

Questions on the topic of trust

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A career strongly dominated by its international character and her Australian background, enable Kathleen Wantz O'Rourke to observe France through a multi-cultural prism. A former student of the Institute of High Finance and Paris-Dauphine University, Kathleen was the General Manager Finance of Siemens France before joining the GDF Suez Group.

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Trust Management Institute : What does the word trust evoke for you?

Kathleen Wantz O'Rourke : It evokes freedom and security. For me, these are two fundamental notions for functioning effectively in society. When there is trust, it is possible to undertake new things, to achieve one's personal aims, to yield to creativity without any complex or constraint and to move forward. Why security? Simply because you can commit to something without there being any traps. Trust stimulates. Mistrust to the contrary contributes towards retreating into one's shell. We capture and decode communications and interactions with others less effectively. A sort of negative filter distorts our way of interpreting things and that risks deforming the way we understand messages, which can lead to conflict.

TMI : Trust « by people for people », in reference to the slogan of GDF Suez ?

KWO'R : It's absolutely essential ! We need trust to live, it's an integral part of human nature.

TMI : How does it translate into your current professional role ?

« Ensuring that actions are coherent, understood and tangible in day-to-day operations »

KWO'R : I currently have the task of defining and implementing a performance program that has a strong transformational dimension to it. The energy sector, like many others, is undergoing significant and profound change. Historically for example, energy utilities were companies that had a quasi monopole in

certain areas, with a loyal customer-base etc. All of a sudden, this environment is confronted with increasing competition, the arrival of new entrants, fundamental ruptures in technologies and business models, an extremely unfavourable economic climate, European policies that occupy more and more space.... This contributes towards the destabilisation of the people that work in this industry. We need to provide operational and concrete responses to these challenges. Trust in this context is hard-earned. It's a daily exercise. When all of a sudden you upset habits, when you define new approaches and objectives, that effectively requires taking to heart the question of trust, being convincing and credible, in other words, speaking the same language as those you are addressing. By ensuring that actions are coherent, understood and tangible in day-to-day operations, you maximise the chance that trust will gain ground and that employees will understand why change is necessary and even healthy.

TMI : How do you see French society ? Is there a trust deficit in France ?

« In France, we live quite often in the past. However, this past is bygone. »

KWO'R : Yes. And I perceive two essential dimensions to the problem. Firstly, there's an unfavourable economic context that is coupled by a significant underlying transformation within society linked, for a greater part, to rising globalisation. This translates into very substantial challenges for the nation. I feel

that these challenges are sometimes perceived as being insurmountable. People are at a loss as to how to resolve these issues. There is no clear roadmap.

Secondly, I believe that France has been in retreat for such a long time. The country has not drawn the benefits from its own multiculturalism in order to better prepare the population for certain changes linked to globalization. This is a genuine shame as France, as an immigration-friendly country, is depriving itself of a terrific source of creativity.

When I compare France to countries like my native Australia or the United States which are true melting-pots, I find that these countries also have a real sense of the nation but one that is constructed with the future in mind. I feel in these countries that there is a sense of opportunity and a personal and collective willingness to succeed that is a motor. For example, during the last presidential election campaigns in both France and the USA (which almost coincided), we witnessed two very different and opposing ways of addressing the issue of enterprise and business. In the USA, the candidates focused their site visits on leading-edge companies in which there are high expectations for dynamic growth and development. In France on the other hand, site visits were concentrated around companies in difficulty, sometimes even in serious decline. In other countries, the talk of the future is not necessarily laced with references towards institutions or past historical events like in France. In France, we live quite often in the past. However, this past is bygone. And this creates a gap between what one can observe on a daily basis and the references that have been instilled into society and that are no longer necessarily relevant today. There is no framework to decipher all of these rapid changes and I have the feeling that people are at a loss as to how to approach the future.

TMI : What advice could you give to the French President ?

« Now, the French know how to plan (...) useful to orientate the future. »

KWO'R : I believe that he needs to set a clear course for France; a set of objectives clearly positioned in time that are ambitious but feasible. The nation needs a middle to long term vision that is constructed by multidisciplinary and multiparty groups around clear deliverables. This nationwide project should then be protected in some way

against electoral deadlines and political agendas. Whatever the government, the course is set! And this roadmap should be explained to the citizens – what, when and why in respect to the choices that have been made. This way the people themselves will be able to observe and monitor the proper implementation of the roadmap. Further, there shouldn't be any nasty surprises as there is this clear and shared vision. Now, the French know how to plan. This would be useful in order to give a positive spin and perspective on things, to orientate the future and lead the way.

TMI : What risks do you see today in the increasingly fragile trust equation between France and Germany ?

« What we observe and is of concern for us currently is the risk that Germany ends up getting frustrated with the various changes of heart of the French state. »

KWO'R : Within TMI we have started to reflect on the question of trust between France and Germany and in particular, on whether or not this topic merits a specific research project. We have already held a number of discussions with selected personalities from German, French and Franco-German backgrounds. What we observe and is of concern for us currently, is the risk that Germany ends up getting frustrated with the various

changes of heart of the French state. And consequently, without it necessarily being visible or public knowledge, that Germany develops alternative partnerships, especially with the east, Russia in particular. This would undoubtedly be at the detriment of the privileged status of the French-German relationship that we have known up until now.

« Hence the need for a certain coherency in public discourse. »

Within our discussion group which has started to reflect on the question, we believe that Europe would have a lot to lose should this be the case. It's a topic of genuine concern. There is also an

issue with how cultural differences are decoded between the two partners and how that can undermine trust. Trust is a language that needs to be interpreted between two parties. With all intercultural relationships, it is necessary to adapt one's dialogue, to position oneself on an equal footing and to understand where the other party is coming from, despite differences in opinion.

In the French-German relationship, you see incoherencies on this topic. There are times when all seems well between the two ; when you observe genuine comprehension. We saw this recently when President Hollande on a visit to Germany praised highly the reform of labour laws in this country. At the same time in France however, we observe a heated

debate over the preservation of social rights, accusations that Germany promotes social dumping and that their social policies are inadequate. Hence the need for a certain coherency in public discourse.

TMI : What was your most difficult professional challenge in terms of trust ?

« Top management should put themselves in danger. »

KWO'R : At the end of the 90's I returned to France from Australia to take up a Director function in a large group at a time of great crisis linked to the implosion of the internet bubble. We

were suddenly confronted with heavy losses and a strategy that was no longer adapted to our situation. It became necessary to put into place a recovery plan; we managed to turn the situation around in just nine months. We were obliged to restructure the activity which included unfortunately amongst other measures, redundancies.

« Not unlike a foreign language, there is a language of trust. »

We managed collectively to surmount our difficulties, and I am fairly proud of this, with confidence in the future and a shared understanding of the reasons behind the exercise.

What's important in this type of situation is that top management, the bosses, descend into the arena, that they put themselves in danger and that they clearly demonstrate to employees that they share their daily turmoil, that they defend the interest of the company and that there is a real sense of « team » working towards recovery. It was a truly inspiring experience, particularly coming from another culture. Not unlike a foreign language, there is a language of trust. I think that it's useful to try and decode cultural differences so as dialogue and exchanges can take place on the basis of a common understanding. In this situation, I really had to correctly decode worries and concerns and ensure that the trust basis upon which the exercise was based was in-line with expectations.

TMI : What made you decide to join TMI ?

KWO'R : I first met Jean-Luc Fallou and Michel Francony et the Institut de l'Entreprise where they gave a presentation on trust and the specific case of a big French group. My attention was immediately drawn to the language that was used, the method and the evaluation that was made. I found that their approach made a lot of sense to me. So I contacted Jean-Luc and we ended up carrying out a project together within my own company. After that, TMI was created and Jean-Luc asked if I would be interested in joining the initiative. I responded positively as I find it fascinating to pursue the exploratory works on the question of trust. I also fully identified with the idea that TMI should be a foundation of general interest to the public and I am delighted to offer up some of my time and my experience to this undertaking.

« I trust our youth. »

TMI : Could you share with us one "fear" and one "hope" for the future ?

KWO'R : My hope lies in our youth. I trust our youth and in particular their capacity to instigate an evolution in French society. And even if this youth doesn't approach problems in the same manner as precedent generations, I strongly believe



that by means of the incredible force of innovation that they demonstrate, the culture of collaboration and networking that is deeply anchored in their way of operating, through their creativity and commitment, that this youth will find the right solutions for the future of the nation. We just need to be vigilant that this youth doesn't become discouraged and be tempted to relocate abroad indefinitely.

My concern is that we don't establish the roadmap that I mentioned earlier. That because of short-term political interests, we don't manage to build a shared vision of the future and advance together around a common project and that subsequently, mistrust gains further territory. This would be a grave error for France.