whatever their background. Or perhaps within the first few moments of meeting the Arab he simply felt some level of trust or affinity with him. Possibly all of the above. Camus also provides a strong hint that Daru was acting from a further motive: "This man's stupid crime disgusted him, but to hand him over was contrary to honour." So Daru finds himself in a dilemma: how can he do the minimum in terms of complying with orders while not violating his own honour? There is so much more going on than just honesty, competence and reliability. It's all about context, including values.

2. In the NHS story about the outsourcing of health and safety, we know that the two people involved had previously got on well together, so probably they viewed each other as honest, competent and reliable. But a new policy (insourcing) prompted Ray to lose his sense of trust in Tim's honesty and reliability.

3. In the story about the ambulance service, staff were minutely controlled by systems designed to monitor the organisation's performance against targets. This left them feeling untrusted (dishonest, incompetent, unreliable, or all three?). O'Neill herself clearly recognises this scenario – she mentions a midwife who had to spend as much time on paperwork as on delivering the baby – concluding that the very systems of accountability that are supposed to make it easier for us to judge the trustworthiness of certain professionals have the converse effect (O'Neill 2013).

To my mind, O'Neill's criteria do have some value, in that they help distinguish between three bases of trust – honesty, competence and reliability. But stories shed a different kind of light on the dilemmas and complexities of human relating. They also tend to resonate with our own experience, which is what makes them invaluable for stimulating conversations about trust in the organisational context. One of the editors of this special issue and I explored this earlier this year (Donaldson & Warwick 2016b). Rob (Warwick 2016) has also written separately about the value of fiction in management learning.

I wonder whether the stories we have looked at here have stimulated memories and associations for you? What stands out for me is the strong part that outer circumstances play – whether the setting is 1950s Algeria or 21st century England. In other words, trust isn't just about the individuals immediately involved. It can easily be undermined by environmental factors beyond their control. When the teacher in Camus' story meets the prisoner, there is so much more at stake than just a glass of mint tea.

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