Quaderni FMV
n.5/2026

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Abstract

This paper argues that trust is best understood as a relational and emotional skill essential for human flourishing. Moving beyond exclusively cognitive, moral, or contractual accounts, trust is interpreted as a human capacity exercised in response to lived situations of uncertainty and vulnerability. Drawing on attachment theory and contemporary models of trustworthiness, the paper develops an integrated account of the emotional architecture that enables trust and proposes a relational model explaining how trust unfolds in practice through disposition, intuition, trusting belief, intention to trust, and trusting behavior. By integrating emotional foundations with relational discernment, the paper clarifies how trust functions as an enabling condition for cooperation, psychological safety, ethical leadership, and meaningful participation in shared life.

Keywords

Trust; human flourishing; vulnerability; attachment; integrity; relational skills

1. Introduction

Trust occupies a central place in human life, underlying intimate relationships, social cooperation, institutional credibility, and leadership effectiveness. Yet despite its ubiquity, trust remains conceptually elusive. It is often approached as a moral virtue, a cognitive judgment of reliability, or a behavioral expectation aimed at reducing uncertainty. While each of these perspectives captures an important dimension, none fully accounts for trust as it is lived: as a relational capacity exercised under conditions of vulnerability and uncertainty[1].

This paper proposes a reframing of trust as a relational and emotional skill, exercised in response to concrete situations of uncertainty. Drawing on attachment theory and contemporary accounts of vulnerability and integrity, it develops an account of the emotional architecture that makes trust possible and a relational model that clarifies how trust is discerned, decided, and enacted in lived reality. The paper argues that, when understood in this way, trust functions as emotional infrastructure for human flourishing, sustaining meaningful relationships, ethical leadership, and collective life under conditions where certainty and control are unavailable.

2. Trust as a Relational Skill: Conceptual Framing

Despite extensive interdisciplinary literature, trust remains theoretically fragmented. It has been described as belief, attitude, expectation, moral posture, or mechanism for managing risk[2]. This fragmentation often results in analyses that isolate one dimension of trust while obscuring how trust actually operates in human life, where emotional appraisal, cognitive judgment, ethical commitment, and concrete behavior converge.

A useful synthesis begins by distinguishing trust from neighboring concepts. Trust is not identical to reliance, which can operate without personal vulnerability, nor to optimism, which may remain affective without commitment. It is also not reducible to verification or control, since these aim to eliminate uncertainty rather than accept it[3]. Trust thus involves an irreducible element of vulnerability: to trust is to grant another person or institution discretionary power that may be used well or poorly.

Understanding trust as a relational skill makes this structure more explicit. Skills are cultivated capacities exercised through practice and discernment in concrete situations. They develop over time, are context-sensitive, and involve judgment rather than mechanical application. A skill-based view explains why individuals may trust wisely in some relationships and unwisely in others, why trust can be repaired or degraded, and why trust cannot be reduced to either personality traits or isolated decisions[4].

This framing also clarifies trust's normative dimension. Trust is not simply prediction of behavior; it is a decision to allow the other genuine freedom in the relationship. This decision can be ethically mature or ethically negligent depending on how it is formed and enacted. A skill-based view therefore does not romanticize trust; it places trust within prudence. Trust, when exercised well, is calibrated openness: neither naïve exposure nor chronic suspicion.

Finally, a relational skill perspective provides the conceptual bridge to human flourishing. Flourishing is not achieved in isolation. It depends on the capacity to enter and sustain relationships oriented toward shared goods. Trust is one of the capacities that makes such shared life possible, because it enables cooperation and belonging under conditions where control and certainty are unavailable[5]. To develop trust as a skill is therefore not merely to improve performance or coordination, but to strengthen a fundamental capacity for relational life.

3. The Emotional Foundations of Trust

Trust is emotionally consequential because it shapes how individuals inhabit relationships under conditions of uncertainty. To trust is not merely to form a belief about another's reliability, but to accept a form of vulnerability that carries moral and emotional weight.

Trust necessarily involves moral vulnerability, insofar as the trusting person places something of value at the discretion of another, accepting the possibility of betrayal as a constitutive feature of the relationship. As Annette Baier has argued, trust is not merely reliance on predictable behavior, but a morally significant form of dependence that exposes the self to the goodwill—or failure—of others[6]. This moral exposure explains why trust cannot be reduced to strategic calculation or rational expectation alone. It engages the person at a deeper level, implicating emotional regulation, self-understanding, and relational judgment.

3.1 Attachment and Emotional Grounding

Attachment theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the emotional conditions that make trust possible. Through early interactions with primary caregivers, individuals develop internal working models that shape expectations about availability, responsiveness, and safety[7]. These models influence how individuals perceive relational risk and regulate emotional responses to uncertainty throughout the lifespan.

Secure attachment fosters confidence in relational engagement and tolerance for dependence, enabling individuals to approach uncertainty without excessive fear. In contrast, insecure attachment patterns often produce heightened vigilance, avoidance, or ambivalence, making trust either difficult to sustain or indiscriminately extended. Importantly, these attachment-based dispositions do not determine future trust behaviors, but they condition the emotional baseline from which trust is exercised as a relational skill.

3.2 Vulnerability and Emotional Regulation

Because trust entails exposure to potential harm, the capacity to regulate emotions such as fear, anxiety, and disappointment is central to its enactment. Emotional regulation allows individuals to remain relationally engaged even when outcomes are uncertain and guarantees are absent. Where this capacity is fragile, vulnerability is experienced as threatening, and trust tends to collapse either into defensive control or withdrawal.

Emotions in this context are not opposed to rational judgment, but function as forms of evaluative appraisal. As Martha Nussbaum has shown, emotions register what individuals perceive as salient for their flourishing, shaping how situations are interpreted and responded to[8]. From this perspective, trust understood emotionally does not reflect impulsivity or naivety, but a situated judgment about relational meaning, value, and risk. Emotional responses thus guide, rather than undermine, the discernment required for trusting wisely.

3.3 Psychological Safety and Relational Contexts

At the interpersonal and organizational level, trust contributes to what Amy Edmondson has called psychological safety: the shared perception that one can participate, speak, and act without fear of humiliation or retaliation[9]. Psychological safety does not eliminate disagreement or challenge; rather, it creates relational conditions in which engagement remains possible despite vulnerability.

Such environments reduce the emotional cost of participation and allow individuals to contribute without excessive self-protection. In this sense, trust functions as an emotional infrastructure that sustains cooperation, learning, and resilience over time. Where trust is absent, relational energy is redirected toward self-preservation.

3.4 The Limits of Emotional Foundations

While emotional grounding explains the conditions that make trust possible, it does not by itself explain how trust is enacted in concrete situations. Individuals may possess emotional resources and yet fail to trust wisely, or trust in ways that expose them to unnecessary harm. Emotional readiness is therefore a necessary but insufficient condition for trust.

To account for how trust unfolds in lived reality, it is necessary to move beyond emotional foundations toward a relational model that articulates how trust is discerned, decided, and enacted in response to real-life events. Such a model clarifies how emotional capacities interact with intuition, judgment, intention, and action, enabling trust to function as a relational skill oriented toward human flourishing.

4. A Relational Model of Trust

This section develops a relational model of trust aligned with the emotional foundations described above. The model situates trust within lived reality and articulates the dimensions through which trust is exercised as a relational skill. Rather than proposing entirely new dimensions of trust, the model integrates emotional, cognitive, and ethical elements that are often treated separately in existing literature, situating them within a relational process through which trust is discerned and enacted in lived reality.
Figure 1 presents the model schematically.

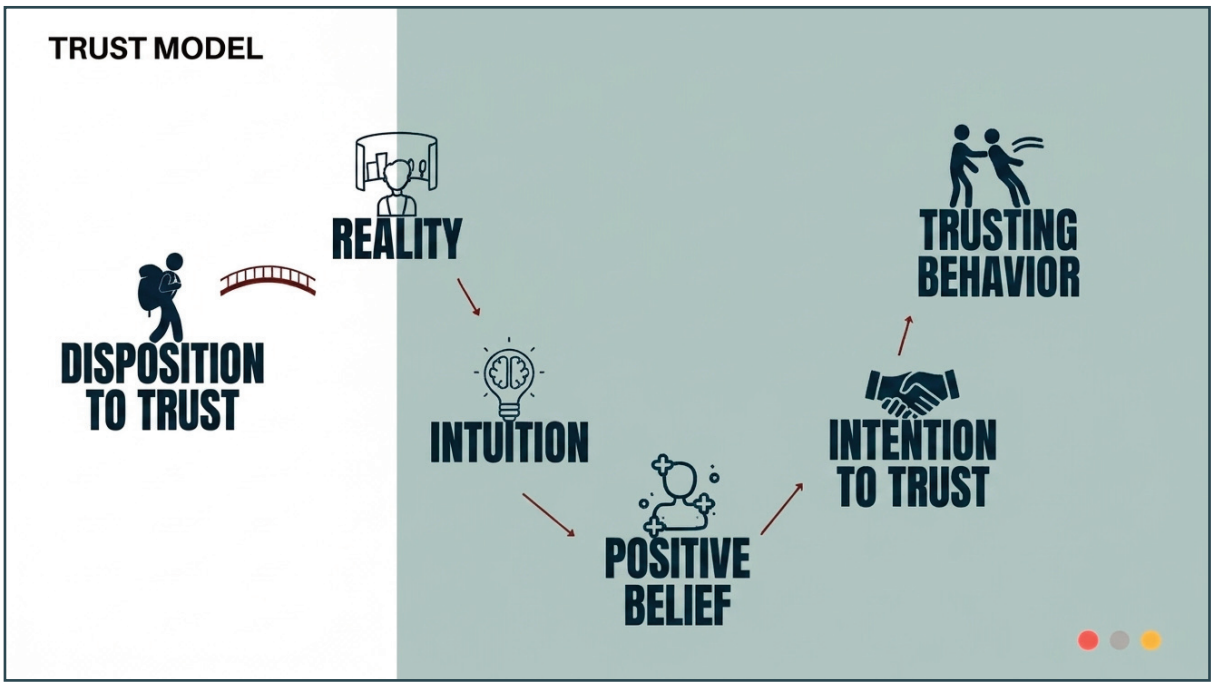


Figure 1. A relational model of trust.

Trust is initiated by lived reality and unfolds through five interrelated dimensions: disposition to trust, intuition, positive trusting belief, intention to trust, and trusting behavior.

4.1 Reality as the trigger of trust

Trust does not arise in abstraction. It is activated by real-life events that confront the subject with a decision under uncertainty. Such events may be interpersonal, professional, or institutional, but they share a common structure: the individual must decide whether to accept vulnerability in the absence of guarantees.

Trust begins where certainty ends. Because outcomes cannot be fully controlled, the question “Can I trust here?” becomes existentially and ethically meaningful. Lived reality is therefore not external to trust but constitutive of it: trust is elicited precisely by situations where control is limited and the freedom of the other becomes consequential.

4.2 Disposition to trust

Disposition to trust refers to a relatively stable emotional orientation toward relational dependence[10]. Shaped by attachment history and cumulative experience, this disposition influences how uncertainty is emotionally received. Some individuals approach relational risk with openness; others approach it with caution or suspicion.

Disposition conditions trust without determining it. A favorable disposition may facilitate openness, but it does not guarantee wise trust. Conversely, a cautious disposition does not preclude trust, but it may require greater discernment and emotional effort. This dimension helps explain why identical situations can elicit divergent trust responses. It also prevents a common conceptual error: treating trust as merely a cognitive conclusion rather than as a capacity rooted in emotional readiness.

4.3 Intuition

Intuition operates as an affective appraisal of relational safety[11]. It precedes deliberative reasoning and either permits or inhibits engagement. Intuition integrates emotional memory, bodily cues, and contextual signals, offering an initial sense of whether trust may be possible in this situation.

Intuition is not opposed to reason. Rather, it functions as the emotional threshold that makes reflective evaluation possible. When intuition signals danger, the person may withdraw before cognition fully engages. When it signals sufficient safety, the person remains open long enough to consider the relationship more explicitly. In this model, intuition is not romanticized; it can be accurate sensitivity or inherited defensiveness. Its importance lies in its practical role as the affective gatekeeper of vulnerability.

4.4 Positive trusting belief

Trusting belief involves a cognitive evaluation of the other's trustworthiness. In organizational trust research, this evaluation is commonly organized around competence, benevolence, and integrity[12]. Competence concerns the capacity to deliver what is expected in a given domain. Benevolence concerns goodwill: whether the other intends one's good rather than acting primarily out of self-interest. Integrity concerns coherence between values, words, and actions.

These beliefs remain probabilistic; they reduce uncertainty but never eliminate it. In this sense, trusting beliefs render vulnerability reasonable without making it risk-free. They provide grounds for trust without converting trust into certainty. This is why trust always retains an element of risk: it is a decision made under partial knowledge.

4.5 Intention to trust

The decisional core of trust lies in the intention to trust: the conscious choice to accept vulnerability despite uncertainty. This intention distinguishes trust from optimism, admiration, or mere prediction. One may believe the other to be competent and still refuse to trust because the cost of vulnerability feels too high or because the person prefers control.

The intention to trust reveals the ethical dimension of trust. To trust is to allow the other genuine freedom in the relationship, including the possibility of disappointment. This is why trust cannot be reduced to monitoring or control. Excessive control may simulate reliability, but it undermines trust by denying the other's freedom and by eliminating the very vulnerability that makes trust meaningful[13].

4.6 Trusting behavior

Trust is completed through trusting behavior: actions that enact vulnerability in practice. Such behaviors may include delegating authority, sharing information, relying on another's judgment, or refraining from excessive monitoring. Through these actions, trust becomes relationally real and consequential.

Trusting behavior exposes the subject to risk, but it also makes cooperation and shared responsibility possible. Without behavioral enactment, trust remains internal—an attitude or intention that does not transform the relationship. At the same time, trusting behavior must be calibrated. Trust as a skill includes discernment about degree and context of vulnerability. Flourishing does not require naïveté; it requires wise openness oriented toward shared goods.

4.7 Trust and human flourishing

As a relational skill, trust integrates emotional readiness, affective appraisal, cognitive judgment, ethical intention, and embodied action. Its enactment enables cooperation, belonging, and resilience under conditions of uncertainty. In this way, trust functions as a foundational condition for human flourishing.

In leadership and organizational life, trust functions as emotional infrastructure. When leaders cultivate trust through competence, benevolence, and integrity—while also permitting vulnerability and freedom—they create relational conditions in which others can contribute without chronic self-protection. Trust thus supports psychological safety, ethical decision-making, and sustained collective engagement. Understanding trust as a relational skill clarifies both why trust is fragile and why it remains indispensable for flourishing in families, organizations, and society.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that trust is best understood as a relational and emotional skill exercised in response to concrete situations of uncertainty. By reframing trust in this way, the analysis moves beyond abstract definitions and situates trust within lived experience, where vulnerability, discernment, and action converge.

The emotional foundations of trust explain how individuals become capable of vulnerability, while the relational model clarifies how trust is enacted through discernible dimensions. Together, they show why trust cannot be reduced to belief, disposition, or control. Trust is neither blind faith nor merely contractual reliability; it is an intentional form of relational engagement grounded in emotional readiness and guided by discernment.

From the perspective of human flourishing, trust is foundational. Flourishing is inherently relational; it depends on the capacity to participate meaningfully in relationships and communities oriented toward shared goods. Trust enables such participation by making cooperation, belonging, and shared responsibility possible under conditions of uncertainty. Without trust, individuals retreat into self-protection, limiting both personal development and collective life.

In leadership and organizational contexts, trust functions as emotional infrastructure. It sustains psychological safety, ethical decision-making, and the capacity to navigate complexity without coercion or excessive control. Leaders who cultivate trust as a relational skill create conditions in which others can contribute freely and responsibly, supporting not only performance but the flourishing of persons and communities.

Ultimately, trust matters because it mediates the relationship between vulnerability and meaning. To trust is to accept exposure in the hope of shared goods that cannot be secured alone. When exercised with discernment and integrity, trust becomes not only a condition for effective relationships, but a defining capacity for human flourishing.

Notes

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[3] N. Luhmann, *Trust and Power*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 1979, pp. 20-33.
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[12] R.C. Mayer, J.H. Davis, F.D. Schoorman, *An integrative model of organizational trus*t, «Academy of Management Review», 20/3 (1995), pp. 709-734.
[13] S.B. Sitkin, N.L. Roth, *Explaining the limited effectiveness of legalistic "remedies" for trust/distrust*, «Organization Science», 4/3 (1993), pp. 367-392.

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ottobre 2026


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