



To Win Over an Audience, Focus on Building Trust

By Allison Shapira and David Horsager

A few years ago, David was giving a talk at the National Speakers Association on the topic of trust. Standing in front of a room full of professional speakers, he made a bold assertion: "Communication is never the core issue. Trust is."

Allison, who was sitting in the audience, felt a rush of defensiveness. As a public speaking and communication expert, she thought, "How could you say communication is not the issue? I've spent my career teaching people that communication skills will make or break their effectiveness as a leader."

But she soon realized he was exactly right. In order for our presentation skills to be effective, we need to first build trust with our audience.

When we craft a presentation, we sometimes spend more time on how to deliver the message than on the strategy and vision that will make the message more effective. We make a monumental mistake when we skip strategy and head straight for delivery.

Trust Is a Process

David has spent his career helping organizations build trust. David and his team at the Trust Edge Leadership Institute publish the Trust Outlook, an annual study on the impact of trust across industries and around the world. Over the years he's learned a lot about the importance of establishing trust, and how leaders win and lose it.

In the 2020 Trust Outlook, 80% of Americans said they would not follow a leader they do not trust. According to the research, the number one reason people will not buy from a sales person is lack of trust. Furthermore, in the U.S. nearly 8 in 10 people would not refer the products or services of someone they do not trust. Trust is how organizations win our loyalty: respondents reported that the leading reason they wanted to work for an organization — more than compensation or company culture — was trusted leadership.

After the conference, Allison reflected on new ways leaders could use communication skills to build trust. She thought about how she and her team teach persuasion: they stress that persuasion is not a speech, it's a process. The strategy before the speech is essential to gaining the buy-in of the audience.

Allison found a direct link between that mindset and the issue of trust. As speakers, our first goal is to build trust: in our credibility, our belief in what we do, or our ability to deliver value. Only then can we mobilize our audience to take action around a shared vision.

Five Competencies for Leaders

When Allison finally talked with David, they realized their views on the topic were complementary. Together, they identified five competencies a leader can utilize to gain buy-in and build trust in the context of a presentation, based on David's research. When preparing for an all-hands meeting or a presentation to their leadership team, a leader can review all five competencies and ask themselves how they are addressing each one in their presentation.

1. Clarity.

One of the most frequently asked questions in Allison's leadership communication programs — from American business executives to international leaders of all sectors — is how to get to the point. Leaders and their teams know that when they ramble, they lose their audience's attention and their ability to make a persuasive point. They're picking up on something real: David's research shows that people trust clarity and distrust what is ambiguous or overly complex. A leader might not be trusted because they're not clear about their vision. A manager might not be trusted because they're not clear about expectations. A sales professional might not be trusted because they're not clear of the benefits of their product or service.

Clarity is especially important when speaking to an unfamiliar audience with no prior knowledge of your work; clear communication lets our competency shine through. We achieve this by identifying the goal of our presentation in advance and then using a clear structure with logical transitions to achieve that goal. Then, we read our presentation out loud and ask ourselves if it will make sense to our audience, adjusting it until it does.

2. Compassion.

Not feeling appreciated was the top reason people reported for leaving a job in the 2018 Trust Outlook. One of the ways David's team teaches compassion in the workplace is through appreciation. Leaders need to ask themselves, "How do I demonstrate that I care about my audience?"

There are a few ways they can project compassion. When we use more inclusive language such as "We did this together" instead of "I did this for you," we draw the audience in. When we put ourselves in our audience's shoes and empathize with how they feel, then we make them feel heard and understood. Compassion is also about spending time before the presentation to be prepared and organized, showing we care enough about the audience to prepare content that is relevant to them. The compassionate presenter consistently uses language such as, "So what this means to you is..."

3. Competency.

One of the ways we inspire trust is by demonstrating that we know how to do our job. Whenever we speak, our audience is evaluating not only whether we believe in what we're saying but also whether we are capable of doing it.

We can project competency in many ways when we speak. First off, we can demonstrate knowledge of our topic by either using examples from our own experience or sharing current trends in our industry. Secondly, we demonstrate competency by investing in our presentation skills so that we present a cohesive, persuasive presentation. When a leader says "I know we only have 20 minutes but I could speak for an hour on this topic, so just interrupt me when we're at time" they communicate a lack of competency in preparing their content for the time allotted (as well as a lack of compassion for their audience's time).

4. Connection.

In his seminal HBR article "The Neuroscience of Trust," Professor Paul Zak shared how stories tap into the emotion of your audience, producing oxytocin in their brains and leading to a feeling of trust and connection. Using stories is a powerful way to introduce yourself to a new audience, because it's through shared values that the audience starts to connect with you on a personal level.

What personal examples can you share in your presentation? We recommend a specific focus on stories that demonstrate transparency and vulnerability. In the 2020 Trust Outlook, 92% of employees said they would trust their senior leader more if that leader would be more transparent about their mistakes. There are nuances here, of course: this doesn't mean that transparency equals trust, because confidentiality is also trusted. However, we relate more to someone's challenges than to their capabilities.

5. Consistency.

While we address this competency last, it's actually one of the most important. One of Allison's favorite speakers is the head of a business unit in a Fortune 50 financial institution. What makes this woman a powerful speaker isn't her elaborate oratory skills. Instead, it's her ability to be the same confident, authentic speaker on stage in front of 1,000 people as she is in front of a group of five people.

Does your message constantly change or does it remain consistent? Are your actions consistent with your words? Trust goes beyond a brand or a logo, it's how an audience feels in every interaction. In order to demonstrate consistency, we need to be consistently prepared and intentional about both our words and our actions. Consistency is how we build a positive reputation, both on an organizational and individual level.

These five competencies are not easy to build, however once you make them standard practice in your leadership style, they will become easier to include. When you take time to prepare a presentation, speech, or difficult message, take time to ask yourself how you are building trust with your audience. The results will have a massive and positive impact on retention, company morale, productivity, and business outcomes.

<https://hbr.org/2022/03/to-win-over-an-audience-focus-on-building-trust>