

## Trust – the only thing that counts

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It is long ago since the Norwegian newspaper ‘Dagbladet’ changed from broadsheet to tabloid format. It was presented as if it was a world event, I remember. It was in the early 1980s when we looked at new technology and new packaging with a lot of excitement, whereas we today new technology for granted, every year. One of the ‘Dagbladet’ advertisements showed the overweight and bold editor, with his suspenders and a broad smile, together with the director of finance. The competing paper, ‘Aftenposten’, picked up on the ad, and asked in its story: Would you trust to buy a second hand car from any of these gentlemen? True, with their self-confident and smug smiles, few would probably trust them

At the same time, Jan Carlzon was the able CEO of the Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), from 1981-1993. He turned the money-losing SAS into a successful, profit-making airline in a few years. He painted the planes in new colours. This part of Janne’s success was gimmick. In other fields, he was a democratic leader far ahead of his time. He was a leader that staff, customers and shareholders came to trust. As recent as 2009, somebody called for the Jan Carlzon-type of leader back in SAS and other private sector companies – because, as the title of my article says, trust is the only thing that counts – in life and work.

When the world leaders this week meet in Davos, Switzerland, for the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting, trust is on top of the agenda. That also includes debates about how to reduce inequality, in all fields of society. Trust can only be established if activities are good for all, not only the ones at the top. As for climate change, that is a field where those who are the least to blame for the environmental devastation are hit hardest by the consequences, notably floods, droughts, and more, caused by overuse of nature through deforestation, industrialization, pollution and more – benefiting the few at the top but hitting hard the majority at the bottom.

Trust deficit is found in more fields today than when I grew up and came of age in the 1950s and 60s. True, we didn’t know about many ‘bad things’; the misuse of power by the rich and powerful in the private and public sectors. Yet, when those who betrayed the unwritten covenant with ordinary people, to do good as far as they could, were exposed, it was always a disaster for them. They lost face and standing in society even if the formal legal punishment was often not exercised. That time, not so long after the lessons from the Second World War, to be judged and found guilty by the public, by family, friends and the society at large, was probably a worse punishment than a prison term. Today, it seems that it doesn’t really matter if the society judges us and find us guilty of misuse of power and more. Corrupt leaders in many young states, where the democratic traditions and thinking are not yet deep-rooted in power, are allowed to stay in power. There, even more than in the West, material wealth is admired, never mind that it was sometimes made from ruthless business activities, underpayment of workers at sea and ashore, arms trade, war profiteering, environmentally harmful practices, and more. All these things that should have made people say: don’t trust such people.

Sadly, if leaders are caught red-handed, they still often get out of it. The bank and financial institutions and their leaders were much to be blamed for the recession and economic hardship in the recent well over half a decade. But most of them went scot-free. They have not even lost face, as they would have in my youth, and it would probably have mattered little to them. They are part and parcel of

the world we have created where inequality grows and antisocial business practices condoned. This week, the British charity, Oxfam, has released data showing that fifty percent of the world's wealth is owned by a tiny one percent of the people.

We seem to worship the 'successful' in our technocratic world, where the leaders only operate within a limited parameter and standards of what is right and wrong. These private sector leaders seem not to bother much about the lack of trust among people, simply because their blueprint for how to operate is skewed and stunted. The bottom line in their accounts sheet is profit, and that end justifies the means, with no clear moral justification and consideration of the positive and negative consequences of the utilitarian processes. True, some leaders, such as Bill Gates, try to pay back to society after they have ripped it off. But that doesn't change the system, neither does the little indulgence that the private sector pays through various forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), steered and implemented on their own premises, as philanthropy always is.

In the government sector, the trust deficit is also growing, although many try to do their best. But that may be the worst deficit of all since it is the elected representatives and leaders that are meant to put things right, regulate and control the selfishness of private capitalism, the only economic system allowed in our time.

We don't even trust the NGOs and the other civil society organizations. We often suspect their motives when some of them thrive on misery and catastrophe, resembling private companies rather than organizations serving the needy.

Whereas the modern technology could have been used to democratize our societies, make control better and easier, it has often led to smarter ways of hiding information, making it all more complicated and less transparent. It was Julian Assange of WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden on his own that sounded the alarm, through unorthodox methods, some even wrong. They paid a service to us all, but they are not members of the good society, and indeed not invited to Davos.

In future, I fear that new, creative and daring individuals and organizations will not follow the democratic rules. Right-wing political parties and groups, and sometimes extremist groups, can shatter the democratic systems. We have seen such cases in Europe in recent government elections, especially related to immigrant issues.

I hope the youth haven't become too technocratic in their minds, but will still be able and willing to improve the democratic system. We who are getting old should help, because some of us can still be trusted. Alas, few alternative thinking people are in Davos this week. And if they are, they have to play it safe, because if they are seen as being outsiders, none in our time will listen to them.

A formidable task lies ahead of us to restore the covenant between the leaders and the people, the haves and the haves not. It is not enough to change format from broadsheet to tabloid, or to paint old airplanes in new colours. We need deeper and more sincere change and commitment. And then, we also know that without trust, no sustainable development can happen, not in personal relationships or in business, politics, moral, religious and other fields.

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