



The Trust Gap

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Since I am in the trust business, I pay attention to the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) when it comes out in February each year. Richard Edelman and his associates have been publishing a compendium of statistics on trust each year for more than 15 years.

Using online surveys, they measure the level of trust in 28 countries and categorize it into four sectors: Business, Government, Non-Government Organizations, and Media. For example, in the Business sector the question they ask is “Do you trust Business to do what is right?” Note: they intentionally leave the specific definition of what is “right” up to the person who is responding.

The sampling is also split between what they call “informed publics” (college educated populations with incomes in the top 25% and who follow the news daily) and they also survey the mass population who are less educated and often do not follow international trends closely.

I usually spend a couple days absorbing the latest information each year and updating my summary charts. It is good to keep abreast of the trends in trust around the world. There is an interesting trend in the worldwide information on trust that is particularly evident in the USA. If you are a manager or leader, at any level, you will want to know about this trend so you can use it to improve your culture at work.

Ever since the recession of 2009, the gap in trust between what the informed publics report and what the mass populations report has been widening with the informed publics reporting higher trust. In 2016, the gap has reached 12% worldwide, and that gap was greatest in the USA at 19%. The gap is evident in all four sectors measured in the survey.

A specific percentage of how people respond in a particular country or segment may not have second-decimal-place accuracy, but I believe the major trends give an accurate description of valid movement within the major groups. The reason is that the Edelman

Group has been using the same methodology each year for over a decade, and the sample size is large enough to produce valid information.

There is some speculation in the Edleman analysis about the cause of the gap, but they leave plenty of room for readers to interpret the cause of this widening gap for their own situation. Their main hypothesis is that all four of the following forces are at work:

1. The rising income inequality
2. High profile revelations of greed and misbehavior
3. Democratization of the media
4. Growing schism between the “haves” and the “have-nots”

I believe there is another factor at work in addition to the ones they mention that would be of particular interest to organizational leaders or managers. There are several movements toward a more balanced and ethical way of doing business springing up. One that I am involved with is [“Conscious Capitalism,”](#) which seeks to have organizations serve all stakeholders at the same time rather than just maximizing shareholder return. Other trends are the [“Green Movement,”](#) [“100 Best Companies to Work For,”](#) and Measures like the [“Ethics Bowl.”](#)

The activity to accomplish movement within organizations is mostly driven by the “informed publics” population, and the mass population has significantly less visibility to the trends and the good work that is going on in numerous organizations. Hence, it seems logical that more people in the higher echelons are seeing at least some forward progress and attention given to running more principle-centered organizations.

The trend also means that the greater mass of people working in organizations will be more skeptical about the level of trust than their managers. It is necessary to communicate information more times in different ways in order to have people believe it to be true. Edelman has measured that most people working in organizations need to hear something three to five times before they believe it is likely to be true. Ten years ago hearing something once or twice would suffice.

That statistic represents a major challenge for any manager or leader. No longer is a Town Hall Meeting sufficient to communicate vital information. Rather, you need to have several methods of communicating points and use them all when trying to convey important information.

The consequences of the trust gap has significance for us all, from how we elect our leaders, to how we keep the peace in our cities, to how we conduct business in each sector. We need to pay attention and seek to broaden awareness of some of the good trends to combat the fear being promulgated by groups who want to ignore or reverse the progress that is being made.

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