Thank God Someone Finally Heard Me: Some Ideas on Building Trust

Why "feeling heard" can help build organizational trust, mediate conflict, improve mental health, promote learning, and save the world… with specific ideas about how to do it

REPORT PREPARED BY: MYLÈNE DIPENTA, ANNAPOLIS VALLEY MONTHLY MEETING
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Introduction

Spirit and the universe earn our trust every day, but it's harder for people to earn each other's trust. It's hard for us to be as reliable as the universe. Acting as if we trust each other can be unhealthy if that trust isn't well grounded. How can we create organizations and relationships where people trust justifiably?

This was the subject of a workshop I attended in April 2014. Through the generous support of Canadian Yearly Meeting and Annapolis Valley Monthly Meeting, I was able to travel to Philadelphia's Pendle Hill retreat and conference centre. Here's what I learned.

This Lesson Followed Me Home – Listening Vs. Being Heard

A single idea has been dogging me all year. The repeating message is: *there's a difference between "listening to someone" and making sure they feel heard.*

It started last April, when CYM supported me in attending a workshop called "Building Organizational Trust: Working With and Through Others" at Pendle Hill. Over the next few months, the same message turned up everywhere I went:

- At a workshop on Dialogue for Peaceful Change, a conflict mediation training at the Tatamagouche Centre
- At a facilitated retreat organized by my Monthly Meeting
- In the Non-Violent Communication framework, via a workshop put on by the Halifax Rad Pride Collective
- At a training session on Mental Health First Aid, offered by my employer

Why I Care – Co-Creation Requires Trust

I am an electronics technician by trade, and I teach in a trade school. In order to help my students become skillful technicians, I search for ways to foster mutual support, intellectual humility, confidence

in their ability to solve real problems, and peaceful disagreement. This means **I put control over the curriculum in the hands of the students**, to which they may react with excitement, anger, and/or culture shock. As I become more involved in Annapolis Valley Quaker Meeting, I am starting to understand that the responsibilities of a "priesthood of all believers" can similarly be both exciting and intimidating. Like students who find ourselves in charge of the curriculum, one way to interpret Quaker theology is that **the "teacher" does not do the work for us**. We are, together, engaged in the process of co-creation; we ourselves must take on the work of ministry, pastoral care, community-building, and peace-making.

Pastoral Care: Helping Us Find Our Own Sense of Right and Wrong

A few years ago, I started asking my students to make decisions about what and how they would learn. I was caught off-guard when this provoked moral crises. As our classroom culture shifted away from believing in single right answers, and toward well-supported collective discernment, my students started re-evaluating their entire way of thinking about right and wrong. I noticed that **their ideas of "right and wrong answers on tests" were tangled up with their ideas of "right and wrong moral behaviour."** I wasn't just challenging their relationships to knowledge; I was challenging, unintentionally but unavoidably, their identities as good people.

As they dismantled and re-formed their reasons for believing in their own goodness, I felt overwhelmed. I was providing not just academic but spiritual support. *"I didn't sign up for this!"* I thought. I had been alienated from organized religion for years, and I **knew little about how to support someone in finding their own moral ground.** As I settled in to the importance of doing this work, I realized that it wasn't impossible, but it *was* demanding. My next thought was, *"Hey – my students are spiritually starving. Why are my students' spiritual needs not getting met anywhere else?"* I was angry. The very next thought I had was *"Who's doing this for ME?"*

Imagine my relief when I discovered that there was an organization, called Quakers, in my own town that shared many of my beliefs about the importance of breaking down hierarchy and practising care for the world and each other. They also had centuries-old institutions for supporting those beliefs. That's when I sought out my local Meeting. As an attender of Annapolis Valley Monthly Meeting, truly *moral support* didn't require me to submit to a human authority figure, or reach pre-determined conclusions. Instead, I found that **pastoral care is possible among equals**, both when we agree and when we disagree. I've been grateful to both give and receive it. Then I was ready for the next step: pastoral care in difficult situations, like when there is an institutional power imbalance or a history of unresolved conflict… or, in my students' case, sometimes both.

In order to deal with a demanding new way of learning, my students needed to feel heard by me and by each other. Similarly, the members of my meeting needed to feel heard in order to spiritually nourish themselves and each other. And I needed to feel heard in order to support my own mental and spiritual health, as well as to support my classroom community and my Monthly Meeting community.

I decided to seek out a workshop at Pendle Hill, in Philadelphia, to prepare for this next step. A Quaker study, retreat, and conference center, Pendle Hill "seeks to transform lives and foster peace with justice in the world." For me, it was a rare opportunity to attend Meeting every day with dozens of people from around the continent. I was inspired by civil rights movement activists Vincent and Aljosie Harding, who were Friends in Residence at the time, and the American Young Friends who were attending a workshop on lobbying and public policy. It was a fruitful and nourishing place do this work.

Working With and Through Others: Clinton Pettus's Approach

Clinton Pettus presented the workshop at Pendle Hill. Until he retired, he was a deputy general secretary with American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), as well as the president of Cheyney University. He also has experience in community conflict mediation. He shared his experiences with us in each of these roles, and did not shy away from difficult topics. In our workshop group of 8 participants, he spoke plainly about how **poorly-managed conflict can break trust and prevent it from being rebuilt**. He gave examples of white people denying or minimizing the effects of racism, and having concealing misunderstandings of racism behind the also very real experience of classism. After giving his own examples of conflict, he asked each of us to reflect on a conflict we wanted to share with the group, and the ways we had responded to it so far.

"There's no such thing as avoiding conflict," he said. If poorly-managed, it may break trust; if well-managed, it can actually build trust. But either way, it's with you, you're in it. *"If my response to conflict fails, don't let it be because I created the opening for the other person to walk away. Not succeeding is not failure unless we keep doing the same thing."*

The Short Version

I can help people be heard. If I remove the roadblocks, and actively contribute to an environment where someone feels confident that their ideas are understood and valued, it gives us the best chance that we can soften our positions, problem-solve together, and become reliable to each other, even if we reliably disagree.

Teaching With and Through Others

Clinton's workshop design not only described new tools for working with and through others; it required us to practise them. We started with story-telling about conflicts that we were interested in working on. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds, so described a variety of tricky situations. One was a database developer, another an organizational change consultant, and one was a researcher in a health field. Some were Quakers, but most were not, and many had heard about Pendle Hill through their involvement with Quaker schools.

Clinton had a slide deck prepared with some basic information about what trust is, how it gets lost, and how it gets built. Whenever he came to a technique that was closely connected to one person's story,

he would pause his presentation. He would ask that person to tell us what they most wanted feedback on, and then invite the rest of the group to practice relating the technique to the person's request.

What made this work as a trust-building technique?

a) The storyteller got to say what feedback they wanted and didn't want
b) The listeners practiced advising the storyteller in a low-stakes environment
c) We got immediate feedback from Clinton on our way of applying the technique
d) The storyteller got feedback from Clinton on the conflict itself

In this way, each person in the group got to practice using each technique. The person whose story we were discussing benefited from a panel of "consultants" who brought a variety of ideas to the table. Clinton would make his own suggestions, and also coach us if he felt we had misunderstood the technique or were proposing a solution that might have unintended consequences. Because of that, each person in the group also got personalized feedback about the way we were applying the techniques.

Lesson #1: I Can Stop Assuming Others' Motivations
The first technique I learned was that I had to stop guessing that I know *why* others do what they do.

As the first workshop participant described the conflict they wanted us to "consult" on with them, it because clear how hard it is to tell a story without talking as if we were inside the other party's head. "Management – all they care about is increasing profits." "The chair of the board only thinks about herself."

Clinton's advice was this: *"We assume others are self-centred because we are."* The point is not that I am self-centred and others aren't. In fact, I might be completely right about the other person being self-centred; it doesn't matter. I need to practice telling the story with those assumptions left out, and it's not because I am necessarily wrong. It's because **I *can't* build trust until I acknowledge that my understanding of the other is imperfect, and that the other has the right to tell their own story**. If I tell their story before they do, even if I tell it exactly the way they would have, the conditions for trust are constantly being eroded, both in ourselves and in those we talk about.

What Can I Do Instead? Observe What They Did, Not Why They Did It
What do we do instead? We can focus on our observations, or our feelings, or our own motivations. We can focus less on *why* the other person did what they did, more on *what* they did. "And that's when management left the negotiating table. I was furious." "She hasn't called since then. I'm sad – I need someone to talk to." If we need to know the other person's motivation, instead of assuming, we can ask.

Clinton's workshop design incorporated this by asking us what we wanted feedback on. We each got to name the situation conflict as we saw it, and to name our own motivations. In the workshop, we explored how this could increase organizational trust – especially between managers and their reports, or between union members and non-unionized staff.

In my teaching, I've started asking students why they think what they think, regardless of whether I agree with their thinking or not. Whenever a student introduces a new idea, I ask "and it seems like that because…". This helps the listening students notice ways of thinking that they wouldn't have thought of otherwise, but most importantly, it has drastically reduced how often students find each other's thinking "wrong" or "stupid" – and makes it possible for them to imagine that their own thinking might also not be "wrong" or "stupid."

Lesson #2: I Can Stop Giving People Kinds of Support They Don't Need or Want

Sometimes we exhaust ourselves supporting someone, and yet they're still frustrated, telling us that they don't feel supported. Maybe they withdraw, grumbling. Maybe we refuse to support them anymore, resentful that our efforts are not being appreciated.

If we listen carefully, *without assuming their motivations*, we may find that they need one kind of support but we are providing something else. Perhaps they are in crisis, needing immediate help with food or health issues, and we are trying to support a systemic change. Perhaps all they want is a non-judgemental presence, but we're focused on problem-solving. Maybe we are sympathizing about a time when we faced a similar situation, when they want to talk about their experience, not ours. But how do we truly hear what kind of support the person needs? Sometimes they can tell us directly; other times they are focused on telling us other things, like what happened, or how they've been wronged. They may be repeating that story over and over. This might be the time to help them be heard.

What I Can Do Instead: Describe, Ask, Paraphrase, Summarize

It's hard for people to move on to talking about feelings, or needs, or solutions, if they don't feel like their most urgent message has been heard. It's even harder to change our minds or soften our position if our ideas don't seem to be acknowledged or valued. Silent listening can only take us so far. **Before we problem-solve, or describe our own position, we need to hear them – and they need to be convinced that we really heard what they mean.** These active listening techniques probably won't be surprising – but what's surprising is how underused they are, and how effective.

This means **describing** someone else's position in a way that they would agree with. Note that this requires leaving out my editorializing ("they're only interested in the bottom line, so they think…" See Lesson #1!) – I'm going to have to open myself up to really hearing and understanding what *they* believe about their motivations. To find out, I can:

- **Ask** open-ended questions ("What was that like?" "And then what happened?" "What were you thinking when that happened?")
- **Paraphrase** what the other has said ("Do you mean …")
- **Summarize** the main issues ("So the main issue is the workload?")
- Ask again – this time, if my paraphrases or summaries are accurate ("Is that what you were saying?")
- **Focus** my attention on the speaker, by turning my body, nodding or shaking my head, or otherwise being physically present
- **Listen for the feelings**, especially fears, unmet needs, and values

I can also take a break from listening to the other person and spend time describing my own needs and feelings. Identifying them makes it much easier to set them aside temporarily and focus without judgement or trying to "fix" the other person.

Again, Clinton's workshop design incorporated some of these ideas by inviting us to say what we wanted feedback on. The ideas themselves are similar to the conflict mediation techniques I learned in the "Dialogue for Peaceful Change" at a workshop series offered by the Tatamagouche Centre. They also overlap with the "non-judgemental listening" advocated in the Mental Health First Aid course I took recently. As a conflict-mediation framework, believing that the mediator has fully understood your position can make it more possible to hear someone else's. Similarly, when supporting someone who is having a mental health crisis, **the practise of listening for what the person is asking for can go a long way to reducing my impulse to provide the support I think they need**, or should want, or the support that reduces *my* discomfort.

 In my classroom, this has been a breakthrough. Teaching students to ask each other "Do you mean …?" has drastically reduced the number of conversations that become staunch defenses. We now have conversations about multiple ways of solving problems that focus on their advantages and disadvantages. Recently, a student diffused a conflict by accurately restating both positions. After both sides felt confident that they had been heard, they were supportive of the student's suggestion that we " *not focus on one person being right and one being wrong. Let's work on being less wrong together*."

Of course, this is easier when we're talking about physics, and harder when we're talking about deep moral questions. As well, not everyone feels equally comfortable or able to talk about their feelings. Insisting on this, or criticizing them for not talking about their feelings enough, is likely to make conflict worse. So then what?

Lesson #3: Listen for the Feelings and Unmet Needs
And now for something slightly different. When I was participating in the workshop, I explored many ways of responding to people's stories. One that dovetailed well with the workshop approach could be summed up as "Listen for the feelings and unmet needs." My first experience with was through Dialogue for Peaceful Change, but I've since heard a similar message in Annapolis Valley Monthly Meeting's annual retreat (facilitated by Elizabeth Azmier-Stewart). Sometimes when I listen to someone, they are focussed on telling me what happened or how they've been wronged. This is important. At the same time, it doesn't necessarily help me understand what they feel, what they need, or what fears are keeping them in the conflict. It's delicate; I need to fully reflect that I've heard and understood the events and impressions they have – even their opinions of someone else's motivations.

What I Can Do: Ask "Do You Need…?" "Do You Feel…?"
One way to walk this tightrope is to ask *closed-ended* questions specifically about what it sounds like the person finds important, or what they might be feeling. "So open communication in your family is really important to you?" "Were you sad about that?" This corresponds closely to Marshall Rosenberg's "Non-Violent Communication" framework.

This is the place where it's especially helpful to distinguish *feelings* from *thoughts, interpretations, or evaluations* – or assumptions about someone else's motivations! Our words **for emotions, physical sensations, and ideas are so tangled that sometimes it's hard to tell them apart** – is "abandoned" a feeling? Or is it an accusation that someone else did something to me? I've learned to test them by putting them into the sentence "I think you _____-ed me." For example – "I think you abandoned me." See? Not a feeling. If I think someone abandoned me, I might feel afraid or lonely.   Now try it again – "I think you lonely me." The sentence doesn't work – "lonely" is probably a feeling.   So it goes into a closed-ended question: "Were you lonely?"

It's also important to separate "what do I need or want" from "what do I want *from you*." "I need companionship" is different from "I need you to be my companion." It takes practise and support to answer those questions separately, and to hear one without assuming we are hearing the other. If we interpret others' needs as requests, then they have no way to say "I need" without being coercive or manipulative. If we say "I need…" but we really mean "I want you to…", then it becomes harder for others to know us – since we're no longer talking about ourselves.

The person I'm speaking to might not need or appreciate this approach. I trust that they'll tell me. And **what they tell me will help me figure out if there's something more important that they'd rather talk about. I can follow their lead**. And I've found that when I'm doing it well, the person's reaction is something like, "YES! Thank God someone's finally hearing me."

Technique #4: Integrity Builds Trust

The techniques above can help build trust, but they also require a level of trust. How do we start from scratch, or when our relationships are so damaged that there's a lot of mistrust to undo?

Clinton suggested these building blocks. Even in cases of damaged trust, I can:

1. Be authentic – in other words, sincere, and not copied from someone else
2. Share myself
3. Keep confidences
4. Do things that are within my skills, and be honest about the skills I don't have
5. Co-operate and look for ways to offer help
6. Plan for the long term
7. Avoid excuses and blaming
8. Assume there are solutions I haven't thought of
9. Grow from small acts of trust to bigger ones
10. Behave reliably according to shared values

I found myself nodding along to the first 9. But, considering the last one – I think it's possible to build some kinds of trust even when our beliefs aren't *shared*. It might be enough for me to behave according to beliefs that are *known*. That means letting my beliefs be known, and making sure that I am acting in accordance with them.

In my classroom, this one is the most difficult, and the most important. I am asking my students to re-evaluate their entire way of thinking about learning – which means re-evaluating their thinking about themselves and everything they've learned in the past. As they embark on this delicate and scary task, it is crucial that they see me as reliable. Even if I am reliably frustrating, they need to know where they stand. I do this by focussing on 2-3 key questions throughout the curriculum – whether we're having a class discussion, writing lab reports, or solving problems on quizzes, the themes are consistent: what evidence supports this idea? What reasoning leads from the evidence to the idea? What physically causes this? *Clarity, coherence, and causality* are the themes I've chosen to underpin the kind of critical thinking we do in physics class. The themes may be different in our family lives, our work lives, or our spiritual lives – but in each case we can use criteria, and we get to choose which ones to use.

What Did the Workshop Participants Conclude?

Want to know some of the specific advice we gave each other for repairing and building trust? Here are some examples. Which ones apply to you? What would you change or add?

1. Vent to someone I already trust – not someone I am trying to build trust with
2. Solve problems with people who actually have the power to make change
3. Appeal to the other's sense of integrity and justice – consider that they might *want* to do what is right
4. Document what's happening, and share the documents
5. When managing up (for example, in a workplace), consider recruiting help from below
6. Show someone that I could help them accomplish their priorities better if I had their help and support
7. Seek out social or informal situations where people are more at ease
8. Remember that I may not have enough social capital yet to accomplish what I want to accomplish. Sometimes the fastest way to accomplish something is to wait and build relationships.
9. Look for someone else taking the lead on an issue and support them, instead of taking the lead
10. Reduce supervision while increasing chances for observation (position yourself to have first-hand knowledge of someone's success)
11. Set clear objectives, and define a clear measurement strategy
12. Create a culture of feedback among peers
13. Make sure that the people affected help design the feedback process
14. Make sure the consequences for poor performance are known, fair, and consistently enforced
15. Give specific praise: not "it went well" but "doing X improved how we met objective Y"

Workshop Process

One of the things that was remarkable about the workshop is how consistently we embodied these principles in the process of learning them. For example, we went from small acts of trust to bigger ones by getting to know each other gradually. Clinton invited us to reveal more of our stories as the weekend went on. We discussed our values in response to questions like, "what is an example of a person you trust? An organization? An institution?" We practised asking to be heard, and supporting others in feeling heard, by opening our conflict story to the other participants. Clinton helped us stay focused on the person who was sharing their story, gently redirected us if we wandered into speculating about their motives, and reminding us to imagine the very long term possibilities. We defined shared principles for the feedback we gave each other, instead of following externally-imposed rules.

How I Can Apply This in my Classroom and my Meeting

I have already started implementing these ideas in my teaching. I now help students practise describing an idea they disagree with, and make use of conflict in the classroom to show the consequences when someone feels unheard or gets the impression their ideas have no value. I explicitly invite students into the process of supporting each other – by collectively defining our shared rights and responsibilities, and by having them describe the kind of feedback they want from each other. I share my own learning process – about musical instruments I'm learning now, about what I was like as a student in the past, about the electronic projects I hope to take on in the future. I also emphasize the brain's ability to grow. If we are going to choose criteria to which we consistently hold ourselves and each other, it's important to emphasize that we are all, with practise, capable of meeting them.

My next project is to create a letter to the class for each new semester. I want to be even more consistent in explaining why I expect these strange things from them, and how I think it will benefit them. I want the letter to include highlights of the semester; I'll have to be attentive throughout the semester for moments when we embodied these principles, so I can remember to include them.

In my Meeting, I am alert for times when someone hasn't finished a sentence, or hasn't heard their idea reflected back to them. I reach out to individuals outside of regular Meetings – not only because I enjoy the company, but because I know it's an opportunity to hear about their lives. I'm also much more attentive about making sure that I'm sharing my life – one-sided listening can make power dynamics bigger instead of smaller. I'm looking forward to creating a workshop for my Meeting on these topics; if I have learned these lessons well, I may be able, as Clinton did, to create a workshop about trust-building that itself is a trust-building experience.

The relief that people feel when they feel heard, or when they receive the support they are actually asking for, is visible. I don't think it's a coincidence that a common response is to "thank God" that someone finally heard them. **To know what is inside another's heart is not easy for mere mortals, but we can get better at it with practise**. I believe that it is our responsibility to develop this power, in order to minister to each other, and to build the trust that is required in order to create the world of peace we say we want.