



CULTIVATING COMMUNITY:

A Framework for Building Trust in Leaders and Institutions





The Urgency of Trust-Building

Trust, or the belief in the honesty, integrity, and reliability of others is one of the building blocks of prosperous, inclusive, and democratic societies.¹ Trust in the institutions and leaders that serve us is a critical ingredient for the success of societies globally as they tackle contemporary challenges—political, social, economic, environmental, or other.²

Trust can support the legitimacy and sustainability of democratic governance and enables economic, social, and psychological well-being.³ When trust in leaders and institutions is marked by healthy skepticism without excessive cynicism, markets and public institutions work more efficiently, and people tolerate different views better, benefit from higher levels of social cohesion and social capital, work together with less friction, and take more actions that help contribute to the public good.⁴

Low levels of trust carry real consequences. Distrust in leaders and institutions undermines the ability of governments, business, and the media to serve citizens and makes it harder to reduce divisions, unrest, and violence. When trust is low, compliance with laws and social norms becomes less likely,⁵ economic performance declines,⁶ and prosperity becomes weaker and less inclusive. Low levels of trust are increasingly considered a major risk to global stability and security by foreign policy experts⁷ and are a major driver of extreme polarization.⁸

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This framework focuses on trust-building for leaders and institutions and includes three core building blocks: demonstrating competence, showing good intent, and promoting belonging. Taken together, these building blocks can contribute to trust-building when they are operationalized within an enabling environment of *reliable information*.

These building blocks are both mutually reinforcing and necessary for trust-building to be effective. When leaders and institutions **demonstrate competence**, they show their capacity to reliably respond to and proactively anticipate the needs of their constituents.⁹ When leaders and institutions **show good intent**, they demonstrate what motivates their actions and communicate those intentions. When leaders and institutions **promote belonging**, they foster a shared sense of identity to encourage unity, engage in bridge-building, and establish relationships that encourage trust.¹⁰

Leaders and institutions seeking to build trust must go beyond cultivating their own trustworthiness--they must also communicate trustworthiness in a way that can be heard--and received--by those they serve. Each building block in the trust model emphasizes the action that leaders and institutions must take to communicate trustworthiness: *demonstrate, show, and promote*.

Finally, this model emphasizes the role of reliable information because without quality information, people are unable to accurately perceive whether institutions or leaders really demonstrate competence, show good intent, or promote belonging. This is critical because trust can only be cultivated to the extent that these practices are perceived by the communities that leaders and institutions set out to serve. If people do not perceive an institution to be competent, acting with good intent, or on their side, trust will remain weak. When it comes to trust-building, perceptions matter.

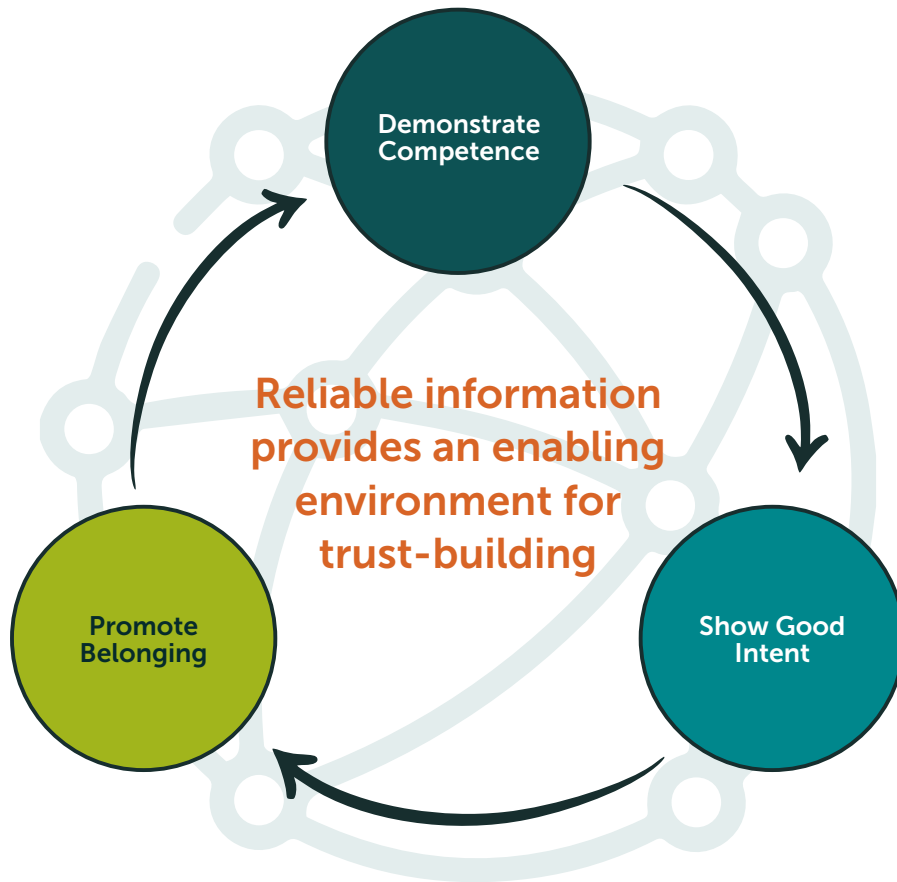


Figure 1: Trust building includes three reinforcing building blocks: demonstrating competence, showing good intent, and promoting belonging. These can be realized when they are operationalized within an enabling environment of reliable information.

Trust-Building, in Context

There is a temptation to consider trust as an unalloyed good to be maximized. In surveying the global trust crisis, it is easy to assume that increased trust might offer a panacea to social division and polarization.¹¹ But we must reckon with the limits of trust—it is not, on its own, the end goal. As authoritarian regimes have repeatedly demonstrated, high levels of trust can be compatible with ideas that do not promote just, prosperous, or inclusive societies.

As we have outlined in IREX’s [People Centered Approach to Institutions](#), we seek to promote healthy levels of social trust aligned with the aim of just and resilient societies, so that everyone can have equal access to opportunities, public information, resources, and decision-making regardless of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, or religion.

Seven Practices to Foster Trust

Leaders and institutions committed to addressing the global trust deficit have a range of tools at their disposal. We identify seven key practices that policy makers and program implementers can use to cultivate trust with communities, leaders, and institutions. These practices are not a checklist; rather, they represent a guide for the kinds of activities and inputs that can help build trust incrementally:

1

Do: Unite people against shared community challenges

Focus on a shared problem, not areas of disagreement. To build trust between people, focus on identifying challenges, planning, and then doing things that allow people to feel a sense of accomplishment and common purpose. It's important that these kinds of initiatives give people from different groups opportunities to work together on something tangible. By overcoming shared challenges, more people can trust your organization and those involved.

2

Do: Elevate ethics

State ethical expectations openly. Tell people what they should expect from you as a public leader. Be explicit about what you are expecting from them. Praise and promote those who do follow the rules. Apply the rules fairly, to everyone.

3

Do: Invest in long-term relationships

Take the time to get to know your stakeholders before you get down to business. Then, keep showing up. When your community and the partners you work with know that you will show up outside of required interactions, they can perceive what you really stand for and this can help you communicate your goals and intent. Understand that some of the most impactful work will take much longer than a single project or opportunity and you are going to need your collective partners and community for durable impact in the real world.

4

Don't: Ask for input and then ignore it

To build trust, go the extra mile to show people they are heard and incorporate feedback – even if it was not your own first choice. Allow space for this input to shape decisions so that people can see, through concrete actions, that you have heard them. Engage your community—governments, civic actors, and community members from the outset to share their opinions and priorities. Make space for more of these partners to participate. Be sure to acknowledge these contributions publicly so that others value their role in the effort.

5

Don't: Rely on a single leader

It's too easy to rely on talented and exceptional individuals, but effective institutions can sustain trust beyond a single individual and can promote healthy trust across a range of contexts and with different people. It can be tempting to prioritize people who speak your language well, are polished communicators, or charismatic. This tendency may result in overlooking rural communities, marginalized groups, or individuals who are respected by the community but do not fit leadership stereotypes.

6

Do: Tell a compelling story

People like stories. Help them interpret who you are and what your goals are by presenting a compelling and honest narrative that they can grasp easily. Build partnerships with credible journalists and then work with those journalists to help them understand and tell the story of what your organization does and how it accomplishes that. When people learn about your organization from an external, reliable source, they are more likely to have faith in your work.

7

Do: Take responsibility

Follow-through on your commitments. When things go wrong, admit your own mistakes and oversights and commit to doing better. Demonstrate that you are accountable by clearly communicating goals and expectations and allow your community to regularly assess progress toward those expectations. Recognize that meeting performance deliverables, but failing to show good intent and promote belonging may prevent you from building trust.

Six Positive Outcomes When Trust-Building is Applied

When trust-building practices are applied by leaders and embedded in institutions, it is possible to see incremental feedback loops emerge between institutions, leaders, and the people they serve that result in positive outcomes:



Communities identify and overcome shared challenges together.



Institutions deliver on their promises.



Social cohesion and belonging increases, building habits of civic engagement.



Leaders demonstrate that they are trustworthy, by delivering on their promises and acting in the public interest.



More voices are valued and included in decision-making, leading to better decisions with more public support.



Reliable information becomes more widely accessible so that people can evaluate leaders and institutions.

Endnotes

1. “Americans and Social Trust: Who, Where and Why.” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 30 May 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2007/02/22/americans-and-social-trust-who-where-and-why/>.
2. OECD. *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust*. 2017.
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4. Norris, Pippa, *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify* (New York, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 Sept. 2022); Vives, Marc-Lluís, and Oriol FeldmanHall. “Tolerance to ambiguous uncertainty predicts prosocial behavior.” *Nature communications* 9.1 (2018): 1-9; National Intelligence Council 2040 Global Trends report. 2021; “State Resilience Index,” Fund for Peace, [The Fund for Peace](https://www.fundforpeace.org/). Accessed 17 October 2023.
5. Hooghe, Marc, and Sonja Zmerli. “Chapter one introduction: the context of political trust.” *Political trust: Why context matters* (2011): 1.
6. Knack, Stephen, and Philip Keefer. “Does social capital have an economic payoff? A cross-country investigation.” *The Quarterly journal of economics* 112.4 (1997): 1251-1288.
7. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World.” <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/keythemes>.
8. “2023 Edelman Trust Barometer.” *Edelman*, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>.
9. OECD 2017; See Kevin Vallier, “Trust in a Polarized Age,” 2020 for an in-depth discussion and review of the literature describing how competent and quality governance promotes trust.
10. Social identity theory sheds light on how perceptions of group belonging can lead to trusting behavior. See Tajfel 1970; people who are excluded become less trusting of those who excluded them (Hellebrandt 2011) and that trusting behavior is increased when people expect to be treated with reciprocity, either because of perceptions of trustworthiness or because of inferred shared group membership. (Tanis, Postmes 2005)
11. See, for example Norris, Pippa. 2022. *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify*. Oxford University Press.

Why IREX?

For over 50 years, IREX has invested in fostering social trust. Today, we work in more than 100 countries in four areas essential to progress: cultivating leaders, empowering youth, strengthening institutions, and increasing access to quality education and information.

We know how to foster partnerships with key actors already committed to working for social change and accompany them to build, apply, and spread knowledge, skills, and attitudes throughout their networks. Our past and current work demonstrates our extensive experience supporting trust-building through demonstrating competence, showing good intent, and promoting belonging for more just, prosperous, and inclusive societies.

To learn more about IREX's work and how you can partner with us to support trust-building around the world, please reach out to us at communications@irex.org.

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