

THE BIG IDEA: TRUST

David Horsager

At the heart of my original trust research, I made two critical findings. The first is that *trust is the single greatest metric for success*. The second is that *there is a way to build or rebuild trust*.

In working with businesses and organizations large and small, I consistently observed one fundamental truth at the root of all of their failures and successes, struggles and solutions: **Trust affects everything**. When trust increases, so does output, morale, retention, innovation, loyalty and productivity. When trust decreases, costs, problems, attrition, stress and time-to-market all increase. No matter the goals, challenges or circumstances, authentic long-term success will not be achieved until a significant level of trust is established.

From this initial research, I was able to identify eight specific traits of the most trusted leaders, brands and organizations. When even one of these eight traits is weak, trust is predictably compromised. When all eight traits are present, trust will increase and grow an organization's bottom line. Strength in all 8 Pillars of Trust™ (**Clarity, Compassion, Character, Competency, Commitment, Connection, Contribution, and Consistency**) leads to the greatest advantage in business and in life, which I have come to now call "The Trust Edge."

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This trust framework was an extremely exciting discovery. It meant that in any case where a business is struggling, not only will we find a predictable lack of trust, we will also find concrete, diagnosable reasons for the weakness—and they are fixable.

THE PILLARS OF TRUST™

- **Clarity:** People trust the clear and mistrust or distrust the ambiguous or the overly complex.
- **Compassion:** People put faith in those who care beyond themselves.
- **Character:** People notice those who do what's right over what's easy.
- **Competency:** People have confidence in those who stay fresh, relevant, and capable.
- **Commitment:** People believe in those who stand through adversity.
- **Connection:** People want to follow, buy from, and be around those who collaborate.
- **Contribution:** People immediately respond to results.
- **Consistency:** People love to see the little things done consistently.

Often the next question asked is, "Which of the eight traits is most important?" It is true that in a given situation some of these traits may be more important than others. If I am hiring a nanny for my children, for instance, I am watching out for compassion and character more than clarity. If you are the surgeon about to operate on my child, I am not too concerned with your connection, but I am keenly interested in your competency!

By and large, though, all 8 Pillars are relatively coequal, and for the structure of trust to stand all 8 Pillars need to be present, healthy, and strong. Like the columns of a building, the pillars hold up the entire edifice. When one or more of the 8 Pillars is weakened, the structure itself is in danger of collapse. The strength of the pillars a company does well in cannot make up for the weakness in all of the others. This shows how important it is to diagnose organizational problems and arrive at the necessary remedies.

TRUST IS YOUR LEADING INDICATOR

Businesses use dozens of different key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess their relative health and progress toward their goals. Many KPIs have great validity, in and of themselves. The problem is, many of them do not get at the heart of the matter. For example, one common goal is to increase engagement. However, you do not increase engagement by adding more engagement. The only way to increase engagement is to increase trust. When trust in teams goes up, people feel safe and valued so they are willing to share ideas and praise, which in turn leads to increased innovation and productivity. Higher engagement scores are the natural outcome of a high-trust culture. It starts with trust. If members of a team trust each other, they share ideas. Sharing ideas results in more creativity and innovation. If a team does not trust one another, they will not feel safe to share ideas, and both creativity and innovation take a nosedive.

People do not follow leaders they do not trust.

A LACK OF TRUST IS THE CORE CHALLENGE

Think about your own company or organization: What are the top two or three issues you are facing right now, or have faced in the past year? What are the greatest challenges to your future performance, growth, and stability in the marketplace? Whatever issues you encounter, even though you and I may have never met, I can tell you one thing about those issues with complete confidence: They are, at their core, an issue of trust. You may believe you are having a leadership issue, but that is only a symptom.

People do not follow leaders they do not trust. Perhaps your sales numbers are not where they should be. It is not a sales issue at the core. You are losing sales because your sales force or your potential customers do not trust you. Maybe you have been told you need better marketing. That may be so—but the only way to amplify a marketing campaign is to increase trust in the delivery of the message. **Trust touches everything.** Success is never fundamentally a leadership issue, or a communication issue, or even a resource issue. Success at its core always comes as a benefit of being trusted.

I believe every organizational and leadership issue can be solved by using this framework. I am not saying it is easy, or that contextualization is not necessary. I am saying that every issue falls under one or more of the 8 Pillars of Trust™. For this reason, it is valuable to create this common language around trust in organizations that want to enjoy the benefits of a high-trust culture.

TRUST IN 2021

Every decision a leader makes will either increase or decrease trust in themselves, in their team, and in their brand. **The only way to sustain, or even grow business is with trust.** Furthermore, a high-trust organization builds an environment where adaptation and innovation are possible.

Amidst the widespread societal-level upset caused by COVID-19, public protests about racial justice, and an uncertain economy, leaders have been expected to adjust rapidly in order to embrace new challenges and lead their people. It can be incredibly stressful when you are expected to have the answers about things you cannot control. This past year flexible workdays have become essential as employees find themselves becoming teachers, caregivers, and sometimes patients all at once. Technology has become a necessity more than ever before. Understanding employees' needs and the obstacles they face has become crucial for maintaining operations and profitability.

LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS

Employees and customers are looking to leadership for guidance as the workplace and commerce have evolved into something nearly unrecognizable compared to just a year ago. The role of the executive is to lead effectively during change and ambiguity. While clarity is always a pillar of trust, leaders today must also act as a guide in the midst of uncertainty. The high call of trusted leaders is to give as much clarity as possible even during cloudy storms. Your fastest opportunity to build trust is in times of crisis and recovery, but it also the time you can lose it most quickly.

Over this past year, unfortunate and often uncontrollable circumstances have magnified weaknesses in leadership: Leaders who are ambiguous and overly complex lose trust due to a lack of **Clarity**. Leaders who lack empathy are just as dangerous as those who are overly critical and are missing **Compassion**. A lack of integrity undermines the ability to grow a culture of trust with **Character**. Leaders lose trust who do not pivot or stay relevant with **Competency**. Leaders who make decisions selfishly crumble in adversity and lack **Commitment**. Isolation and siloing loses trust, and the lack of **Connection** is magnified in crisis. Leaders who do not deliver results lose the essential element of **Contribution**. Leaders who lack **Consistency** lose trust from flip-flopping, indecision, and unpredictability.

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LEADING IN CONFUSING TIMES

Here and now, in the midst of unstable times, you have a chance to succeed by being a trusted leader. In this time of crisis and recovery, we believe that the 8 Pillars of Trust™ are key aspects of the future of leadership. These ideas are more critical now as people adapt through the disconnection and confusion caused by our new virtual environment and social distancing practices.

Though we do not know exactly what the future workplace landscape will look like, we do know the shift toward humanizing leadership is permanent. VUCA, an acronym which stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, was first coined for use by the US Army War College. Pertinent to our world today, a VUCA world sets forth two questions to ask yourself: **What can I control? What should I do first?** These questions can lead to a fresh approach to leadership.¹

In a 2019 *INC. Magazine* article titled “8 Ways the Workforce Will Change in 2020, According to Business Leaders” the Young Entrepreneurs Council anticipated many of the changes we are experiencing today.² They predicted a greater dependence on technology, including implementing remote work platforms, focusing on flexible work options, edging toward diversity, and supporting mental health and better work environments.

Prior to the pandemic, many leaders alluded to the changes outlined in this article. Even before these factors became a reality, the groundwork was being laid to support ever-changing work environments and the corresponding shift in management and operations. Leaders understood that technology and work-life changes were imminent.

Themes which have emerged about a leader's future role in a productive and modern workplace include:

- Practicing mutual compassion and care
- Demonstrating character through actions
- Connecting with employees to truly know and appreciate them
- Building an inclusive company culture by leading with integrity
- Paying attention to their communication and responses

Leadership of the future requires taking the time to get to know employees, being human, and showing one's character. An organization's bottom line and culture are directly linked to the overall health and safety of its employees. When an organization cares for its employees, a high-trust, high-performance workplace becomes possible.

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There are effective ways to build trust during a conflicted and difficult time of change. The following list of behaviors from the Trust Edge Leadership Institute are musts during times of crisis:

1. TAKE AN ACTIVE APPROACH

Be present and make decisions before they need to be made.

2. DEAL WITH TENSION

Treat tension like an opportunity to address things that may be underlying in your organization's culture.

3. LEAD WITH COMPASSION

Lead with an open heart and a human presence. Make an effort to understand where people are coming from.

4. DEFINE ONE PRIORITY

When everything feels like the most important thing, choose one to focus on in order to alleviate overwhelming conditions.

5. OVER-COMMUNICATE

When you've said it 100 times, say it again. Leaders need to communicate the next thing more than they think they do.

6. OVER-CONNECT

It may seem invasive, but trust comes from a true connection with people. Be with them, not just near them.

7. SEEK WISDOM

You are not alone. People have gone before you and have likely faced crisis and challenge. Seek them out and learn what you can.

8. THINK LONG AND SHORT TERM

Be present with what is happening and make efforts to address those things, but also be aware of the future ramifications of your actions. Do not make a policy or practice you will have to undo later when conditions have changed again.

9. CULTIVATE SEEDS

Sleep, Eat right, Exercise, Drink water, Seek a Source of Strength beyond yourself.

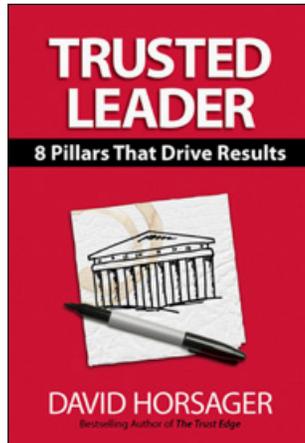
Many people want to have a quick, motivational solution to every problem in five minutes or less. Trust is not like that. It takes work. You have to take your trust building vitamins and do your trust homework if you want to become an effective leader. It is work, but it is worth it. It is the only way to lasting success and long-term impact.

People ask me about being trusted versus being trustworthy. The problem is you can manipulate the 8 Pillars of Trust™ to appear trusted for a time without actually being worthy of it. What are we really going for? Trustworthiness! People might mistakenly trust a leader, but is the leader worthy of their trust? That is our goal, to be worthy of everyone's trust. And, let me tell you, that takes work every single day. Your friends, family, team, and staff—they need you. The world needs you.

It is noble work to become a TRUSTED LEADER, and if you commit to this journey, you are guaranteed to flourish! 🌱



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Horsager, MA, CSP, CPAE, is the CEO of Trust Edge Leadership Institute, inventor of the Enterprise Trust Index, and director of one of the nation's foremost trust studies, The Trust Outlook, and the national bestselling author of *The Trust Edge* and *The Daily Edge*, and his new book, *Trusted Leader*.

His work has been featured in prominent publications such as *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Through speaking, training, consulting, and coaching, David and his team at Trust Edge Leadership Institute make it their mission to develop trusted leaders and organizations. Learn more at DavidHorsager.com.



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The Research

All data featured is from The Trust Outlook, an annual research study produced by the Trust Edge Leadership Institute. The goal of each study is to understand the current landscape and future impact of trust by surveying thousands of individuals. Each year, we examine a variety of countries to generate a global perspective and provide practical tools for leaders to increase trust in their organizations. Topics covered range from trust within organizational culture and families to trust in sales and leadership. The study continues to prove the bottom-line impact of trust. The survey is conducted online, and the total sample has a margin of error averaging ± 1.8 percent. Learn more at: TrustOutlook.com.

Endnotes

1. [VUCA World](#), access date 30 September 2020
2. Young Entrepreneur Council, "8 Ways the Workforce Will Change in 2020, According to Business Leaders," [Inc.Com](#), 3 December 2019, access date 7 October 2020

The Book

David Horsager wrote *Trusted Leader* because everyone desires to be a trusted leader or work for a leader they can trust. *Trusted Leader* is a the true-to-life business parable about a senior leader who thought success was certain. CEO Ethan Parker discovers the power of trust and how to apply it amidst the complexities of leadership, change, and culture transformation. This book offers a roadmap for how to become the most trusted in your industry. In *Trusted Leader*, you will learn strategies to increase alignment, overcome attrition, and get absolutely clear on executing your top priorities.

Learn more at Trustedleaderbook.com.