



Who Do Your Employees Trust?

The importance of communicating to your workforce during times of crisis.

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This question is taking on a new and expanded sense of significance. For many of us, a related but even more important question is—who CAN we trust? *The Edelman Trust Barometer 2020* provides clear evidence that trust, in our most important institutions, is deteriorating substantially, nationally and internationally. And, this study was conducted before the coronavirus was a known factor. Corrupt government, fake news, ever-increasing income inequality, the job-stealing gig economy and technological evolution, ugly partisan politics, and self-serving dishonest leaders are creating a growing sense of insecurity and an undeniable need to know who to turn to, who to count on, and what to believe in. And, again, this study was conducted before the coronavirus pandemic. Now, on top of it all—we are scared.

If there is a silver lining in the Edelman study, it applies to feelings identified about trust in business as compared to trust in other major institutions such as government, media, and NGO's. When it comes to business, there are some green sprouts and some opportunities that business leaders can build on to strengthen trust. This is one of the parts of the study that caught my interest because it is consistent with what we are seeing in our own data. At WSA we have rapidly become one of the largest current survey research providers who focus exclusively on the employee experience. Our history building Kenexa and our partnership with Qualtrics have provided us exclusive access to, and experience with, the largest data base of employee survey responses ever collected. (This was a three-year, rolling data base that reached twenty-two million employee surveys at its peak.)

What we are seeing in our data should not be a surprise. It is the same pattern we have observed in other times of crisis. However, it is a critical time to highlight what the data has once again uncovered. We are not seeing an overall decline across our clients in relation to trust in leadership and trust in employers—it's a mixed bag. For some companies, trust is modeling the national and international trend of decline, but for others, the employees, with all their fears and insecurities, are turning to their organizational leaders, and, in some cases at least, the leaders are rising to the challenge. And guess what? It can make a big difference! It is this difference, and how it comes about, that we think every leader of every organization needs to understand.

THE IMPACT TRUST HAS ON YOUR WORKFORCE

What is changing is the way in which trust is impacting workforces. We are seeing an increasing importance of trust in driving the level of employee engagement and performance. Given that engagement is a key determinate in the motivation, commitment, and overall positive feelings that employees have toward their leaders, their company, and their job, it's just possible that employee engagement has never been more important than it is right now. It appears likely that we could be entering a time when companies are going to be tested in ways and to the extent that they have never been tested before. Indeed, some companies may face an existential crisis. As company leaders, it may be more important than it has ever been before to stay in touch with and respond to our employees. After all, they are the army whose performance will either win or lose the battle.

The opportunity for you, as a leader to have a game changing impact involves the following steps. Effectively communicate that you understand the hopes, fears, and insecurities of your employees. Then, credibly build the case that you hear them, that you are at the helm, and that you are going to navigate together, with the help of all, through the approaching storm, no matter how severe. This means that job one is to listen and listen accurately. It may never be more important than it is right now.

Building trust can be dramatically different across organizations just like defining success can be, it varies company by company—the goal posts are always different, and the target is always at least a little unique. For some workforces, building trust is about the importance of navigating the storm and answering the questions: Who wins, who do we help if we succeed, who loses, and who gets hurt if we don't? For others, it could be about values, for example, honesty and transparency in the communication from the top, or hearing leaders articulate values that resonate and then seeing those values reflected in the actions, decisions, and commitments of leaders. For others, it's about the success and opportunities that can be claimed and created when the storm calms. And yet others desire a shared sense of purpose and belonging, so they know they aren't in it alone and that someone has their back and everyone's in it together.

Maybe it's about fixing a problem. If people feel that trust has been breached, it doesn't matter if the breach was intentional or not, trust won't improve until the breach is fixed. In some cases, just addressing and explaining or apologizing is enough. In other situations, the damage has to be repaired. Whichever of these apply to your company (or other factors), until you do your job and listen, you have no idea how to refine your message and priorities in order to maximize your leadership impact.

WHAT HISTORY HAS TAUGHT US

During the financial crisis of 2008, each company from our large client base at Kenexa made one of two different types of decisions. Some companies decided to cancel or postpone surveying their employees. They said things like: "There's just too much turmoil," or, "We already know our people are confused and worried. We don't need a survey to tell us that". When these companies finally got past the crisis and decided to resume their survey process, trust and engagement across their company had suffered long-term damage. Employees apparently felt that just when they needed to feel understood and cared about the most, their leaders didn't want to hear from them. In most cases it took years to repair the damage.

For the rest of our clients, the ones who decided to proceed as planned with their survey process, the results were mixed—with the exception of one consistency: we did not observe the same dips in trust and engagement as those who cancelled their survey process.

Some were able to at least stabilize the levels of trust and engagement while others actually made notable progress in both areas. In the companies that showed gains, we learned that the leaders had gone out of their way to understand all of the most salient points that were revealed through the analysis of the survey data, and then communicate at least three things to all employees. They worked hard to answer these three questions:

1. What did we learn?
2. What are we going to do about it?
3. What do we expect others to do about it?

With these questions the leaders were able to accomplish three things:

- Ensure their employees feel understood and cared about.
- Reinforce the core values of the company.
- And in the best cases, to help people see a brighter, even-more-important-future on the other side of the storm.

Let us share a little more about what we have learned from our experience and offer some suggestions about what to do and what not to do:

Things to Avoid:

- Don't cancel a survey if you had planned to do one.
- Don't withdraw from your employees, just because you might have to make some very difficult decisions.
- Don't hide the bad news when you know it will come out eventually.
- Don't assume you already 'know enough' about what your employees need.

Things to Embrace:

- Be open and tell the truth. When employees experience a shared sense of purpose, they can handle bad news, they can't handle feeling lied to about it.
- Consider doing a timely survey being especially careful to communicate your reason for doing it. It can be a way of letting people know you care.
- Be particularly thoughtful about the questions you ask and remember that words matter! Get help if you need it. Ask the experts.
- Focus on answering the three critical questions: 1) what did we learn, 2) what are we going to do about it, and 3) what do we expect others to do about it?

At WSA we are committed to doing whatever we can to help navigate through this crisis. We believe that we are uniquely prepared to help you listen harder and smarter than you have ever listened before. We've spent more than forty years learning how to do it right. We can make sure that you have the information you need about the employees in your workforce so that you can best frame your messaging and planning to optimize your impact on trust, the motivation and commitment of your people, and ultimately performance. And if needed, we can be with you every step of the way.

Workforce Performance Down to a Science

About Workforce Science Associates

We believe in the power of applying the right science to make people and organizations successful. We believe in empowering business to measure what matters when it matters—so they, in turn, can motivate their people to work harder, stay longer, and care more. We believe that behavioral science is the ingredient for ensuring that employees stay focused on the right things at the right time and with the right momentum. We believe that employee's lives are never better than when they are highly engaged and using their talents to contribute to a company they believe in. And, we know that you need a partner who has workforce performance down to a science.



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