

Human Facts meets

«GOOD ORGANIZATIONS ENABLE THE GOOD LIFE OF ALL»

Prof. Dr. Antoinette Weibel, Researcher/Scholar and Entrepreneur in conversation with the Founder and Managing Partner of Human Facts AG, Dr. Eva Bilhuber Galli.

Today, I am honored to meet [Antoinette Weibel](#). She is a leading expert in trust research and dedicated to changing organizations from “suffering machines” to life-giving spaces (and as a Professor in HR she is mindful that HR practices often cause this suffering). Acting as President of the [Institute for Work and Employment Research \(FAA-HSG\)](#) and Professor for HRM and Organization at the University of St. Gallen, she has become a passionate and leading researcher and teacher in the fields of trust within and across organizations and HR/Org practices, and has created a number of education initiatives to alter the way we think about HR and leadership. Recently, she initiated the movement [#goodorganisations](#), together with the disruptive thinker and former COO at ING Otti Vogt. In this interview she reflects with us on her trust research insights, and why and how she thinks we need to change HR and organizational practices to rebuild “good organizations”.

1. Thanks a lot for taking time for this “[Human Facts meets](#)”. Before we dive in, actually, a personal question to start with: What brought you to research the specific field of trust? And what keeps you there still? In other words: what fascinates you?

Trust comes quite natural to me, but of course I have moments where I find trusting difficult as well. It is in these moments where I start to ponder and ruminate, where I understand and feel how wonderful trust-based relationships are. Trust allows me to feel safe, belonging, to go into co-creation – and I have to admit for me these moments of inter-dependence I share, for instance with my small research team, are wonderful. So – why not study this and make this more accessible to the world. But in all honesty, when I started trust research it was Bruno Frey who told my doctoral mother, that trust is a sexy and upcoming topic...;-)

2. What was the most unexpected insight for you in your trust research so far? And what did it lead you to?

When I started with trust research, we mostly understood trust to be “a rational choice”. You start trusting with little steps and little risk, and then gradually deepen trust with positive experience. So I was puzzled when we found out that this model might be wrong – or maybe not wrong, but not the road most taken. We often start with higher trust levels than warranted by rational choice, with a “bias towards trust”, and funnily enough it turns out to be the better way to start exchanges and relationships. Why? Because trust is a gift – and we tend to reciprocate gifts (and friendly intentions). Plus those who dare to trust more often also develop a more

fine-grained understanding of the moral compass of their vis-à-vis – there is no better way to get to know other humans than to let them disappoint you (or not disappoint you).

3. What is the most crucial “killer” of trust in organizations? In other words, what kind of HR, leadership or organizational practices are the biggest enemy of trust?

Phew – a lot of HR is a trust killer. I would say that everything we initiate to “control and correct” human beings carries the risk of destroying trust. For instance, forcing your leaders to work with “rank or yank systems” (ranking their team members and categorizing them into pre-fabricated buckets) is a sure trust killer. It kills the trust of employees – for many reasons, for instance because for many jobs it is almost impossible to evaluate individual contribution fairly but also because it works on the premise of “fight or flight”. It also kills the trust of leaders – as they are now forced to view their employees as categories and because HR “commands them to do this silly stuff”, as they themselves and their ability to talk with open candor with their team is questioned (this instrument is often used because leaders are believed to have a lenience bias).

4. And of course, the other way round: If there were to be one most important ingredient for building, retaining, and cultivating trust in organizations, what would it be?

Build a bias to trust into all HR instruments and start with trusting yourself. I always advise leaders to start with being vulnerable (rather than to ask it from their team members): ask your employees for feedback, rely on our team members (delegate instead of micromanage) and drop your masks. For HR my advice is even more simple: stop categorizing, optimizing, instrumentalizing. Translated: get rid of individual performance evaluation, forget about bonuses and pay-for-performance, and use North Star Goals or “my contribution” instead of MbOs [*Management by Objectives*].

5. You recently launched a movement together with Otti Vogt, called good organizations. Was there a specific event, insight or reason that inspired you to launch it, and why now? And what does it aim for?

We often joke around that this is our “midlife-crisis” project. And yes, in my case it was inspired by some “epiphanies” – mostly because I had to learn the hard way how difficult it is to change organizations, particularly those organizations that have developed an immunization strategy, a strategy where we do not have to see others as humans but can comfortably see them as categories, as production factors. In these organizations, humans are “withering away”, feel lonely, disconnected and have a hard time to see their work as meaningful. And I found out that the reason for this lies often within ourselves – we have become so oriented towards “optimizing ourselves”, seeking success without enjoying it when we have it and thus in a sense feel “hollow” – that we do not even know where to start changing ourselves and our organizations.

6. What is in your eyes a “good organization”? What are criteria to identify them? Are there examples?

Good organizations enable the good life of all (they touch). Here I need to tell you a bit about the background. We believe that we as a society need to question our values: what are good actions? Ethics has given us a variety of answers but we like virtue ethics, which put character and practical wisdom at the heart of this question: an action is good if the actor is good. The purpose of organizations in this view then becomes twofold: organizations must allow their organizational members to fulfill their highest potential, i.e. to grow and develop together through meaningful work and in thriving communities. And organizations should also develop their own moral character to allow for collective practical wisdom to serve the common good. So how can I identify such good organizations? Well, we are writing a book about this – and it is difficult to put this into a few sentences. But good organizations place a premise on this “Kaizen for individual and collective flourishing” and view return as a means to an end – to enable a fair return for all stakeholders and to secure long-term viability. And it is likely that they have kicked out some toxic HR-practices – such as pay-for-performance or excessive executive pay – and work with some organizational affordances – such as paid time for more reflection and leader selection for character.

7. What is different to other organizational culture concepts, such as e.g. Barrets’ value approach, Laloux’ reinventing organizations or any corporate social responsibility approaches?

Virtues are not values. The difference is that virtues need to be habitualized – we become every day better versions of ourselves – and the same is true for organizational virtues which need to be engrained into the organizations’ structures, processes and routines. Plus virtue ethics is of course a normative approach – consciousness, which is at the core of Laloux, is important as it allows you to hold your beliefs, values, emotions and actions object, but it does not help you to address the question “what is good”.

8. Do “good organizations” create more or better performance or impact? In which way?

Well performance – as I have already explained – is a means to an end. Good organizations need to secure their long-term viability. But it is not the core. The core is the good life for all – enabling meaningful work, creating thriving communities and being an active contributor to a just and fair society. Good organizations are part of a civil economy where organizations find innovative solutions to social problems within the market and economy.

9. If a leader would like to become a “good leader” and build “good organizations”, what’s your recommendation? Where do they start and what do they focus on?

Well join our good leadership society ;-). Most important is to view your role from a dual loyalty perspective: good leaders are responsible for their organizations, but also accountable to society. Or to cite Otti Vogt on this topic: «But, whatever the theories and practices, 'good leadership' always starts with 'good people' who commit to developing themselves and their leadership capacity as a professional vocation - deeply driven to use their leadership power for good. Hence, maybe, we should insist that political and organizational leaders personally pledge their allegiance to professional standards and norms, to continuous personal development, and above all, to the 'spirit' of responsible leadership.» In more practical terms: leadership is life-long development. Good leaders develop their character, train their moral muscles, understand and hold object their beliefs, emotions, desires and learn to be vulnerable.

10. And if there are readers who would love to support the #goodorganisation movement, how can they do it?

Engage with us – through our LinkedIn page or through our website. We are in the process of building a good leadership society and here we look for service providers as well as leaders to participate. We are looking for companies that want to experiment with our “g-labs” and of course we look for case studies and researchers who want to help us to study, collect, evaluate and disseminate good practices.

11. I know from my own experience that striving for “system-changes” entails a lot of disappointment potential. What frustrates you most, and what keeps you up and moving anyhow?

I am convinced that change becomes only possible if we do it together – if we bring movements and communities together and if we are able to reach out beyond our siloes. And this is hard. We are all quite entrenched in our “I-Society”, and even if we are part of a movement, chances are that we find it hard to reach out to other movements. So, for me the hardest bit is to weave trust between groups, and to let go of my own ego (in some instances). But with the outlook that we must quickly come to terms with the grand challenges we face, and that the good life for all is a wonderful north star, I can draw on my resilience and hope. This keeps me moving.

12. Human Facts collects from every interview partner, questions that have the power to change lives or our thinking. What is the question you think the world would benefit from being asked?

Ask yourself: what is a life worth living? And then start becoming!

13. And finally, is there anything left you would have loved I ask you – or that you would like to share?

Casino capitalism, I-Society, “Geiz und Gier ist geil” – roll over! Read the [pre-amble of the Swiss constitution](#) and live it or join our good organisations movement at www.goodorganisations.com.

Thank you so much for your time, Antoinette, and your generous sharing of insights, ideas and thoughts with us. I am looking forward to continuing to keep in touch, hear, learn and exchange with you and the [#goodorganisation movement](#)! I wish you and this mission-driven movement a vibrant growth and impact.

**) I met Antoinette Weibel around 10 years ago in relation to my research on Social Capital. Since this time, I have had the pleasure to contribute a short part to her management education in [Strategic HRM](#) at University St. Gallen (in German). She is a great role model in evidence-based, yet human-centered research. I am grateful for her lighthouse engagement to bringing humanity back into HRM, in our organizations and leadership, and to courageously voicing up for it.*

About the interviewer:

Dr. Eva Bilhuber Galli, Founder and Managing Partner of Human Facts AG leads since 2009 her boutique management consultancy based in Switzerland with a focus on co-creative multi-stakeholder engagement processes and partnering leadership excellence. She received her PhD in strategic management at University of St. Gallen.