Trust
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Imagine the following. With a group of scientists, you are playing a game that revolves around negotiation and cooperation. The game is designed in such a way that although you can win as an individual, it is impossible to get there without making deals with fellow players. Trading takes place in subgroups of players who each hold different assets. At a certain point in the game, you and a fellow scientist player are in a position where a certain deal is beneficial for both of you: he, at that moment nearly penniless and without much perspective, will get a chance to reach the deserted island where a treasure is suspected to be buried. You will take him there, thereby making more efficient use of the ferry service you operate, which will bring you in a position where you have a fair chance to win the entire game. It is a clear win-win situation. You close the deal.

And then it happens. A little while later, your partner gets an offer from a third player, the one who operates the competing Stena Line. The offer consists of free travel, but a smaller share of the suspected treasure. Slightly different conditions, not obviously more advantageous. Without as much as a blush, he takes the offer and breaks your earlier agreement. What do you think?

Interactions among scientists are generally based on trust. This is not a nature-given principle but a choice. In academic institutions – more so than in many other organisations – trust is chosen as a default basis for professional exchanges, because we believe it to be the best default for scientists to flourish in, the default from which the best science will emerge.

So what do you do when a fellow researcher – a colleague, someone you tend to trust when working together – breaks a deal with you during a game? Or, viewed from the other side: what, as a scientist, is the better strategy — to pursue self-interest, even if this might compromise your trustworthiness, or to guard the latter under all circumstances?
Would you, after the experience of the game, enter a real-life collaboration with the deal-breaking fellow player? If yes, then perhaps a strategy proposed by the mathematician Anatol Rapoport in the 1980's will come in handy. Rapoport developed a strategy for obtaining the best outcome in the iterated prisoner's dilemma – the famous game theoretic problem on competition between cooperation and betrayal. The key of his approach, building on earlier work by John Nash, was to start by collaborating with a partner and in subsequent rounds to either keep collaborating or breach collaboration, depending on which of these two the other player had chosen to do during the previous round. It turned out to be a highly successful strategy for showing the other side the benefits of collaboration and thereby offers a practical way to manage trust.

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