

A matter of trust – Gaining the confidence of the public and client.

In the last Newsletter I addressed the issue of credibility and the negative perception created when the project proponent pays for the impact assessment. In this issue the intention is to move this debate to another level and examine the matter of trust within the public/client/consultant triad. Apart from ensuring neutrality in the funding of impact assessments there are other matters that need to be addressed to increase levels of public/client/consultant trust. In order to understand what can be done to enhance trust we first need to consider the constructs of trust.

Trust is a dynamic social phenomenon that changes over time and develops through an evaluative process. This evaluative process is based on a number of facilitators through which the trustworthiness of the focus of trust is assessed and which include openness, integrity, benevolence, competency, a history of interactions and personality characteristics (Bews & Rossouw, 2002)¹. Most of these facilitators are common in the literature and have been well tested over time (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Bews, 2000; Bews & Uys, 2002; Sellén, & Wellergård, 2003; Lawson, 2004; Binikos, 2006)². Consequently, it is suggested that at least openness, integrity, benevolence, competency and a history of interactions form a good base on which to tackle the question of trust within social impact assessments and on this basis to enhance the credibility of the practice of social impact assessments.

¹ Bews, N.F., and Rossouw, G.J. "A Role for Business Ethics in Facilitating Trustworthiness," *Journal of Business Ethics*, (39:4), 2002, pp. 377-390.

² Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., and Schoorman, F. D. 1995. An Intergrated Model of Organisational Trust. *Acadamy of Management Review*, 2(3):709-734.

Bews, N. F. 2000. An Investigation into the Facilitators of Trustworthiness of Managers. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Rand Afrikaans University: Johannesburg.

Bews N. and Uys, T. 2002. The Impact of Organisational Restructuring on Perceptions of Trustworthiness. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 28(4):21-28

Sellén, J and Wellergård, A. 2003. Trust As A Tool For Collaboration – In an inter-organisational context. Master of International Management Master Thesis No 2003:23. Graduate Business School School of Economics and Commercial Law. Göteborg University. ISSN 1403-851X. Printed by Elanders Novum.

Lawson, W. D. 2004. Trust and Trustworthiness in Professional-Client Relationships: Procurement of Architect/Engineer Services by Texas Municipalities. A Dissertation in Civil Engineering Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Texas Tech University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Binikos, E. 2006. A Sociological Case Study of the Relationship Between Organisational Trust and Whistleblowing in the Workplace. Unpublished Masters Dissertation: University of Johannesburg.

Competency is probably the most appropriate starting point as, without establishing a pool of competent practitioners, the chances of putting the rest of what is necessary in place, to ensure credibility and build trust, becomes somewhat questionable. Competency, as referred to here, is domain specific and refers to the technical and, to some degree, the personal proficiency to perform a required task at an acceptable level. Currently, those practicing social impact assessments tend to draw their expertise from a wide range of backgrounds. Few, if any, of these disciplines adequately equip the practitioner competently to practice SIAs and some to a much lesser degree than others. I would argue that to enhance competency within the practice would require a concerted effort on the part of a number of role players amongst which are academic institutions, professional bodies, such as the IAIA, and governmental institutions.

Turning to integrity, it is indicated that Mayer et al, relates integrity to consistency, fairness and reliability. In this vein one could point to the application of a set of principles which are acceptable, predictable and reliable, and to the importance of establishing such principles within the SIA field. The principles referred to here are of a moral or ethical nature and, within an organisational setting, are likely to be embedded in organisational culture and values. In this sense it would be incumbent on a professional body to generate an appropriate set of principles reflecting the culture and value of that organisation in much the same manner as is done in the medical, accounting and engineering fields. These principles would be reflected in the organisation's constitution, code of ethics and guidelines for practitioners.

The third facilitator of trustworthiness to be addressed is openness. Openness is related to honesty requiring sensitivity and a balanced approach reflecting a professional attitude, particularly with regard to communication. Harari (1995)³ argues that, at least in management, a lack of openness in communication leads to powerlessness and alienation and that dishonesty in communication results in scepticism. Openness is a value that should be written into the principles referred to above and made apparent through the action of all practitioners affiliated to such an association.

³ Harari, O. 1995. Open the doors, tell the truth (open communications in business). *Management Review*. January. 84:33-35.

Next we turn to benevolence, which it seems could be the strongest agent of trustworthiness (Bews, 2000). Benevolence refers to the degree to which the trustee is prepared to act in the interests of the trustor and in the event of this happening, intensify trust. In this regard the importance of having a community of competent practitioners, able to balance the interests of all parties and adhere to a strong set of principles, becomes paramount.

Finally, a history of interactions could be considered. The formation of trust can unfold via three different routes, dependent on the stage of the relationship. These routes are the peripheral, central or habitual routes (Hung, Dennis & Robert, 2004)⁴. Hung et al continue to indicate that in the initial stages, when knowledge of the trustor is scarce, the peripheral route is followed and reputation is significant. During the central stage knowledge is gathered based on a positive history of interactions founded on ability, integrity and benevolence. Over a long period of a continued positive history, habitual trust patterns and emotional bonds are formed as perceptions of risk are reduced. Accordingly, it is essential that social impact assessment practitioners establish a positive reputation based on high levels of competency, integrity and openness and ensure that habitual trust patterns and emotional bonds are formed between SIA practitioners, the public in general and clients, and that this experience is passed on via third party interactions.

Considering the above discussion, questions posed and left for debate are: Who should take responsibility in driving an initiative to increase trust and credibility? Is there capacity amongst the appropriate institutions to address these issues? Is there the will to do so? In the next Newsletter, with this in mind, I intend to address the issue of enhancing the competence of SIA practitioners.

⁴ Hung, Y. T., Dennis, A. R., Robert, L. 2004. Trust in Virtual Teams: Towards an Integrative Model of Trust Formation. Proceedings of the 37th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.