

TRUST. It is critical for organizations to have high levels of trust in order to consistently achieve high levels of performance. The primary measurement tool used to determine the 100 Best Companies to Work For list published annually in Fortune is called the [Trust Index](#)[®] and it measures the levels of trust employees experience in their workplaces. And, according to [Russell Investments](#), in a simulated portfolio that is reset with newly named list companies each year, the research shows Best Companies have a cumulative return *nearly three times* the benchmark [Russell 3000](#) and [Russell 1000](#) indices.

And this makes sense. When there are high levels of trust, people are more willing to go above and beyond in service of the organization. They are more willing to innovate, take calculated risks and collaborate with their peers and colleagues. They are highly engaged, loyal and serve as brand ambassadors for the organization, positively promoting its work.

Trust. It's a crucial element for organizational success and yet it is incredibly fragile. It can take dozens of actions and interactions to build up trust—but it only takes one action to erode all of that trust quickly and occasionally irreparably.

In order for a leader to be successful, they need to engender high levels of trust in their organization. Given the fragility of trust and the challenges associated with measuring it, it has always been a challenging responsibility for leaders. And yet, that challenge has never been greater.

With close to 2 million lives lost and joblessness almost equivalent to the Great Depression as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, levels of trust across the globe have further declined. According to the [2021 Edelman Trust Report](#), *"a majority of respondents believe that government leaders (57 percent), business leaders (56 percent), and journalists (59 percent) are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false."* The trust scores for government leaders, CEOs, journalists, and religious leaders fell across the board. This "infodemic" is fueling fears, eroding trust and further polarizing people. The world desperately needs competent and ethical leadership to guide us through these challenges. But there is a HUGE difference between being trust-worthy and being perceived as being trust-worthy.

In conversations with leaders of organizations of varying sizes across different industries, many of them express their challenges garnering high levels of trust, and yet almost every single one of them will share that they are trustworthy. They also often share that they wish that their people would extend them benefit of the doubt and assume that they have positive intentions. Yet with levels of trust quickly eroding world-wide, it is highly unlikely that people will begin to extend the benefit of the doubt to their leaders any time soon. *So what then?* Leaders need to put in the hard work to be perceived as trustworthy.

About the Institute

The Dr. Nancy Grasmick Leadership Institute is an interdisciplinary research and action-based institute at Towson University. The Institute provides a continuum of leadership development opportunities for individuals and organizations that drives personal, professional, and organizational success. Programs focus on transformational outcomes, improving workplace culture and engagement, talent attraction and retention, and addresses today's most challenging issues.

Here are some tactics that leaders can employ in order to engender higher levels of trust:

- **Invite feedback from direct reports:** In as many 1:1 meetings as possible, ask “*is there any feedback that you have for me that would allow me to better support you and your work?*” this question helps to open the door to more open and honest dialogue, while also providing input for enhancing your performance
- **Recognize that there is no such thing as a “trust neutral interaction:”** With each action or interaction with a team member, you are either choosing to increase levels of trust or you are choosing to erode it
- **When you make a mistake, own up to it:** Apologize and share with others what you learned—demonstrating vulnerability and humility helps to increase levels of trust
- **You’ve got to give trust to get trust:** If people feel that they are micro-managed, they will likely not feel trusted and will therefore be less likely to trust you
- **Reflect on potential mix-messages and align your behaviors to your words:** Even for things that you think are minor

As an example, when I started as the chief culture officer of Union Square Hospitality Group, I shared with my team my philosophy that while work is incredibly important, so is being a full human outside of work and so there was no expectation to work crazy hours consistently. And then in one of my 1:1 meetings with a direct report, when I asked for feedback, she shared with me that while I say that I don’t want people to work crazy hours, my actions don’t match my words because I am often sending emails late at night and over the weekends. She further shared with me that not only did she then feel compelled to quickly respond on off-work hours, but she also wasn’t sure what to believe—my actions or my words. When she said that she wasn’t sure what to believe, it hit me like a ton of bricks! I thought in my head, but didn’t say: “*Oh my gosh, of course I meant what I said! Please believe me!*” I quickly tried to stuff my hurt feelings down and thanked her for the feedback. Now that she had shared with me the feedback, I needed to do something with it. At the next team meeting, I acknowledged the lack of alignment of my messaging and explained that as a single, working mom, I often needed to make accommodations throughout the workday for kid stuff, so this was my attempt to “catch up” on missed time. I asked if they preferred that I draft all of my emails when I needed to get work done, but wait to send them until working hours, and they said no. Once they understood the why behind the what, they no longer questioned my intentions and didn’t feel compelled to respond.

Being perceived as trust-worthy is one of the greatest challenges for leaders—and it also represents one of the greatest opportunities. Trusted leaders are more capable of unlocking and harnessing human potential. It takes skills, tools and ongoing support in addition to commitment to be perceived as a trust-worthy leader. We are proud that the Dr. Nancy Grasmick Leadership Institute offers a comprehensive portfolio of leadership development offerings to support individuals and companies in addressing these opportunities. Interested in learning more about our offerings? Become an Institute Insider and join our community to receive updates.



Meet the executive director

ERIN MORAN is the Institute’s inaugural executive director, leading the overall operations and fiscal management of the Institute. Moran has spent most of her 24-year career dedicated to developing leaders who create inspiring work environments that enable people to be fulfilled while also achieving extraordinary business results. Moran believes ‘we create a better society when people work in healthy environments.’

Related resources

- [The Speed Of Trust: It's A Learnable Skill](#) via Forbes
- [The Trustworthy Leader](#) by Amy Lyman via Amazon

Upcoming event

Lessons in Leadership with Chip Wade, president of [Union Square Hospitality Group](#), about how they are rebuilding trust as they rebuild their organization as a result of the pandemic.

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