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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Trust Literacy: The Skill Nobody Taught You

Why reading the trust condition is a skill every communicator needs

A Links Global thought leadership article by M. Sanchez, founder of Links Global, a communications firm working at the intersection of trust science, narrative design, and civic engagement. Part of the Links Global article series: Trust as Infrastructure. Drawn from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

In Brief

Communicators are trained to write, design, and deliver. Almost none are trained to read the room those messages will land in. Trust literacy is that missing skill: the ability to diagnose the trust condition of an audience before you decide what to say, how to say it, and whether to speak at all. This article defines it, explains why it is not the same as empathy or audience research, and describes the four things a trust-literate communicator reads before acting.

Ask a room of communications professionals how they prepare a campaign and the answers are remarkably consistent. They define the objective. They segment the audience. They test the message. They choose the channels. They schedule the release. Every step is a craft skill, and most of them are done well.

Now ask a different question: how do you know whether the people you are about to address will hear a message from your institution as information, or as something else? The room usually goes quiet. There is no standard step for it. There is no course that teaches it, no line in the creative brief that asks for it, and no dashboard that reports it. The question is treated as a matter of instinct, and instinct is exactly what fails in the places where the answer matters most.

That gap is the subject of this article. We call the skill that fills it trust literacy.

What Trust Literacy Is

Trust literacy is the ability to read the trust condition of an environment accurately, and to let that reading decide the work. It is a diagnostic discipline, not a persuasion technique. It comes before the message, and sometimes it ends with the conclusion that no message should be sent yet.

It helps to say what it is not.

It is not empathy. Empathy is a valuable human capacity, and it is not a measurement. A sincere communicator can feel deeply for an audience and still misread what that audience has learned to expect from the institution speaking to them.

It is not audience research. Audience research asks what people think, want, and prefer. Trust literacy asks something prior: what people have learned to expect, based on what has happened to them before. A person can like a policy and distrust the agency proposing it. A person can dislike a policy and still trust the process that produced it. Opinion and trust condition are different things, and communications that treat them as one will keep being surprised.

It is not media literacy. Media literacy teaches audiences to evaluate sources. Trust literacy teaches institutions to evaluate how they are being evaluated.

Why the Skill Is Missing

The omission has a simple explanation. Communications grew up as a delivery profession. Its core questions were about reach, clarity, and consistency, because for most of the twentieth century the main constraint on communication was getting a message to people at all. In that world, trust was a background condition, assumed to be roughly intact, and the craft was in the carrying.

The background condition has changed. Pew Research Center's long-running series found that in September 2025 only 17 percent of Americans said they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time, down from 77 percent in 1964. The pattern is not only American. The OECD's survey across 30 countries found that 44 percent of respondents reported low or no trust in their national government, against 39 percent reporting high or moderately high trust. When trust is the exception rather than the assumption, delivery excellence stops being sufficient. A flawless message arriving in a damaged trust environment is processed through the damage.

The other reason is asymmetry. Paul Slovic described it decades ago: trust is built slowly and destroyed quickly, and a single negative event carries more weight than a single positive one. Institutions that have accumulated a history of broken commitments, late disclosures, or unacknowledged failures are not starting from neutral when they communicate. They are starting from a deficit that the audience remembers precisely, even when the institution does not.

The Four Readings

In our practice, trust literacy comes down to four readings. They are the foundation of the short self-assessment in the Links Global Trust Audit™, and they can be practiced informally by anyone willing to be honest about the answers.

1. **Institutional history.** What is the institution's actual record of keeping promises, disclosing on time, and owning failure? Not the record leadership remembers, and not the record in the annual report: the record the community would recite. The useful exercise is a timeline of commitments made against commitments kept. Communicators rarely build it, and communities almost always carry it.
2. **Opposition characterization.** Is the opposition about the issue, or about the institution? This is the most consequential distinction in the field. Opposition to a specific proposal can often be addressed with better information, better design, or better sequencing. Opposition to the institution itself cannot, because every new piece of information arrives pre-interpreted. If you cannot tell which one you are facing, you will apply the right tool to the wrong problem.
3. **Defensive prior strength.** How deeply, and how broadly, has the community come to expect harm from the institution? People enter every institutional encounter with expectations built from experience. When those expectations are weak, a good message can update them. When they are strong, the same message is filtered to confirm them. Trust literacy means estimating how strong the filter is before you decide how much weight a message can carry.
4. **Information environment.** What does the space your message will travel through actually look like? Echo chambers, active misinformation, thin local media, and platform dynamics all change what a message becomes between sending and receiving. A communicator who has read the first three conditions but ignored this one will still be surprised by what the message turns into.

None of the four requires special technology. They require time, willingness to ask uncomfortable questions of your own institution, and a refusal to substitute what you hope is true for what the record shows.

What a Trust-Literate Communicator Does Differently

The practical differences are specific.

They sequence before they write. The reading comes before the brief, and it can change the brief entirely. A strong trust condition means the message can be the work. A damaged one means the work is repairing the conditions the message will depend on.

They choose the tool to fit the condition. An environment with intact baseline credibility and a contested issue calls for disciplined, well-segmented communication. An environment where distrust is directed at the institution itself calls for something slower and different: acknowledgment, structured contact, and demonstrated change before persuasion is attempted. Applying the first approach to the second environment is the most common and most expensive error we see.

They treat correction with care. A fact delivered by a distrusted source can be received as evidence of management rather than as information. The research on this is more nuanced than the popular version, and backfire effects are rarer than once assumed. But for the audiences who most need accurate information, the messenger's standing determines whether the correction works at all.

They measure what matters. Impressions and engagement describe exposure. Trust literacy asks whether the condition itself is moving, and it builds the measurement to find out.

And they know when to wait. Sometimes the most professional recommendation is not to launch. That is a difficult thing to say to a client with a deadline. It is also the recommendation that protects the client's credibility for the next time it is needed.

Who Needs It

Everyone who communicates on behalf of an institution that has to be trusted to function: public agencies, health systems, utilities, campaigns, universities, associations, and the firms that serve them. Elected officials and agency leaders need the reading because they own the history that audiences are responding to. Communications teams need it because they are the first to feel the consequences when it is ignored. Consultants need it because the strategy they sell is only as good as the diagnosis beneath it.

The skill is learnable. It is also teachable at scale, which is why we built the Trust Audit Practitioner Course around it: a structured way to learn to read the conditions before writing a word.

Where This Fits

Trust literacy is the personal, daily practice behind the institutional frameworks Links Global has published. The Trust Condition Framework describes what is being measured and how to choose the right response; the Links Global Trust Audit™ is where the reading begins. The companion piece, The Four Readings, goes through what a trust-literate communicator checks before writing a word. For the technology version of the same discipline, see AI Literacy Is Not What You Think It Is, and for the relationship between trust and communication itself, The Intersection of Trust and Communication.

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