

# Effective Cooperation Between Strangers in Unexpected and Dangerous Situations – A Matter of “Swift Trust”

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**Abstract:** This chapter aims to discuss what it takes to make people or groups that do not know each other previously establish effective cooperation during unforeseen events. The focus is on the formation process of “swift trust”, and the potential prerequisites and outcomes of such trust, seen as an alternative to traditional, history-based trust approaches that dominate the research literature of today. “Swift trust” may enable effective cooperation even among people that are unfamiliar with each other. This is seen as a relevant perspective because such temporal groups often handle unforeseen and critical events. Given the limited amount of research on “swift trust”, the chapter also aims to identify future research questions. In the analysis, I utilize different theoretical perspectives, including the social sciences, experimental psychology and leadership, and seek to conclude the investigation by identifying different leadership strategies that may stimulate the formation of “swift trust”.

**Keywords:** *Samhandling*, swift trust, leadership, temporal groups, the unforeseen

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## Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce an alternative approach to the long-held theoretical assumption that people need to have developed a high level of trust, based on an extensive history together, to be able to cooperate during such unexpected and dangerous situations that Torgersen (2018) outlines in relation to the *Bow-tie Model* in Chapter 1 (e.g., Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998; Siebold, 2007). As an alternative point of view, I will discuss how people and groups that are strangers to each other may still be able to establish a well-functioning degree of cooperation under such conditions, similar to that of groups with considerably higher levels of interpersonal knowledge and experience, by developing a state of “swift trust” (e.g., Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, & Ben-Ari, 2005).

This may be a fruitful perspective, given that in dangerous and unexpected situations like terrorist attacks, avalanches, explosive fires, or mass casualties on the motorway, the people and groups standing back-to-back and dealing with the situation are, in many cases, *not* highly cohesive emergency units, but rather strangers that have never worked together before (e.g., Ben-Shalom et al., 2005; Curnin, Owen, Paton, Trist, & Parsons, 2015; Fahy, 2012). These situations encompass a cluster of threats and problems that require combined efforts from a wide range of specialists and departments, often with little or no previous familiarity with each other. They may also entail urgency, where those present have to respond immediately, making the best out of the resources at hand within the framework of an “ad hoc” organized group of strangers.

It is worth noting that such a gap between prevailing theory and operational realities, which often includes the efforts of temporal groups, may be the reason that establishing well-functioning cooperation between strangers is a form of competency and knowledge that is under-stimulated or completely absent from training and education of professional emergency workers. This lack of awareness and focus may in turn lead to a lack of cooperation and the loss of life, in worst-case scenarios.

Against this background, the question I pursue is the following: What does it take to make people or groups that do not know each other, or see each other as strangers, or even are prejudiced towards each other,

quickly establish effective cooperation in dangerous and unexpected situations? According to Meyerson (1996), a key challenge is the rapid development of “swift trust” in temporal social systems.

## Temporal systems responding to the terrorist attack on Utøya 2011

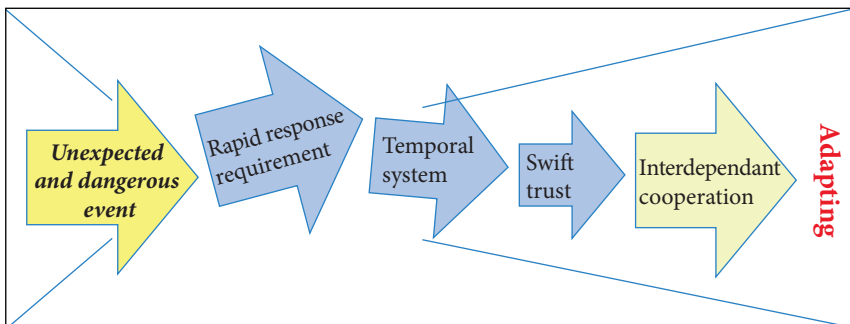
On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011, a terrorist first set off a bomb outside the Norwegian Government Buildings in Oslo, killing eight people. Disguised as a police officer, he then travelled 40 km northwest of Oslo, where he attacked the youth summer camp of the Labor Party, on the isolated island of Utøya. In the space of 70 uninterrupted minutes, the terrorist shot dead 69 people and wounded another 66, before he was eventually detained by the police.

When the police SWAT unit finally arrived at the scene, while the shooting was still in progress, they chose to approach Utøya in a rubber dinghy. During the voyage towards the island, their engine suddenly broke down. Luckily, they were soon approached by two recreational boats. After a short conversation, a local resident (civilian), Oddvar Hansen, and his girlfriend, Lill-Hege Nilsen, invited four unfamiliar police officers on board their day-cruiser. Sailing at a speed of 45 knots, they transported the assault team to a landing site on Utøya chosen by Hansen, at great personal risk. Immediately after the first landing, Hansen was requested to take another two other groups into the “hot spot”, before learning that the terrorist had been captured.

This assault group can be described as a *temporary system*, defined by Goodman & Goodman, 1976:494) as “a set of diversely-skilled people working together on a complex task over a limited period of time”. According to Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996:167), these systems may “exhibit behavior that presupposes trust, yet traditional sources of trust – familiarity, shared experience, reciprocal disclosure, threats and deterrents, fulfilled promises, and demonstrations of non-exploitation of vulnerability – are not obvious in such systems”. Thus, individuals have little time to sort out who knows precisely what and no time for the usual forms of confidence-building activities that

contribute to the development of trust, in more traditional, enduring forms of organization. This is particularly challenging, given that the tasks and missions usually require high levels of interdependence and little self-sufficiency, in order to adapt effectively to the situation. In other words, the members are forced to cooperate by contributing their partially-unique competency, in order to solve the shared problems ahead of them.

In order to convert the individual expertise of strangers into an interdependent cooperation, a demanding challenge is to reduce the sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that naturally occurs among members that do not know one another, but still need to rely on one another, during dangerous circumstances. One mechanism for the reduction of such uncertainty may be “swift trust”, as illustrated in Figure 21.1.



**Figure 21.1** “Swift trust” - the link between the unexpected and temporal, and interdependent cooperation, during unexpected and dangerous situations.

## What is “swift trust”?

There is no unified and clear definition of “swift trust”, distinguishing it from other forms of trust. However, according to Meyerson et al. (1996:170), trust in temporary systems is not simply conventional trust scaled down to fit brief encounters among strangers, but arises in a situation where “...people have to wade in on trust rather than wait while experience gradually shows who can be trusted and with what: Trust must be conferred presumptively or *ex ante*”. It follows from this that rapidness of

the trust-development process is essential in “swift trust”, and that it forms in response to a different set of antecedents, based on rapid perceptions, compared to more history-based, conventional trust. Therefore, building on Meyerson, “swift trust” is better perceived as “a unique form of collective perception and relating that is capable of managing issues of vulnerability, uncertainty, risk and expectations” (Meyerson et al., 1996:167) in a temporary setting. Thus, in an emergency situation, “swift trust” can be seen as the result of a brief evaluation process related to fears of ending up hurt, leading to a sense of positive outcome expectancy that enables people to overcome a subsequent reluctance to contribute to the situation at hand (Fahy, 2012; Hyllengren et al., 2011). It is nurtured by rapid perceptions of variables that reduce the experience of vulnerability, uncertainty, and risk.

In order to understand “swift trust”, Meyerson et al. (1996) suggests three aspects of trust, based on general trust theories, that may capture nuances in the construct: Firstly, as an element of “accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected ill will (or lack of good will) towards one” (Baier, 1986:235). Secondly, as a belief: “that when offered the chance, he or she is not likely to behave in a way that is damaging to us” (Gambetta, 1988:219) – coincident with uncertainty reduction. Thirdly, as risk and the choice to expose oneself to a situation where the possible damage may be greater than the advantages sought (Luhmann, 1988, p. 98). Accordingly, (swift) trust is an attitude that allows for risk-taking decisions, and without it, risk is avoided, innovative activities dry up, and only routine actions are applied. This suggests that “swift trust” is not only a cognitive process, but is, in accordance with Popa (2005:9), “an individual’s willingness to take risks in a temporary group and it has a behavioral manifestation that involves the actual act of risk-taking”. In an emergency situation, such behavior could be manifested, for example, as the willingness to enter a dangerous avalanche area on the basis of strangers’ risk assessments, or participating in an attack where your survival depends on unfamiliar people’s ability to cover you.

A lack of “swift trust” may have several negative consequences. For example, withdrawal, passivity or even escape by people or groups that could have been valuable assets during an emergency (Fahy, 2012), lack of information-sharing or impaired delegation and decentralized

decision-making, to the benefit of control behaviors that slow down decision cycles or increase information overload (Fahy, 2012; Mishra, 1996). Such low trust perceptions may also lead to relevant and available resources at the emergency scene being ignored, due to pre-established negative reputations, as is frequently witnessed in the interplay between the police and fire department in New York (Fahy, 2012).

Therefore, an important element in a theory about effective collaboration between strangers is the identification of factors that may stimulate (or obstruct) the formation of “swift trust”. Here, *the first meeting* may be of great importance.

## How can “swift trust” be developed?

### The first meeting – the birth of “swift trust” (?)

For the formation of “swift trust”, the *first meeting* between individuals or groups that need to collaborate may represent the “moment of birth” (Ben-Shalom et al., 2005). At this meeting, people strive to learn as much as they can about those they are dealing with, and subsequently decide on how they will approach the relationship in the future (Meyerson et al., 1996; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). A company commander puts this need into words in the middle of a combat operation:

“When you don’t know, it worries you. You don’t know what his capabilities are, what he knows... You ask him: What can you do, what are your capabilities? ... You study him, learn to know him a bit, you must do that.” (Ben-Shalom et al., 2005:73).

Little is yet known about the mechanisms and behaviors that stimulate the formation of “swift trust” during such initial encounters, and only one study has, to our knowledge, addressed the question empirically (i.e. Ben-Shalom et al., 2005). However, the more substantial body of research on first impressions may represent an alternative path to the development of this theory. From this research, we learn *first* that impressions about other people are formed very quickly and often sub-consciously. For example, in a study of trait inferences based on facial appearance, trait judgments made after only 100 milliseconds of exposure, concerning

variables like trustworthiness and competence, correlated highly with judgments made in the absence of time constraints (Willis & Todorov, 2006). *Second*, studies suggest that first impressions have a long duration, and determine how communication and relations develop over time. An example of this is provided by Sunnafrank and Ramirez (2004), who show that impressions made after three-minute first encounters determine the long-term nature of relationships. And *third*, a large body of research shows that automatic evaluations can be relatively rigid and difficult to change (Bertram, Rydell, Vervliet, & De Houwer, 2010).

The functional properties and antecedents of positive first impressions are still the subject of ongoing debate. Regarding functionality, “Predicted outcome value theory” (POVT) suggests that individuals attempt, often unconsciously, to develop relationships with those expected to be most rewarding, and restrict development with those who appear less rewarding (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Hence, low-outcome value assessments will produce few to no attempts to continue a contact, and vice versa in the case of positive assessments. In either case, individuals will act and communicate in ways likely to maintain initial impressions and relational decisions.

In a field study of combat units at war, Ben-Shalom and colleagues (2005) observed two parallel processes related to swift impression-making in temporary settings. The members initially imported expectations of trust from other settings, making use of category-driven information processing to form *stereotypical impressions*, due to the limited room for developing expectations based on first-hand information. However, once different units had been placed within a new context, such category-driven reputation was not enough to assure collaboration. A process of *mutual testing* was also activated in order to detect the possibility of extending cooperation to more sensitive areas.

From this, I deduce that awareness of the first-impression processes interwoven in first meetings and the ability to create a positive impression, may represent an important competency for emergency workers, who often collaborate with strangers. An awareness of stereotypical impressions generally attributed to one’s own profession, and the significance of rapid demonstrations of competency, may also represent knowledge that

could be transformed into pre-established strategies that can be activated to stimulate “swift trust”.

It is, however, notable that no experimental studies have studied behaviors or traits that may stimulate positive first impressions in a complex and dangerous setting, affecting the level of “swift trust”. Nevertheless, there are strong indications that such positive impressions and trust are related to how leadership is conducted.

## Competent leadership and involvement

Leaders are important, and a large body of research shows a direct link between a leader’s behavior and how well a group functions. Many studies also show that the effect of this behavior is often mediated by trust (e.g. Zhu, Newman, Miao, & Hooke, 2013). In addition, it has been suggested that trust in a leader will have a contagious effect on the group, propelling the formation and distribution of trust in the group as a whole, possibly due to an increased optimism related to mastering the situation (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Meyerson et al., 1996). This may explain why the *leadership* factor, in a study of Scandinavian military officers, emerged as the single most important factor explaining “swift trust”, or the lack of it, in critical situations (Hyllengren et al., 2011).

According to Kolditz (2007), those leader characteristics and behaviors that are perceived as instrumental in getting people through a dangerous situation alive, are the most important in the formation of follower-attributed trust. In a study of US soldiers at war in Iraq, Sweeney (2010) found that particularly followers’ perception of their leaders’ *combat-related competency* determined how much they trusted these leaders. This study also found that soldiers re-evaluated trust in their leaders at the point of transition from peace to combat operations, shifting from a strong appreciation of relationship-oriented leadership into a much stronger appreciation of leaders’ military skills and tactical judgment, as exemplified in the following quote from a US soldier at war in Iraq:

“I don’t like the guy. I don’t know how to deal with him when we get off work, but as far as being professional and being out there in the trenches, he is a great squad leader... I admire him.” (Kolditz, 2007:12).



In the same vein, on the basis of a content analysis of 988 critical incidents, Lapidot (2007) found that subordinates' perception of vulnerability increased the importance of behaviors reflecting leader ability, compared to benevolence, to avoid swift erosion of trust. The question is, however, how such professional competence can be demonstrated quickly – in order to nurture “swift trust”.

Few, if any, studies have investigated this important question empirically, but several assumptions can be made:

- (1) There are indications that static factors, such as leaders' rank and status, may stimulate “swift trust” in the leader in a temporary group (Lapidot et al., 2007). By symbolizing competency and responsibility, such symbols may nurture hope and positive expectations, and lower a feeling of vulnerability.
- (2) As shown by Hyllengren et al. (2011), leaders' rapid trustworthiness is highly dependent on their ability to display emotional stability in the face of danger – possibly as an indication of coping ability. Thus, a leader's ability to gain control over personal fears and stress-reactions may be an important amplifier of “swift trust”.
- (3) As part of the observed process of mutual testing of others during first meetings, Ben-Shalom (2005) found that even simple arrangements, like how a tank commander placed tanks in a parking area, served as a test of competence to detect the possibility of extending cooperation to more sensitive areas. This indicates that leaders should be involved, not only in initial decisions, but also in the actual organizing, planning and first operational responses. Extended delegation, rendering the leader “invisible,” may give an advantage in terms of overview, but may obstruct the possibility for strangers to learn more about the leader quickly and subsequently develop “swift trust”.
- (4) Effective leadership in dangerous situations also requires rapid decision making, tailored to a constantly changing environment (Kolditz, 2007). Thus, a demonstration of decisiveness may initially stimulate trust swiftly, which partially concurs with Meyerson et al.'s (1996) suggestion that “swift trust” is more resistant in groups where leaders and followers are *skillful improvisers*. This implies

that for “swift trust” to evolve, the leader should not take a purely authoritarian role but rather demonstrate a willingness to change plans together with the group (Lester, 2006; Meyerson et al., 1996). This concurs with Hyllengren et al.’s (2011) finding that the ability to encourage involvement and creativity is the single-most significant leadership behavior related to “swift trust”. Here, the question about why such involvement might stimulate “swift trust” is both relevant and under-researched. One could, however, speculate that involvement rapidly increases a sense of control, which subsequently stimulates positive outcome expectations and “swift trust”, but the basis for this claim is, as yet, thin.

- (5) A leader’s ability to share risk with followers has also been suggested as a way to stimulate trust in leaders in dangerous contexts (Kolditz, 2007). By initially exposing him or herself to the dangers of the situation, the leader both communicates hope that the situation may be mastered (and will not become a death sentence), and nurtures a sense of justice, by demonstrating willingness to share the same fate as their followers – possibly stimulating “swift trust”.

## Role clarity as “swift trust” development

An additional challenge for leaders in temporal settings is to stimulate a sense of common role clarity in the group (Curnin et al., 2015). Meyerson et al. (1996) suggest that strangers build trust faster by dealing with each other through roles than through personal relationships, which may take a long time to develop. This is further supported by McEvily and Perrone et al. (2003) who find that reducing role redundancies is an effective strategy to increase trust within organizations. Thus, an ability to rapidly establish a common understanding of each other’s responsibilities and tasks (i.e. role clarity), represents a form of (swift) trust building suited for temporary teams, as demonstrated also in a recent study of liaison officers in emergency operation centers in Australia (Curnin et al., 2015).

However, according to Fahy (2012), such swift establishment of roles may be difficult to achieve. Often, in complex and dangerous situations, first responders have difficulty seeking out counterparts early in an operation

to share information regarding their capabilities or tactics, or to decide on strategies. An initial meeting does not occur and roles are not clearly defined; units operate independently without communicating their roles or understanding the roles of others. Curnin et al. (2015) also observed that in groupings of individuals with different backgrounds and professions, establishing clear roles was difficult, due to different perspectives and experience. This situation points to another challenge related to the development of “swift trust”: the integration of different group identities.

## The challenge of a new “us” and integration of “them”

During the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, the emergency response agencies in New York City lacked the ability to collaborate and share information during the initial response (Fahy, 2012), which led to the deaths of emergency responders at the World Trade Center, among other things. In the same vein, cross-agency agencies had difficulty establishing trust and cooperation during Hurricane Katrina, due to strongly-held negative organizational stereotypes of the other organizations and perceived ideological differences, according to Zolin’s (2002) findings.

This lack of trust could be viewed as a clash of social identities and general distrust between agencies. According to Tajfel’s (1981) Social Identity Theory, individuals gain positive self-identity through membership in a group, partially from a general overestimation of one’s own group and a devaluation of others, nurturing a state of competition and subsequently, a lack of trust between groups. This implies that a state of pre-established distrust and competitive attitudes may need to be changed quickly in order to develop a functional cooperation between groups in temporal settings.

In their field study of Israeli combat forces, Ben-Shalom et al. (2005) observed four strategies that enhanced the integration of unknown “visiting units” into established “host units”, and the subsequent rise of “swift trust”. First, any logistical needs vital for the “guest” elements to carry out their task were promptly met (e.g. kitchen services, sleeping areas, ammunition), and the “host” demonstrated a strong will to learn from the others. Second, allowance was made for the smaller units to freely express their

professional knowledge and authority without direct relation to their rank in the military, so that a tank commander, for example, might be consulted by a brigadier commander on how to best utilize the tanks. A third factor was related to “distributive justice” and a fair balance in the allocation of quality assignments during the mission. And fourth, an innovative combination of doctrinal and “local” practices that entailed a toolbox of routines, language, drills, etc. was often developed to fit the specific situation, stimulating a commonality among forces that had no common history.

In the same vein, Zolin (2002) emphasizes the importance of creating a unique and temporal task group identity, a new “we” that encompasses all present groups, possibly even by naming the new formation in order to enhance cooperation. In this process, a leader’s enthusiasm for the temporary group is seen as a decisive factor in establishing a team mindset.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to emphasize the relevance of developing “swift trust” in emergency situations and some ways of succeeding in this. It is my opinion that there should be more focus on this topic in both research and training of emergency workers. A search in Google Scholar puts this in perspective. On the topic “team building”, about 179,000 references occur, while “team development” gives about 41,800, and “social cohesion” 361,000. In comparison, the topic “cooperation between strangers” receives about 555 references. If you add “swift”, “rapid” or “quick” to all of the above-mentioned topics, notably no references occur. From this we learn that much is known about what constitutes a well-functioning group, but it also shows a gap between the realities often facing first responders to an emergency situation, having to cooperate with people and groups they have never met before – and the body of contemporary theory.

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