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Restoring trust harder when it is broken early in relationship

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In relationships built on trust, a bad first impression can be harder to overcome than a betrayal that occurs after ties are established, a new study suggests.

While betraying trust is never good for a relationship, the results show that early violations can be particularly devastating, and plant seeds of doubt that may never go away, said Robert Lount, co-author of the study and assistant professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"First impressions matter when you want to build a lasting trust," Lount said.

"If you get off on the wrong foot, the relationship may never be completely right again. It's easier to rebuild trust after a breach if you already have a strong relationship."

While the importance of first impressions may seem obvious, Lount said there is still a common theme in popular culture that suggests many great relationships start off badly.

"Our results fly in the face of this Hollywood notion of hating someone at first sight but then developing a wonderful, passionate relationship," he said. "The likelihood of that happening in real life is pretty low."

The study appears in a recent issue of the journal *Personality and Social*

Psychology Bulletin.

In two related experiments, Lount and his colleagues had college students participate in a game in which their partners violated their trust either right at the beginning of the game or somewhere in the middle.

The goal was to see how much the students were willing to cooperate with the partner after trust was breached.

The researchers used a famous game in psychology called the prisoner's dilemma. In this version, the two players had to decide separately and privately whether they were going to cooperate with each other or defect against their partner in exchange for a monetary reward.

If they both separately decided to cooperate, they would earn $24 each. If one player decided to defect and the other decided to cooperate, the defector would earn $30, while the person who decided to cooperate would earn only $6. If they both decided to defect against their partners, they would both earn $12.

The payoffs for cooperating were designed to increase cooperation, he said. In addition, participants read a "Tutorial on Cooperation" that described the benefits of cooperation in prisoner's dilemma games.

To encourage the participants to take the task seriously, the experimenter announced that several participants would be randomly chosen to receive some of the actual money they won in the game.

In the first experiment, 138 students played multiple rounds of the game on a computer that they were told was networked to a student in another room.

But they were actually playing with a computer that was programmed to

defect at specific points during the more than 30 rounds of the game.

Some participants were paired with a computer that defected against them immediately, in the first two rounds of the game, while others defected in rounds 6 and 7 or rounds 11 and 12. In all cases, the computer was programmed to cooperate for 30 rounds following the defection, regardless of what the participant did. Another group of students were paired with computers that were programmed to always cooperate with the participants throughout the experiment.

Participants were notified on their computer when there were only 10 rounds left in the game.

"The end game is a very critical time, because if you defect, your partner doesn't have much of an opportunity to get back at you," Lount said. "If you don't trust your partner, the last rounds of the game will be when you're most likely to defect."

In this experiment, participants who experienced a breach of trust during the first two trials of the game were also the least likely to cooperate at the end of the game. They cooperated less than 70 percent of the final 10 rounds, suggesting they had the least trust in their partners.

Participants who experienced a trust breach latest in the game - after 10 rounds of cooperation - showed the most cooperation at the end of the game, cooperating more than 90 percent of the time. That was actually slightly higher than participants whose computer partner never defected during the game.

Lount noted that in all cases, the computer defected against the participants the same number of times - just twice during the more than 30 rounds of the experiment. But the timing of the breaches was key.

"An immediate breach of trust is particularly difficult to overcome, and later breaches are considerably less harmful," he said.

In a questionnaire participants took after the experiment, those who experienced the immediate breach rated their partners as less trustworthy than did those whose partner defected later in the game.

In a second experiment, the researchers essentially repeated the first experiment with 108 students, but this time the students answered a short set of questions concerning their perceptions and feelings about their partner immediately following a breach and every 10 trials thereafter.

Participants who experienced the immediate breaches of trust had the most negative evaluations of their partners. Although the interpersonal evaluations improved over time, even after 20 rounds of cooperation following the breach, an immediate breach still generated more negative evaluations than did no breaches or late breaches.

"Our results suggest that immediate breaches are especially costly because they seriously damage the impressions people have about their partner, and that's hard to repair," he said.

Source: Ohio State University