

Faith & Trust in Our Lives and Organizations

FAITH & TRUST

We lack faith. As a society, our faith in each other and especially in our institutions has fallen to an all-time low¹. Yet we live in a time when we need both strong, well-functioning institutions and strong inter-personal trust more than ever. A global pandemic, economic downturn, and growing social unrest all expose both our lack and our need for trust in one other and our institutions. Well before the global pandemic highlighted this growing and deepening lack of faith and trust, Phillip Morris International (PMI) had already come to know well the consequences of widespread distrust as the company undergoes its journey to create a smoke-free future.

Twenty-two years after the 1998 tobacco master settlement agreement attempted to reconcile society's lack of faith in tobacco companies, PMI, one of the successors to those companies, underwrote research by Princeton faculty members David W. Miller and Michael J. Thate into what companies and individuals might learn from the three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, to recover from breaches of trust, resulting in a white paper entitled [“Towards a Restoration of Trust? Preliminary Insights and Lessons from Wisdom Traditions”](#). They propose 11 Theses drawing from the rich resources found in wisdom traditions that organizations might consider applying when seeking to rebuild trust. CollaborateUp worked with PMI and Professor Miller to convene roundtables for open discussion and debate on that research so that in the midst of a global pandemic and widespread social unrest we might identify how to strengthen the ability of people and institutions to work together to solve really big problems.

While our collective work began before the pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and other social upheavals, its importance has grown with each passing day. Reimagining our societies in ways to uproot decades of systemic racism and that allow us to take science-based approaches to tackling the current pandemic and similar crises to come, will require broad-based, collective action built on a foundation of faith and trust in each other and in well-functioning institutions. This virtual roundtable series on faith and institutional trust convened thoughtful leaders to reflect on the 11 Theses in “Towards a Restoration of Trust?” and to share where they and their organizations struggle with institutional trust deficits. The series produced



¹ <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>

valuable takeaways on how to restore trust in these critical moments, including how to tap into faith traditions to:

- Engage employees and colleagues as whole people
- Find pathways to redemption when trust is broken
- Engage even in crises or very hostile environments
- Rebuild trust while overcoming the “sins of our fathers”
- Become leaders worthy of trust

Religion and the Whole Self

We live in an ever more skeptical and cynical society, making it difficult to establish and earn trust. Yet, in an increasingly secular world, **why religion?** Why not learn from more secular paths to reconciliation? Three reasons: first, somewhere between 88-92% of people identify with a religious tradition and as we increasingly want and need to bring their “whole selves” to work, leaders ignore this part of employee identities at their peril. Second, people seek meaning in their lives. For people of faith, their religion offers some of that meaning. Their quest for meaning, to be part of something bigger than themselves, also offers a key to engaging them and helping them achieve their best. This can lead to greater levels of loyalty, effectiveness, and satisfaction.

Takeaway #1: With so many people using faith to help make decisions – approximately 88% of people identify as believers – and so many of them wanting to bring their whole selves to work, we commit leadership malpractice *not* to talk about faith and to see it as a pathway to engagement and productivity.

Third, it’s not about religion per se, but more about what these religious traditions can teach us about how to build, maintain, and restore trust.

The Rituals of Redemption

When a person or organization breeches the public trust, they have a choice. They can obfuscate and cover up or they can own it. The three Abrahamic “wisdom traditions” offer a roadmap to restore trust after a breach. They have a way and healing path to get right with our God or gods, and to get right with our neighbor. These wisdom traditions provide a clear set of guidelines and rituals for both the offender and the offended. The offender must own their mistake, transparently and publicly declaring their acts of commission and omission, and they must make amends. At the same time, the offended must listen and offer to forgive, if not forget, for reconciliation to occur.

These rituals or formulas of declaration and reconciliation offers lessons to us as individuals and as leaders of organizations. They also offer a warning: be patient. Religions and religious institutions operate on a different time scale – centuries not quarters – and so does forgiveness. It also cautions that we can’t restore trust, but we can rebuild it. The sin is forgiven but not forgotten. Our actions must consistently demonstrate over a long time period our commitment to avoiding similar breeches of trust and to truly making amends.

Takeaway #2: When you breach trust, own it and do something about it. But be patient and work to rebuild trust.

Following this guidance, any organization seeking to restore trust must publicly and repeatedly declare and “own” their acts of omission and commission. And then taking deliberate action to reduce or eliminate any further harm while remaining patient with stakeholders who may struggle to forgive.

Crises & Hostile Environments

Fast-moving crises similar to the 2008 financial crisis and now the COVID-19 pandemic, or slower-moving crises like race relations or social injustice, strain communal bonds. People question who they can trust. Longstanding institutions – small businesses, nonprofits, or even the police and security services – may suddenly shutdown or dramatically lose trust. But faith-based organizations endure. Often in the wake of a natural disaster, churches, synagogues, and mosques are the first to reopen or never shut.

People often turn back to their places of worship and look to their co-religionists as founts of trust. Faith leaders can also serve as mediators or bridges of trust, allowing us to open up conversations with communities we may not have spoken to before or where we have particularly low levels of trust. At the same time, we must avoid the darker side of working only with people from one's own tradition and then discriminating against other traditions.

Takeaway #3: Faith leaders can help bridge gaps in trust.

As an example, CollaborateUp works in developing countries or in areas impacted by natural disaster. Often faith-based organizations and leaders form the most reliable partners in these environments because they didn't “drop in” nor will they leave once conditions improve or media attention moves on – as emergency responders or international donors might.



Rebuilding Trust

The research by Miller and Thate point out that wisdom traditions call on each of us to own up to our trust deficits and take actions that align with *being* someone worthy of trust. As noted earlier, the sin is never actually forgotten, only forgiven. In our modern, consumer-driven culture, we often think of having and doing instead of being. If I have a gym membership, then I will exercise more and be healthy. In fact, it works in reverse. I must first decide that I am a healthy person, then my actions will naturally and more consistently align with my self-image. This requires two things: first, changing our timescale from short term actions to



long term sense of being, changing our individual or corporate character, and second, consistently aligning our actions with our new sense of self.

Takeaway #4: Change the corporate character or brand and then align actions to this new sense of self.

But how do you change corporate character? Many executives focus on written strategies or mission statements, but this neglects the other three major levers that drive corporate identity: recruiting/retention, storytelling, and training. Who you choose to have in the organization, what stories get told and retold, and how you train them, especially at leadership levels, drives long-term change.

Faith traditions can offer a particularly useful touchstone when it comes to stories. Before humans had a written language, we relied on the kinds of basic narratives found in faith parables. These stories are like little packets of culture or the DNA building blocks of the brand. People of common faith can use them as a basis for rebuilding trust and organizations can use these kinds of narrative structures to construct useful stories that help transmit the new corporate identity from one leadership generation to the next.



But this raises our next question: dealing with “sins of the father,” as expressed in Jewish and Christian texts.

Sins of the Father

Take, as an example, the leading automotive manufacturers and fossil fuel companies. The people in charge now were not the people in charge when their ancestors lobbied for favorable regulatory treatment of pollutants and emissions or denied before regulators the impact their products would have on climate change. Many are indeed trying to make dramatic changes to their business models. But will they ever be believed and trusted? How long must the corporate “heirs” apologize for the acts of their “ancestors”?

The faith traditions teach us that transparency is necessary but not sufficient. Our long-term character and actions must align and demonstrate our commitment to restitution. In addition to learning from religious wisdom, we might also look to post-apartheid South Africa’s restorative justice or how Germany has dealt with the legacy of the Holocaust. In these cases, the second generation (“the sons and daughters”) took specific actions to reconcile with the people they had harmed and enshrined in law and culture changes meant to endure through succeeding generations.



LEADERS WHO CARE



Takeaway #5: Succeeding generations of leaders must put in place and adhere to changes in policy and behavior that demonstrate a consistent commitment to restorative reconciliation.

For organizations seeking to transform themselves, this might take the form of changes in corporate policy or setting big timebound targets. Again, consider how some automotive companies changed business models away from total reliance on polluting combustible engines and fossil fuels to alternative cleaner technologies. Or how fossil fuel companies have reconsidered their portfolios and long term R&D budgets away from drilling and fracking to include solar wind, and other sources of renewable energy. This also involves

changing the way leaders interact with their teams internally and with the public externally, including shareholders and other stakeholders.

Leaders Who Care

More than almost anything in the world, people seek meaning and a sense of belonging in their lives. That's what truly fills their souls and animates their lives. Navigating a trust deficit doesn't have to be all self-flagellating public confession. It can become *the thing* that gives the organization and its people purpose. Leaders navigating through a trust deficit have an opportunity to use reconciliation and rebuilding trust to create an environment that promotes belonging and a driving sense of purpose for employees.

Takeaway #6: Rebuilding trust can build corporate character and drive employee purpose.

This starts with listening to our employees and to the people we have harmed. This can take many forms, including hosting roundtables like these, engaging in public forums, and other ways of showing that we care and are willing to take action based on what we learn. In fact, to be heard and to be worthy of trust we must first listen and trust others.

Takeaway #7: To earn a second chance, give second chances.

So, if as an organization we want a second chance, we need to consistently offer second chances to our employees and stakeholders. And in the end, this remains one of the most enduring lessons of all religious traditions: treat others as we would like to be treated.