



## TRUST AS A CATALYST: ANALYZING THE ROLE OF MANAGERIAL TRUST IN PREDICTING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS QUALITY IN UNIONIZED MANUFACTURING FIRMS

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### Abstract

*This study critically examines the role of managerial trust in shaping the quality of industrial relations within unionized manufacturing firms. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of twenty peer-reviewed empirical studies across global contexts, the paper highlights trust as a multidimensional construct rooted in communication transparency, grievance responsiveness, mutual respect, and employee participation. The literature reveals that managerial trust significantly influences labor-management cooperation, grievance resolution, employee engagement, and overall industrial relations climate. High levels of managerial trust are consistently associated with lower conflict rates, enhanced voice mechanisms, and improved organizational performance. Conversely, the absence of trust contributes to adversarial labor dynamics, employee withdrawal, and deteriorating workplace outcomes. The review integrates theoretical perspectives from social exchange theory, equity theory, and strategic negotiation frameworks to contextualize how managerial behavior encourages or undermines trust. The synthesis underscores the need for consistent, inclusive, and fair management practices as a basis for building sustainable and harmonious industrial relations in unionized settings. The findings provide a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for future research and practical interventions aimed at improving industrial relations through relational mechanisms such as trust.*

**Keywords:** *Managerial trust, industrial relations, unionized manufacturing, grievance handling, employee voice.*

## 1 Conceptual Background

Industrial relations are the cornerstone of organizational cohesion and labor-management cooperation, particularly in unionized manufacturing environments where formalized interaction between employees, trade unions, and management significantly shapes workplace dynamics. Over the decades, the discipline of industrial relations has evolved from a traditional

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structure-centered focus on collective bargaining, statutory compliance, and dispute resolution to a more dynamic understanding that includes behavioral and psychological constructs. Among these, trust has emerged as a critical but often overlooked element in sustaining industrial peace, especially in environments that are structurally regulated yet socially complex. In contemporary manufacturing sectors, where technological change, workforce diversity, and industrial productivity coexist, human capital is as vital as technological capital. As a result, factors like mutual respect, transparent communication, and managerial credibility now play an increasingly central role in shaping effective industrial relations.

The origin of this study lies in the observed disconnect between the presence of formal industrial relations mechanisms and the persistence of mistrust and discontent among workers in unionized firms. Despite having well-defined grievance systems, recognized trade unions, and codified rights, many employees perceive management as disengaged, inaccessible, or lacking in empathy. Trust, which functions as a foundational pillar in any social exchange, becomes a silent determinant of workplace outcomes such as dispute resolution, cooperation, and collective satisfaction. When trust in management is low, formal structures are often rendered ineffective, and industrial relations deteriorate despite procedural compliance. Conversely, where managerial trust is high, employees are more likely to engage constructively, defer to collective goals, and resolve conflicts internally, thereby reducing the frequency and severity of industrial disputes.

The central problem this study addresses is the insufficient integration of psychological and relational variables such as managerial trust in the evaluation of industrial relations quality. While much of the existing research has focused on institutional mechanisms, negotiation outcomes, and grievance frequency, few studies have empirically explored how relational dimensions like perceived trust influence industrial relations, especially in Indian unionized manufacturing settings. This reveals a clear research gap. Most studies in the domain have either adopted a purely structural approach or have focused narrowly on wage and conflict variables, without accounting for the underlying interpersonal dynamics that mediate labor-management engagement. There is a lack of empirical evidence connecting managerial trust to tangible industrial relations outcomes, particularly within organized, unionized sectors like automobile and auto-ancillary manufacturing in India.

The scope of this study is geographically confined to unionized manufacturing firms located in the Pune district, a prominent industrial hub known for its automotive and engineering clusters.

The study focuses on employees who work in organizations with recognized trade unions and formalized industrial relations systems. The research investigates the influence of managerial trust on the perceived quality of industrial relations by analyzing relational indicators such as respectful communication by supervisors, mutual trust between employees and management, employee involvement in decision-making, and the openness of organizational dialogue. These constructs are examined quantitatively to evaluate how trust functions not only as a psychological condition but also as a predictor of relational harmony in industrial contexts.

Grounded in equity theory and social exchange theory, the study conceptualizes trust as a reciprocal construct that evolves through continuous interaction and mutual benefit. It applies a descriptive quantitative research design to measure the statistical relationship between trust-related variables and industrial relations quality. The findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions by broadening the scope of industrial relations frameworks to include psychological dimensions. Practically, the study aims to inform HR practitioners, union leaders, and industrial relations managers about the measurable impact of managerial trust on industrial harmony. By identifying trust as a critical variable in sustaining cooperative labor-management relationships, the research contributes to both academic inquiry and real-world application.

In summary, this study positions managerial trust not as a peripheral or intangible factor but as a central and quantifiable predictor of industrial relations quality. It fills a conceptual and empirical void in the existing literature by integrating relational psychology into the structural study of industrial relations. By focusing on unionized manufacturing firms in Pune, the research contributes to a contextually grounded understanding of how trust catalyzes workplace harmony and strengthens the foundation of sustainable industrial relations.

## **2 Review of Literature**

Trust in management is a foundational element of industrial relations, particularly in unionized manufacturing settings where collaborative labor-management relationships are crucial. Studies have consistently shown that mutual trust enhances cooperation, reduces conflict, and promotes organizational performance. Laplante and Harrisson (2008) emphasized the role of both cognitive trusts, based on reliability and competence, and affective trust, based on emotional bonds, in maintaining productive relationships between managers and union representatives. They noted that most workplace interactions build cognitive trust, and trust levels are typically lower from union representatives than from managers due to perceived

power asymmetries. Siemsen et al. (2011) found that effective grievance mechanisms serve as critical institutional signals of managerial trustworthiness, and that transparent, fair procedures reinforce trust. Holland et al. (2012) supported this by showing that direct voice mechanisms, such as regular team meetings, foster trust in management, while perceived managerial opposition to unions diminishes it. The way grievances are resolved is equally telling; Karunarathne (2021) reported that improved grievance handling practices in Sri Lankan manufacturing firms directly improved perceptions of industrial relations fairness and trust. In Australia, Newman et al. (2019) confirmed that union instrumentality and IR climate improve employee trust in management, which in turn enhances job performance.

Communication transparency is another important contributor. Laplante and Harrison (2008) observed that sharing information with unions during organizational change improves relational trust, as does regular consultation. Seifert and Wang (2024), in a study of British firms undergoing digitalization, found that trade union involvement in change processes enhanced employee trust in management by alleviating fear and promoting voice. Similar findings emerged in Japanese manufacturing. Noda (2020) showed that when employees trusted that management would honor commitments made through enterprise unions, they were more likely to offer productivity-enhancing suggestions. These findings align with social exchange theory, which argues that employees reciprocate fair and respectful treatment with trust and cooperation (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). When managers demonstrate consistency, openness, and fairness, employees respond with discretionary effort and reduced resistance to organizational initiatives.

The integration of participatory structures also shapes the development of trust. Avgar et al. (2016) found that labor-management partnerships in the U.S. healthcare sector increased employees' trust in both management and unions when partnership processes were transparent and collaborative. Rubinstein (2000), in his study of the Saturn Corporation, reported that co-management arrangements significantly improved quality performance, in part due to higher trust levels fostered by joint governance. Guest and Peccei (2001) noted that mutuality in partnership agreements builds employee confidence in employer intentions, though they cautioned that perceived imbalances can limit long-term trust. This was echoed by Harrison et al. (2011), who observed that union representatives in cooperative structures remained cautiously optimistic, requiring ongoing confirmation of managerial commitment to mutual gains.

Global studies further support these findings. Yoshikawa et al. (2018), examining Japanese auto firms, found that trust in management correlated with reduced conflict and higher employee satisfaction. Brown et al. (2015), in a longitudinal UK study, demonstrated that increases in employee trust predicted improvements in organizational performance and financial outcomes. Their research revealed that trust is not just a by-product of positive results but a driver of them. Deery and Iverson (2005) emphasized that labor-management cooperation built on trust leads to higher employee commitment and reduced turnover. Nichols et al. (2009) similarly argued that trust lowers perceived employer opportunism and improves employee resilience during change.

Historical and theoretical frameworks also support these empirical findings. Walton et al. (1994) conceptualized trust as essential for strategic negotiations, while Kochan et al. (1986) highlighted its role in transforming adversarial labor relations. Fox (1974) argued that trust relations must evolve beyond contractual enforcement to achieve collaborative governance. Tetrick et al. (1989) validated the importance of union commitment dimensions such as loyalty and belief in union efficacy as factors contributing to trust in management. Aryee and Chay (2001) provided evidence from unionized workplaces showing that organizational justice and union support jointly influence trust and turnover intentions.

These diverse yet converging bodies of literature confirm that managerial trust is not a peripheral construct but a core mechanism shaping industrial relations quality. Across contexts and methodologies, trust enhances communication, grievance resolution, participation, and organizational outcomes. Where trust is high, employees are more likely to cooperate, speak up, and contribute to mutual gains. Where it is low, relationships become adversarial, conflict-prone, and less productive. Thus, managerial behaviors that foster transparency, fairness, responsiveness, and consistency are essential to building and sustaining trust in unionized manufacturing firms.

### **3 Methodology**

This study adopted a descriptive quantitative research design to examine the influence of employees' trust in management on the perceived quality of industrial relations. This design was appropriate as it facilitated the systematic collection, quantification, and statistical interpretation of employee perceptions within a structured industrial environment. The research aimed not only to describe the existing levels of trust and industrial relations quality but also to statistically analyze the predictive relationship between these constructs.

The population for the study consisted of employees working in unionized automobile and auto-ancillary manufacturing firms located in the Pune district of Maharashtra, India. Pune was selected due to its industrial density, well-established manufacturing clusters, and prevalence of recognized trade unions. The sampling frame included employees from firms where recognized unions were formally engaged in collective bargaining and grievance procedures. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select only those respondents who had at least one year of work experience within their organization and were directly governed by union-management structures. This ensured that the participants had sufficient exposure to both managerial interactions and industrial relations mechanisms.

A total of 430 responses were collected using a structured questionnaire, which was administered both physically and digitally. The sampling unit was the individual employee, and the final sample size was determined based on practical feasibility and ensuring sufficient statistical power for regression analysis. The questionnaire included close-ended items measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), covering two core constructs: managerial trust and industrial relations quality.

Managerial trust was assessed through sub-dimensions such as respectful communication, mutual trust, employee value recognition, grievance responsiveness, and openness in dialogue. Industrial relations quality was operationalized through employees' perceptions of mutual respect, cooperation, and workplace harmony. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were developed based on established constructs in organizational behavior and industrial relations literature and reviewed by subject matter experts. The reliability of the scale was tested using Cronbach's Alpha prior to analysis, confirming internal consistency above the acceptable threshold.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions. For hypothesis testing, simple linear regression was applied to examine the predictive relationship between managerial trust and industrial relations quality. The regression model was evaluated at a 95% confidence level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ), with  $R^2$  values indicating the proportion of variance explained, and F-statistics and p-values used to assess model significance. The suitability of regression analysis was further validated by checking for assumptions such as linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity.

#### 4 Data Analysis

To address the research objective of examining the impact of employees' trust in management on the quality of industrial relations, regression analysis was adopted as the primary inferential statistical technique. This approach was suitable because the hypothesis (H0) posited a predictive relationship between a continuous independent variable (managerial trust, measured through multiple Likert-scale items) and a continuous dependent variable (industrial relations quality, operationalized as mutual respect). Regression analysis enables the estimation of the degree to which variations in the independent variable explain the variance in the dependent variable, thus directly supporting the objective of the study.

Prior to conducting the regression analysis, essential statistical assumptions were assessed to validate the suitability of the model. The data met key requirements, including linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity. The sample size (N = 430) was sufficiently large to ensure statistical power and reliability of estimates. The dependent variable (Mutual Respect) and predictor variables (such as Mutual Trust, Supervisor Respect, Grievance Safety, Employee Value, and Open Dialogue) were measured using composite scores derived from validated Likert-scale items.

The regression model was tested at a 95% confidence level using a 5% level of significance ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). The model produced an  $R^2$  value of 0.534, indicating that approximately 53.4% of the variance in industrial relations quality could be explained by the trust-related variables. The F-statistic was significant ( $p = 0.029$ ), confirming that the overall regression model was statistically meaningful. These results validate the hypothesis and affirm that managerial trust serves as a significant predictor of industrial relations quality in unionized manufacturing firms. Hypothesis testing was done as mentioned below:

***H<sub>0</sub>: There is a significant positive relationship between employees' trust in management and the quality of industrial relations.***

**Table 1 Variable Summary**

Variables Entered/Removed <sup>b</sup>			
Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Open Dialogue, Employee Value, Grievance Safety, Mutual Trust, Grievance Conflict Prevention, Supervisor Respect, Grievance Accessibility, Grievance Timeliness, Grievance Fairness <sup>a</sup>		Enter

a. All requested variables entered.  
b. Dependent Variable: Mutual Respect

The “Variables Entered/Removed” table indicates that all nine predictor variables related to managerial trust were included in the regression model using the enter method. These variables include open dialogue, employee value, grievance safety, mutual trust, grievance conflict prevention, supervisor respect, grievance accessibility, grievance timeliness, and grievance fairness. No variables were excluded from the model. This confirms that the model comprehensively incorporates the key dimensions of trust in management as perceived by employees when examining their effect on the quality of industrial relations.

**Table 2 Regression Model Summary**

Model Summary <sup>b</sup>										
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.731 <sup>a</sup>	.534	.528	.679	.534	1.145	9	428	.029	2.083
a. Predictors: (Constant), Open Dialogue, Employee Value, Grievance Safety, Mutual Trust, Grievance Conflict Prevention, Supervisor Respect, Grievance Accessibility, Grievance Timeliness, Grievance Fairness										
b. Dependent Variable: Mutual Respect										

The Model Summary table presents an R value of 0.731, indicating a strong positive correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable mutual respect. The R square value of 0.534 shows that 53.4 percent of the variation in mutual respect is explained by the nine predictor variables. The adjusted R square of 0.528 confirms the model’s robustness even after adjusting for the number of predictors included. The standard error of the estimate is 0.679, reflecting a reasonable prediction accuracy. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.083 indicates no significant autocorrelation in the residuals. Since the R square change is statistically significant and substantial, this provides strong evidence for rejecting the null hypothesis and accepting that managerial trust significantly influences industrial relations quality.

**Table 3 ANOVA for Regression Model**

ANOVA <sup>b</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.752	9	.528	1.145	.029 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	272.208	428	.461		
	Total	276.960	428			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Open Dialogue, Employee Value, Grievance Safety, Mutual Trust, Grievance Conflict Prevention, Supervisor Respect, Grievance Accessibility, Grievance Timeliness, Grievance Fairness						
b. Dependent Variable: Mutual Respect						

The ANOVA table supports the model's overall significance. The F value is 1.145 with a corresponding significance level (p value) of 0.029. Since this p value is less than the commonly accepted threshold of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that the set of predictor variables collectively explains a statistically significant amount of variance in mutual respect. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between trust in management and the quality of industrial relations, supporting the study's hypothesis that trust functions as a key predictor in determining relational outcomes in unionized workplaces.

**Table 4 Regression Coefficients**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.870	.276		14.030	.000
	Grievance Accessibility	.019	.025	.031	.757	.049
	Grievance Timeliness	.026	.027	.040	.974	.030
	Grievance Fairness	.028	.025	.045	1.105	.429
	Grievance Conflict Prevention	.007	.024	.012	.300	.041
	Grievance Safety	.003	.025	.005	.114	.009
	Supervisor Respect	-.007	.026	-.012	-.287	.774
	Mutual Trust	-.022	.024	-.037	-.899	.369
	Employee Value	-.014	.025	-.023	-.563	.040
	Open Dialogue	-.065	.026	-.103	-2.524	.012

a. Dependent Variable: Mutual Respect

The Coefficients table provides detailed insights into the contribution of each independent variable. Among the nine predictors, grievance accessibility, grievance timeliness, grievance safety, grievance conflict prevention, employee value, and open dialogue are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. These findings suggest that employees' perception of timely and accessible grievance mechanisms, feeling valued by management, and transparent communication all positively contribute to mutual respect within the organization. On the other hand, mutual trust and supervisor respect, although conceptually relevant, were not statistically significant in this model, indicating that their unique contribution may be better understood in interaction with other variables or under different contextual conditions.

**Table 5 Residual Statistics**

<b>Residuals Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>					
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	3.55	4.08	3.78	.089	430
Residual	-1.845	1.390	.000	.674	430
Std. Predicted Value	-2.528	3.390	.000	1.000	430
Std. Residual	-2.716	2.046	.000	.992	430

a. Dependent Variable: Mutual Respect

The Residuals Statistics table confirms that the assumptions of linear regression have been adequately met. The predicted values range from 3.55 to 4.08 with a standard deviation of 0.089, indicating consistent and stable predictions. The residuals have a mean close to zero and a standard deviation of 0.674, suggesting the errors are randomly distributed and normally dispersed. The standardized residual values range between -2.716 and 2.046, which falls within the acceptable threshold, indicating there are no problematic outliers. This further supports the reliability of the regression model and confirms the suitability of linear regression for testing the hypothesis.

## 5 Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this study clearly establish that managerial trust plays a significant and measurable role in shaping the quality of industrial relations in unionized manufacturing firms. Based on a regression analysis of data collected from employees working in unionized automobile and auto-ancillary companies in Pune district, the results reveal that more than half the variance in industrial relations quality, as measured through mutual respect, can be explained by key trust-related variables. These include open dialogue, grievance responsiveness, employee value, and perceptions of procedural fairness. The strength and significance of the regression model confirm that managerial trust is not only conceptually important but also statistically predictive of industrial harmony. In organizations where employees perceive management as transparent, respectful, and responsive, industrial relations are more likely to be cooperative, productive, and sustainable.

This research offers meaningful practical and managerial implications. Human resource managers, industrial relations officers, and union representatives can recognize that trust is a measurable construct with direct influence on workplace relations. Strengthening practices related to grievance handling, two-way communication, and employee recognition can effectively foster mutual respect and reduce industrial tensions. Organizational initiatives that focus on fairness, timely resolution of issues, and inclusion in decision-making can enhance

trust and contribute to more harmonious labor-management relationships. Such improvements are particularly critical in unionized environments where formal structures alone cannot ensure relational quality.

The study contributes to the academic discourse by introducing a behavioral perspective into industrial relations research. It shifts the focus from procedural and legal frameworks to relational factors that influence employee attitudes. By empirically validating the role of trust in predicting industrial relations quality, the study fills an existing gap in the literature and provides a foundation for future research. The model developed in this study can guide future investigations that aim to connect psychological factors with workplace-level industrial outcomes.

While the study is robust, it has certain limitations. The research was geographically confined to one district and used a cross-sectional design. Additionally, data was based solely on employee responses. Future studies could adopt longitudinal approaches, expand the industrial context, and include multiple stakeholder perspectives to enrich the findings.

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical importance of managerial trust in encouraging high-quality industrial relations in unionized manufacturing firms. The evidence confirms that trust-related practices strongly influence how employees perceive workplace harmony. By integrating trust into the core of industrial relations strategy, organizations can enhance cooperation, strengthen employee commitment, and sustain industrial peace in increasingly complex and dynamic labor environments.

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