



Trends In Workplace Trust In An Era Of Skepticism

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28 February 2022

Stephen Covey describes trust as "The glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships." And yet, according to Edelman's 2022 Trust Barometer, 59% of respondents say their default tendency is to distrust something until proved otherwise. This extends to interpersonal relationships, with a further 64% believing people are incapable of having constructive and respectful debates about issues they disagree on. The report describes a vicious cycle of distrust in the world, fueled by a lack of confidence in both government and media. Leaders need to understand these trends in order to build employee trust in an age of skepticism.

The world of work

The big shift to hybrid and remote working over the last few years has impacted many aspects of how employees collaborate. Studies show that virtual working impacts trust in teams on a number of levels.

Remote working poses greater challenges to interpersonal communication. When teammates aren't interacting in person, it is more difficult to read body language and facial expressions or detect nuances in tone of voice. Without these cues, misunderstandings can arise, which may undermine trust.

There also tend to be fewer opportunities to build trust when working online. High trust teams display several trust-building characteristics, such as more informal social interactions, and building reliance by asking for help. This is found to be lower in virtual teams.

Technology

Technology has supported the pandemic-accelerated shift in working patterns and offers many benefits. But it has also changed the landscape of trust.

Firstly, there's been an increase in the use of monitoring technology, fueled by some employers' desire to track the activities of remote workers. Although these tools may have some positive applications, such as tracking usage trends to identify process improvements, they also send a clear message of organizational distrust to employees. Monitoring can be particularly damaging when used to micromanage individuals, which destroys trust and may spark conflict.

Another technology driver is the impact of social media and AI. Social media algorithms are designed to keep the user on the platform for longer. They show proportionally less content that might present different viewpoints. This serves to reinforce existing opinions, fostering distrust of alternative views. Trolling on social media also normalizes aggressive, linear views, rather than

openness and curiosity. This shows how easy it is to throw out a comment and walk away, rather than engage in a two-way conversation.

The changing workforce

Trust is also affected by workforce factors, both demographics, and the employer-employee relationship. Millennials and Gen Z make up a significant proportion of the workforce, and they have very different expectations of work. They tend to be more values-led and conscious of their place in society than previous generations. To earn their trust, they look to leaders to live the same values as they do, and they want to see organizations taking action.

The traditional employer-employee working model is also shifting towards a more blended workforce. In September 2021, 4.4 million Americans left their jobs, the highest rate since 2000. In 2021, freelance work rose to 35%. A workforce that mixes both employed and freelance staff enables organizations to benefit from the best expertise at a time when it's most needed. However, hiring external talent can create suspicion and resistance from existing staff, who may be concerned about future job security, or whether the external expert's opinion is more valued. Distrust may therefore impact engagement and productivity between employed teams and freelancers.

What leaders can do

While the essential elements of building trust haven't changed, there needs to be more focus and a different emphasis on building trust in organizations. Edelman's Trust Barometer also found that 77% of people trust their employer more than the government, media, and NGOs, so there's a basis to build from for trust-conscious leaders.

To earn employee trust, leaders should be purposeful in their communication. Staff want leaders to be more personally visible and to communicate their values and how the organization's activities contribute to society. But it's not just about communicating 'to' employees. Leaders need to role-model trust by letting managers and staff do their jobs and demonstrate openness and constructive debate in the face of conflict. For organizations incorporating contractors or freelancers, trust can be built by involving staff at the planning stage, having a good onboarding process, and looking for team fit as well as technical skills.

Against a backdrop of skepticism, trust is not to be expected, but earned. It takes effort, consistency, and time to build workplace relationships based on trust. And trust can be lost in a heartbeat. If trust is the glue of life, leaders need to put themselves forward and live their values. Otherwise, workplace relationships may get unstuck.