

The Psychology Of Trust Explains How Institutions Can Regain It Once Lost

F forbes.com/sites/nicolefisher/2020/09/01/the-psychology-of-trust-how-institutions-can-regain-it-once-lost/

September 1, 2020

© 2020 Forbes Media LLC. All Rights Reserved

Nicole Fisher



Construction site rebuilding America

getty

Every relationship, personal or professional, requires a foundation of trust. At our core as human beings we have a fundamental need to feel secure. And when we don't feel safe with a person, environment or information presented to us we draw inward, becoming skeptical of things that are different from what we believe to be true. Put another way, when we feel vulnerable, "We go on an internal strike," writes Dennis Jaffe. Which is why whether we're concerned about our marriage, branding a product or trying to improve employee engagement, you'll see there is no shortage of books, presentations and philosophies on how to build trust – because no relationship exists without it.

But in 2020 there are plenty of reasons for Americans to doubt and question the institutions and leadership they have been asked to trust. However, it's actually not a new phenomenon at all. In fact, for the last few decades our trust has been weakening in

everything from political leaders to science and research institutions to media and to the religious institutions and police forces tasked with our spiritual and physical safety. And while most Americans can think of a specific person or event they see as the catalyst for their erosion of trust, the larger trend is actually a very normal – and predictable – pattern of behavior as societies shift. Proven by the fact that snake oil salesmen, silver-tongued politicians and misleading headlines have always existed.

The Age Of Information

The last twenty-plus years have given rise to endless information at our fingertips and the 24-hour news cycle. Meaning we can now see and hear contradictory information at all times and increase the depth and breadth of what we learn about topics and people, as well as find ways to consistently validate our own opinions. Further, as we learn more and more about the broader world around us, our traditional views and cultural norms are challenged. All of which lead to uncertainty, and thus feelings of vulnerability. The subsequent result is then shutting down our belief in the less known, external voices and large institutions while simultaneously seeking out the local and familiar validators in our life.

More specifically, we're seeing changes in oxytocin levels – the “love and bonding” hormone. Oxytocin is produced in the hypothalamus and impacts bonding behaviors. For example, increased levels of oxytocin lead to relaxation, openness, trust building and mother-child attachment at birth. But when lowered, research concludes there is low empathy, decreased desire to socialize and increased distrust.

Thus, our declining trust in leaders and institutions right now is far more complex than simply feeling like you're not getting the whole story or the latest guidelines seem inconsistent with what you were told previously. It's really a matter of the psychological effects that compounded uncertainty has on our emotions. Our lack of trust stems from feeling vulnerable. And unfortunately, many Americans are feeling very vulnerable right now. So they look to their local chat groups instead of the WHO or life-long acquaintances instead of national scientific communities. They seek out similar-minded people on the internet and bond over their distrust and disdain for the leaders they don't know trying to tell them what to do.

Peter Atwater, a researcher of decision making and Adjunct Professor at William & Mary University says, that not only is this trend of waning trust not new, but he believes the first signs included the societal shift from “big food” to farm-to-table. He contends that as people became uncertain of where their food was coming from and what it contained, they retreated to the same tactics as we now see in other areas. People wanted to support local workers, farmers and attach a name and face to the food they were eating.

A Business Argument For Trust

It's easy to conjure up examples of building trust in a marriage or friendships, but there

is also some interesting work on the impact of trust – or lack thereof – in the professional world. Neuroscientific research has concluded that, “Employees in high-trust organizations are more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate better with their colleagues, and stay with their employers longer than people working at low-trust companies,” according to Dr. Paul Zak, Director of the Center for Neuroeconomic Studies at Claremont Graduate University. His work has consistently shown that those who work in trusting environments are less stressed, more productive and overall more satisfied with life.

But these findings are not limited to just boardrooms and corporate environments. They reveal that lack of trust is highly complex and the effects of trusting or not, spill over into the mental, emotional and physical aspects of our lives. And vice-versa.

So what can leaders and institutions do to help rebuild trust that has eroded and instill confidence as the world has become more globalized and less certain?

- *Communicate effectively.* At a time when people are already fearful and uncertain about the future as it pertains to the pandemic, communication is necessary for ensuring there is less confusion, and thus more certainty – and trust. While the CDC, WHO and various other health-based organizations have been working on understanding, testing and treating Covid-19, there have been times in which information communicated about the virus to the public required multiple clarifications. The clearer the message, the more trusting people will be of it.

- *Be true to your word and act accordingly.* This means keeping promises that are made and not making any promises or commitments that cannot be kept. Politicians are well known for making campaign promises that they are unable to keep. The result is a loss in confidence. Earning trust takes time, and depends greatly on acting out the promises made.

- *Don't make rash decisions.* Even in times of crisis, acting before thinking through options and consequences will most often lead to regret, backtracking and being wrong. In our fast-paced world for example, many in media want to be the first to share a story or event. But sharing inaccurate information or jumping into an action plan without knowing the consequences can lead to further disaster – or in 2020, “fake news.” It’s important to make clear, well thought out decisions to prevent retractions and course corrections.

- *Be honest.* It’s hard for leaders in any sector to say “I don't know,” but it is frequently the most honest and trust-building thing one can do. No one has all the answers and no one is always right. But that kind of statement reveals one is themselves vulnerable, and thus connects you to those who are also feeling vulnerable and looking for answers.

- *Admit mistakes.* Accepting responsibility for an action or statement also involves vulnerability. And when when making decisions or giving advice that affects a lot of people, there will inevitably be mistakes made. Admission of a mistake may lead to

immediate frustration, but that is greatly preferred to long-term loss of trust.