

TRUST DEVELOPMENT THEORY¹

Jack Gibb’s theory of group development describes how groups work together and how trust and productivity occur in groups. Gibb developed and applied his theory at the individual and group level. His theory can also be applied to the development of trust in larger organizations or systems.

Gibb begins with the assumption that humans are by nature social beings, relying on interactions with others for our development and growth. Gibb states, “A person learns to grow through his increasing acceptance of himself and others. Serving as the primary block to such acceptance are the defensive feelings of fear and distrust that arise from the prevailing defensive climates in most cultures.”² Gibb’s insight is quite simple: as trust increases, defensive and unproductive behavior decreases, allowing individuals and groups to interact more effectively. Further, although humans are social and social productivity depends on trust, it takes intention to overcome the defensive feelings and fear that inhibit trust development. Gibb’s theory of trust development provides a framework for this intentional effort.

Gibb identified four highly interdependent “primary modal concerns” that he saw arise in all social interactions between and among humans. These primary concerns tend to be expressed through what Gibb called “derivative modal concerns.” In other words, our underlying or hidden and often unconscious needs (primary modal concerns) tend to be expressed in related questions and conscious concerns (derivative concerns).

Primary Concern	Expressed or Derivative Concern
Acceptance of self, role, and value Who am I? (relative to the other or the group)	Membership Who belongs? Who is valued? Who is listened to?
Data flow: sharing of feeling and perceptual data, verbal and non-verbal information Who are you? (relative to me and the group) Are you open or withholding information?	Decision-making Who makes decisions and how are they made?
Goal formation: alignment and integration of motivations What are we here for? Are we working toward the same purpose?	Productivity Can we learn, grow, and be creative together?
Control: exerting influence over what happens How are we going to accomplish our work together?	Organization How are we structured? How will we collaborate creatively?

FIGURE 3-1: GIBB’S MODAL CONCERNS

1. Adapted from L. P. Bradford, J. R. Gibb, and K. D. Benne, eds., *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method* (New York: Wiley, 1964) and Jack R. Gibb, *Trust: A New View of Personal and Organizational Development* (Los Angeles: Guild of Tutors Press, 1978).
2. Bradford, Gibb, and Benne, *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method*.

Control and Organization

... and to coordinate and collaborate freely and creatively



Goal Formation and Productivity

People are then able to choose courses of action and goals to which they are committed and toward which they are capable of working productively ...



Data Flow and Decision-Making

... they shed roles and give up postures that inhibit the flow of vital information, which allows them to explore options more openly



Acceptance and Membership

As people enter a group and feel confident of their belonging and value ...

Using Gibb's Insights in Practice

Gibb's theory can be used intentionally to help build trust in groups. Designing agendas and group processes with these concerns in mind will create a climate where defensiveness can be minimized, allowing trust to develop. It is important to note that any time even one member of a group changes it is a new group, and trust needs to be developed before productive and creative work will be possible.

The theory can also be used diagnostically. Gibb found that groups that experience ongoing struggles with one concern, such as goal formation and productivity, need to look at the previous level of data flow and decision-making to see what additional work needs to be done at that level. Consider the following scenarios, for example.

Control and Organization

If a group is having trouble deciding how to structure itself to accomplish its goal, the unfinished business may be in the earlier stage of goal formation. Ask yourself: Is there a group commitment to the goal, and if not, why not? What steps will the group take to revisit the goals and understand what needs to be done to strengthen commitment?

Goal Formation and Productivity

If there is a problem setting goals for the group, perhaps data flow hasn't been adequate. The group may not know what the relevant data is that feeds into possible goals or may not know what other people in the group are thinking. Group members also may not understand how decisions are made about what goals to pursue.

Data Flow and Decision-Making

If there is a problem with decisions not being made, or information not being shared, the source may be at the level of acceptance and membership: one or more members may not feel sufficiently accepted to hear data from other members or to contribute effectively. Remember that only when data (information people have access to or information about where people really are on an issue) flows freely, will effective, collaborative decisions be made.

Acceptance and Membership

An individual can help a group reach its potential in the area of acceptance and membership by risking when first entering a group, modeling trust and openness, being accepting of others and open to what others say and want, not always having to be right, and being interdependent (releasing control).