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**Tool**

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**Trust Menu****What It Is**

One of the first – and often one of the hardest – steps to transforming a conflict is to establish a basic sense of trust between two parties at odds with each other, especially where distrust has built up over years of bitter experience with the actions of the other side. A lack of trust ensures that no real progress can be made until the distrust is transformed into the minimal amount of trust that allows movement.

No matter what the substantive disagreements are, conflicting parties will usually agree on one thing – that they share a *mutual* distrust of the other side that keeps them stuck.

The Trust Menu is a practical tool for re-establishing a basic sense of trust that opens the possibility for further progress in negotiations. It describes a proven method for identifying specific, concrete signals that each side could send to indicate a willingness to engage in more constructive ways.

The approach to developing this menu of credible signals is straightforward – simply *ask* the parties what actions the other side could take to indicate their willingness to open a dialogue. By refining and clarifying these signals through independent conversations with each of the parties alone, you can develop a list of actions that could be taken. This is a menu of options, not a set of demands or commitments. You are simply establishing a pre-agreed language of goodwill that is intelligible to the players involved.

Trust attracts.

–William Ury  
*Possible*

When the menu is clear to both sides, this ensures that when one party delivers a signal by taking the pre-determined action, the other side will recognize and interpret it for what it is, i.e., a message of good faith betting on the *possibility* of progress.

Quite often, the initial signals are simple expressions of respect, which, as William Ury reminds us, is one of the easiest, yet most essential, ways to begin to rebuild basic trust.

As signals are exchanged back and forth, the slow process of building trust begins. Successive signals build a “trust ladder” to the possibility of eventual negotiations.

**What to Use It For**

- To test whether an opposing side is trustworthy enough to begin an initial dialogue.
- To begin a process of building “*good enough to get started trust*” where none exists.

## How It Works

- Step 1. In private, separate conversations with each of the opposing parties, raise the question of whether they would be willing to enter into a dialogue with the other side if their opponents could prove their trustworthiness.
- Step 2. With each side, brainstorm a list of *five to ten realistic* actions the other side could take to signal that it might be worth opening a dialogue.
- Step 3. Then brainstorm a list of five to ten signals that *they* would be willing to send in response.
- Step 4. Share these lists with the opposing side and be ready to iterate them significantly; be aware that
  - Some possible signals might miss the mark or even be interpreted to have the opposite effect; if these options cannot be modified to be seen as acceptable, they come off the list of possibilities.
  - Other signals might need further clarification in order to give precisely the intended message.
  - The opposing side might suggest revisions that may or may not be acceptable to the proposing side; these items come off the menu as well.

Be prepared to shuttle back and forth between the parties until both sides agree and understand the “final” list of acceptable signals.
- Step 5. Start small. Use your relationships with each side to make sure the signals that are sent are recognized and received. Do not just take it for granted that the other side will even perceive the signals sent.
- Step 6. Then the reciprocal exchange of signals begins and continues until the parties agree to enter into a dialogue on the actual substance of the disagreement.

## Example

**This example summarizes a more detailed case in William Ury’s *Possible*, especially Chapter 6: Listen and Chapter 8: Attract**

In the course of an initially contentious meeting with Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, William practiced “listening to understand” to make a human connection with the president. He was able to raise the issue of how to avoid having the conflict between Chavez and the opposition turning violent. When he

suggested opening a dialogue between the two parties, Chavez's response was sharply negative:

"Talk with them?... They are traitors who tried to mount a coup against me less than a year ago right here in this room!"

"I understand you perfectly," said William. "Since you can't trust them at all, what possible use could there be in talking with them?"

"Exactly!" he replied.

"Since you don't trust them one bit, let me ask you: is there any action they could possibly take right now that would send you a credible signal that they were ready to change?"

"Señales/ [Signals?]" he asked as he paused to consider the unexpected question.

"Si," I nodded my head.

"Well, for one thing, they could stop calling me a *mono* [monkey] on their TV stations."

He gave a bitter laugh, contorting his face into a grimace as he pronounced the word *mono*. Clearly, he took it as a racist allusion to his part indigenous ancestry."

After agreeing that was completely unacceptable, William asked for other actions the opposition could take. Chavez warmed to the idea, offered a few possibilities, and asked his minister of the interior to work with William and an associate to develop a list of actions *each* party could take. He invited them to return the next day to report on their progress.

William went straight from there to a meeting with Chavez's political opponents, who were initially as negative to the idea of talks as Chavez had been. William acknowledged that there was no trust between the two sides and reminded them that was the whole *point* of this exercise.

They agreed to give it a try. William asked for a few small, but significant steps the government could take that would be received as a positive signal.

"Oh, you mean *besitos*?" asked one of the opposition leaders with a smile.

Everyone laughed. *Besitos* is Spanish for "little kisses." It was a reference to how children – and couples – make up when they have quarreled.

Soon the opposition leaders had brainstormed and refined their *own* list of positive signals that the government could take.

It was politically explosive at this point for either side to be seen talking with the other side. The rabid partisans in each camp would simply not tolerate it.

William arranged for a few senior representatives of each side to come to attend a late-night meeting at the otherwise deserted guest house where he was staying. Each party stayed in a separate area of the property while William and his colleague shuttled back and forth through most of the night, clarifying and refining the menu possible signals.

In a public address a few days later, Chavez sent the first signal, asking his supporters not to interfere with the work – or the equipment – of the journalists covering the crisis. The opposition leaders reciprocated with a signal from their list broadcasting a request that both sides refrain from violence. William writes:

And so it began. It was all about *besitos*, baby kisses, intended to cool off the high tensions.

In and of itself, acting on the Trust Menu did not resolve the conflict, but it helped initiate a process ensure that both parties avoided a calamitous escalation into violence.

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### **Keep in Mind**

- As you notice in the final sentence of the case, the Trust Menu tool is about making a good beginning and is not an end in itself. Its intent is to open the door for all the other tools in your Possibilist repertoire. But it can be an *essential* tool to begin to build enough trust to make further dialogue and negotiations possible.

### **Resources**

William Ury, *Possible: How We Survive (and Thrive) in an Age of Conflict*