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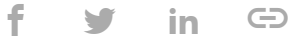
Study Reveals American Trust Crisis With Government, Business and the Media

In an increasingly divisive and volatile world, entrepreneurs must focus on building a culture of trust.

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According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, the U.S. is experiencing a "trust reckoning." Only 48 percent of respondents expressed trust in government, NGOs, businesses and the media, with the global trust index clocking in at 56 percent.

Businesses are now the only institution considered both competent and ethical, earning 61 percent of respondents' trust globally. Simultaneously, trust in the media has reached record lows: Nearly 6 in 10 people believe journalists purposely try to mislead the public.

One factor at the forefront of this crisis is the current "infodemic." An overabundance of information (including *misinformation*) amid the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult for the public to sift through multiple sources to determine whether the information at hand is reliable. Misinformation by omission is another real threat -- when people lack proper context, they are left to fill in the gaps.

The public's trust radius is shrinking to those they feel they know, which should have massive business implications. Employees usually assume that their values align with their employers. When that illusion is challenged or destroyed, that perceived intimacy (and trust) is shattered.

Because so many people have lost faith in governments, they increasingly expect corporations to

support the causes that matter to them. About [86 percent of respondents](#) expect CEOs to speak out publicly on social issues; when CEOs fail to meet that expectation, there can be severe backlash. For example, Coinbase CEO Brian Armstrong faced a massive walkout when he [discouraged employees](#) from discussing social-justice issues at work.

Related: [Employee Activism Is on the Rise. What Does That Mean for Companies?](#)

We operate in an environment of pervasive divisiveness and social unrest. To help your company navigate this volatile climate, you must work to build a [culture](#) of trust. Here's how you can start:

1. Take small steps toward a more open culture

Since the start of 2021, [47 percent of people](#) say it has become more important to speak out when they see the need for change. Many corporations are becoming more outspoken, but companies that take a stab at addressing hot-button issues risk it backfiring.

Some organizations are simply not ready to openly discuss sensitive topics. Coca-Cola, for instance, recently [came under fire](#) for the content included in its anti-racism training. The underlying lessons to "be less defensive" and "be more humble" were fine, but the messaging to "try to be less white" was just too flippant for its internal culture. Employees released slides on [social media](#), which sparked instant outrage.

Coca-Cola could have avoided this PR nightmare by taking the pulse of the [organization](#) first. Anonymous surveys and regular check-ins could have allowed the company to get real-time insights on how effective its DEI practices were, allowing for more specific and constructive takeaways. In less open organizations, you might have to rely on subtext or start by addressing the operational aspects of issues (such as broadening your hiring pool) before diving into controversy (i.e., "our industry is too white").

You cannot expect to change your company culture overnight. Building enough trust to have difficult conversations can take years. Start by making small and productive internal measures toward a larger goal, and these steps will help that overarching objective seem more attainable.

2. Establish a feedback loop with employees

The Coca-Cola example shows just how important it is to know your employees and company culture. [Communication](#) should be a two-way street, but it also needs to be appropriate for the relationship you have with your team.

Recently, my company was doing a campaign to celebrate Black History Month. I had the idea to

showcase Black leaders with the national anthem playing in the background, but someone pointed out that this approach could be problematic. When I asked what he meant, he explained that

Francis Scott Key, a slave owner, was a critical political player in upholding slavery laws and aggressively prosecuting abolitionists. We dropped the idea. We have these types of conversations at my company all the time because we have a culture that values open communication and honest feedback.

If your organization's established culture does *not* value feedback, you must demonstrate that value by seeking and acting upon feedback. Start by asking for feedback in one-on-ones, and then act on it. You can also conduct an annual survey to gauge employee sentiment or collect this information via an anonymous feedback platform.

When beginning a program like this, it helps to explain how you will use this information. This feedback loop will become more organic over time, and open communication in group settings should quickly become the norm.

Related: 5 Steps for Giving Productive Feedback

3. Take authentic and consistent action

Empty promises lead to distrust, especially when those promises feel like a marketing campaign. For the past year, people have been watching companies make sweeping declarations without following through. If your company takes a stance publicly, you must show your employees how you are getting it done -- whether that means implementing new hiring processes to promote inclusivity or by rearranging your office space for social distancing.

Ben & Jerry's has always been outspoken on social justice issues, and the brand is known for backing up its words with action. Instead of simply participating in #BlackoutTuesday, Ben & Jerry's announced its intention to dismantle white supremacy via a four-point plan, which included lobbying Congress.

Of course, implementing change can be difficult when company policy gets in the way. Recently, Starbucks faced backlash when it prohibited employees from wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts and accessories, citing its employee dress code. If you find yourself hamstrung by policy, consider allowing a passionate team member to organize a community service event outside of regular work hours. Collaborate with your employees to develop an event that accomplishes all of the intended goals and adheres to company policies -- even when it's held after-hours.

Related: Brands Want to Tell Stories of Inclusion. Marketing Leaders Should Listen Instead.

Companies can no longer afford to stay silent; they have a responsibility to promote positive change. But before you sprint forward into controversial topics, you must do the work to build trust within your team. Not every organization is ready to discuss institutional racism at a Monday meeting -- sometimes you have to work to build a more open culture, establish a feedback loop and support your words with action.