



# Building trust among enemies: The central challenge for international conflict resolution<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The article presents an approach to the gradual building of trust among enemies, who—even when they have an interest in making peace—are afraid to extend trust to each other lest it jeopardize their own existence. Efforts to resolve the conflict, therefore, confront a basic dilemma: Parties cannot enter into a peace process without some degree of mutual trust, but they cannot build trust without entering into a peace process. The article discusses the ways in which interactive problem solving—a form of unofficial diplomacy, which the author has applied most extensively to the Israeli–Palestinian case—attempts to deal with this dilemma. It describes five concepts that have proven useful to confronting this dilemma in problem-solving workshops with politically influential Israelis and Palestinians and that should also be relevant to trust building in the larger peace process: the view of movement toward peace as a process of successive approximations, in which the level of commitment gradually increases with the level of reassurance; the role of the third party as a repository of trust, particularly in the early stages of the process; the focus on “working trust” in the other’s seriousness about peace based on their own interests (rather than interpersonal trust based on good will); the view of the relationship between participants in the peace process as an uneasy coalition; and the

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development of a systematic process of mutual reassurance, based on responsiveness and reciprocity.

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## 1. Introduction

Today is the thirty-fifth anniversary of the shootings on the Kent State University campus, which took place on May 4, 1970. The shootings at Kent State shocked the entire country and marked an important turning point in public attitudes toward the Vietnam War.

The violence at Kent State reflected the high degree of mutual distrust between university students and political authorities that had built over the course of the war years. Students increasingly lost trust in the government's policy in Vietnam and administration of the military draft. The authorities, in turn—at the state and national levels—had lost trust in universities, students, and indeed all dissenting elements (cf. Taylor, Shuntich, McGovern, & Genther, 1971, p. 150).

Trust is a central requirement for the peaceful and effective management of all relationships—between individuals, between groups, and between individuals or groups and the organizations and societies to which they belong. Trust is an essential ingredient in both communal and exchange relationships (cf. Clark & Mills, 1979). In a communal relationship, such as friendship or marriage, mutual trust is a given. The relationship is defined by the parties' responsiveness to each other's needs and concern for each other's welfare, and there is a strong normative expectation that they will not harm or deceive each other and that each will look out for the other's interests. A violation of trust precipitates a serious crisis in a communal relationship and often marks the end of it.

In an exchange relationship, mutual trust is a fundamental condition for the advancement of the parties' interests. For example, Malik (2003) lists it as one of six core principles of effective management. Trust in the relationship between managers and their subordinates and colleagues is not a given, but it must be built and tested over time. To build a relationship of mutual trust, as Malik points out, managers must extend trust to their subordinates (though not without checking against possible abuse of this trust) and they must earn the trust of their subordinates by their own trustworthy behavior (Malik, 2003, pp.149–163).

The development of mutual trust is equally essential in efforts to resolve conflict and transform the relationship between enemies into a relationship characterized by stable peace and cooperation. But, by definition, the conditions for creating trust between enemies are elusive at best—particularly in deep-rooted, protracted conflicts between identity groups, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, on which much of my work has focused for more than 30 years. In such relationships, in contrast to communal relationships, mutual *distrust* is a given: Both parties believe—usually with a long history of supporting evidence—that the other is bent on frustrating their needs, on undermining their welfare, and on causing them harm. Interestingly, civil wars and intercommunal conflicts share one characteristic with communal relationships: a high degree of

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