



## Guest Column: How to Trust and be Trusted

By Richard Hews

Following our annual home furnace “physical,” my wife, Gill, and I were advised we needed a new chimney liner and were told to hire a company to do the repairs. I don’t know the first thing about chimney liners, so I asked the inspector to refer me to a qualified merchant, whom I immediately contacted.

In short order, a seemingly informed, friendly and professional installer estimated the job, e-mailed a proposal, and we agreed for the work to proceed. A couple of days later, two young men presented themselves on our doorstep. I showed them in and left them alone to do their work while I attended to errands.

What was it that led me to accept this merchant’s estimate and to leave a couple of perfect strangers alone in our home? Why in other situations, have I shopped around extensively before buying and still felt a strange feeling of discomfort? I suppose it was because I just trusted them.

We interact with professionals and service people all the time, entrusting our wealth to their advice, our cars to their repair and our digestion to their meals. Yet there are others we steer clear of. Why is it we trust some people and not others?

At its heart, trust can be thought of as a predisposition to coordinate action with others. With trust we are willing to work together without a lot of checks and balances. Since I trusted the chimney liner installers, I was able to run errands, rather than baby-sit them.

Trust always involves some level of risk. Otherwise it wouldn’t be trust. Unlike child-like simple trust, or

unthinking blind trust, authentic trust involves a calculation as to whether the risks are worth it. So how do we make these decisions? Well, in addition to following a “gut feeling” or “sixth sense,” we make determinations about the other person’s sincerity, competence and reliability.

Sincerity asks the question: “Will they do what they say they will?” This is an issue of integrity and character and we may look for references or to regulators to help us in our decision. Secondly, we look for evidence of competence. They may be sincere, but not qualified to the extent needed for the work planned. We are all competent in some areas and

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incompetent in others (Don’t ask me to cook dinner!). Finally, there is the issue of reliability. Does the other person have a track record of delivering on their promises?

Our decision-making involves balancing the degree of risk with the possible consequences. For example, it may take me longer to decide with whom to invest my retirement funds than which pizza restaurant to dine at tonight.

Making successful decisions requires that both parties in a relationship understand each other and what’s important to them. Being explicit about expectations at an early stage in

a relationship will save unpleasant surprises later on. I assessed the chimney experts to be sincere, since their mood, language and physical presence matched and reinforced one another. I didn’t get mixed signals. My assessment of competency was helped by the referral from the furnace inspectors. I trusted them! Reliability was predicted by the first professional installer arriving on time.

Trust isn’t a one-time activity or a one-way street. It requires work. Trust can be eroded in several ways. One way to destroy trust is to practice “cordial hypocrisy.” This is pretending everything is fine on the surface, when in fact there are important underlying issues that you aren’t comfortable addressing. Forgetting to say “thank you” when someone delivers on their promises or commitments will also erode trust, as will failing to speak up when someone breaks a promise or lets you down.

Learning to trust and be trusted is an ongoing practice based on mutual understanding, dignity and respect. Your ability to trust is based on assessment of the other person’s sincerity, competence and reliability. Trust is a two-way street. Other people will be making the same determinations before deciding if they can trust you.

I’m happy to report that my chimney is functioning well. It seems the trust I had in the installers was well-placed. I also made a point of complimenting the installers for the quality of their work, so perhaps they will also trust me!



Richard Hews is a leadership and change coach, co-founder of the consulting firm Triscendance, and a good friend of Burns Advisory Group.

He can be reached at: 860-739-8448.