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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

The Intersection of Trust and Communication

Why one cannot substitute for the other

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

Most organizations treat trust as something good communication produces. It is closer to the reverse. Trust is built by what an institution does, and communication mostly decides whether that behavior is seen. This article separates the two, shows where they actually meet, and draws out four practical implications for anyone who designs or commissions communications work.

There is a confusion at the heart of how institutions think about communication that costs them more than any poorly worded press release, any failed campaign, any crisis response that arrived too late.

The confusion is this: that communication and trust are the same thing, or at least that one reliably produces the other. That if you communicate well (transparently, consistently, through the right channels, with the right messages) trust follows. And that if trust is absent, better communication is the remedy.

This belief is so widespread, so structurally embedded in how organizations are led and how communications functions are resourced, that questioning it feels almost counterintuitive. Of course communication builds trust. What else would?

The answer, it turns out, is experience. Specifically: the accumulated experience of whether what an institution said would happen actually happened. Whether what it promised was delivered. Whether what it disclosed was complete or managed. Whether, when things went wrong, it said so before being caught or after.

Trust is built through institutional behavior over time. Communication is the medium through which that behavior is made visible, or concealed. These are not the same thing. And conflating them is one of the most consequential errors in contemporary professional practice.

Two Things That Are Not the Same

To understand the intersection of trust and communication, it helps to start with a clean distinction between them.

Trust is a prior expectation: a standing prediction, formed through accumulated experience, about whether an institution's future behavior will be reliable, honest, and aligned with the interests of the people it serves. Trust is not primarily a cognitive judgment. It is a structural condition that shapes how new information from a source is received, often below the threshold of conscious deliberation. A community that trusts an institution receives its communications as information to be evaluated. A community that does not trust an institution receives its communications as institutional management to be defended against.

Communication is the act of making something known: sharing information, building shared understanding, coordinating action, expressing meaning. Communication is a tool. It can be used with honesty or with strategy. It can reveal or conceal. It can build understanding or manufacture it. Communication is not inherently trustworthy. It is the vehicle through which trustworthy or untrustworthy behavior is expressed.

The relationship between them is asymmetric. Trust shapes how communication is received. Communication cannot reliably reshape trust, at least not in the short term and not in the absence of the behavioral evidence that trust is built on.

This asymmetry is what most institutional communications practice misses. Organizations invest in better communication (clearer messages, more consistent delivery, more authentic storytelling) and are genuinely surprised when trust does not follow, or when trust continues to erode despite excellent communications. The numbers show how far that erosion has gone. In September 2025, 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. Across 30 OECD countries in its 2023 survey, 44 percent of people report low or no trust in their national government, against 39 percent with high or moderately high trust. And the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer finds that 61 percent of people worldwide carry a moderate or high sense of grievance, and that those with high grievance distrust business, government, media, and NGOs alike. None of those institutions stopped communicating. The reason is straightforward: you cannot communicate your way to trust. You can only demonstrate your way there, and then communicate in ways that make the demonstration visible.

Where Trust and Communication Actually Meet

Trust and communication intersect at three specific points. Understanding each of them changes how you design communications work.

THE FIRST INTERSECTION: TRUST DETERMINES RECEPTION

Before any message reaches a deliberating mind, it passes through the filter of the prior expectation the receiver holds about its source. This is not merely metaphor: predictive-processing accounts of cognition describe the brain as a continuous prediction engine, constantly generating expectations about incoming information based on past experience and updating those expectations based on the gap between what was predicted and what arrived.

For institutions with intact trust, where the experiential record is one of reliability and honesty, new communications are received through a prior of good faith. Skepticism may exist, but the baseline orientation is "let me evaluate what they're saying." For institutions with damaged trust (where the experiential record includes broken promises, strategic disclosures, and decisions that served institutional interests over public ones) new communications arrive through a prior of suspicion. The orientation shifts from "let me evaluate" to "what are they trying to manage?"

This is one reason corrections of misinformation from distrusted sources can, in some circumstances, backfire. The correction is not received as information; it is received as further evidence of institutional management. This is why awareness campaigns in high-distrust communities can produce the opposite of their intended effect. This is why every institution that has ever launched a well-designed campaign into a damaged trust environment and wondered why it produced so little has been discovering the same structural fact: the filter preceded the message.

THE SECOND INTERSECTION: COMMUNICATION REVEALS OR CONCEALS TRUST-RELEVANT BEHAVIOR

The behaviors that build or destroy trust (delivering on commitments, disclosing information proactively, acknowledging failure before being caught, making decisions that serve people rather than institutions) are not in themselves communications. They are actions. But they become communications the moment they are made visible, or fail to be made visible.

An institution that keeps a promise and says nothing about it has built trust at the level of behavior but squandered the communication opportunity that would have made the behavior visible. An institution that breaks a promise and says nothing has damaged trust doubly: through the broken commitment and through the silence that followed it. An institution that breaks a promise, acknowledges it publicly before being discovered, explains what happened, and commits to a specific correction has a chance (not a guarantee, but a chance) of maintaining or even deepening trust through the quality of its response to its own failure.

This is where communication becomes genuinely trust-relevant: not in the content of institutional messaging, but in the quality of institutional transparency about the behaviors that trust is actually built on. The most trust-building communication an institution can produce is not a well-crafted campaign. It is the acknowledgment of a miss, delivered before anyone asked for it.

THE THIRD INTERSECTION: COMMUNICATION IN THE ABSENCE OF TRUST-BUILDING BEHAVIOR ACCELERATES DISTRUST

This is the intersection most institutions discover too late. When communication volume increases without the behavioral foundation to support it (when an institution responds to a trust problem by communicating more rather than by changing the behavior that created the problem) it typically makes things worse.

More communication from a distrusted source is not more information. It is more evidence of institutional management. It signals that the institution has identified a problem and is trying to manage its way out of it rather than behave its way out of it. Sophisticated audiences recognize this. And in an era when institutional communication is consumed through information environments saturated with strategic messaging, most audiences have become sophisticated enough to recognize it, even if they cannot always articulate what they are recognizing.

This is the trap that most institutional communications responses to trust crises fall into: responding to a trust problem with a communications solution. Launching a transparency initiative. Hiring a chief communications officer. Investing in a new community engagement program. Producing a values video. These are not wrong, exactly, but they are communications responses to a behavioral problem, and they will produce at best marginal improvement in the trust condition and at worst a deepening of the suspicion that the institution is managing its image rather than its conduct.

What This Means for Practitioners

If you work in communications, or if you commission communications work, these three intersections have direct practical implications for how you design and evaluate your work.

IMPLICATION 1: THE TRUST ASSESSMENT PRECEDES THE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Before a campaign is designed, a message is tested, or a channel strategy is built, the trust condition of the environment needs to be honestly assessed. Not the trust condition you wish existed, or the one your leadership believes exists, or the one your last public survey reported. The trust condition that the institutional record actually supports: the one that your harshest critic would describe accurately. That assessment determines whether the communications tools you are planning to use are calibrated to the environment you are actually in.

Designing a communications program without this prior assessment is like designing a building without a soil test. The structure may be excellent. If the ground beneath it cannot support it, the structure will fail, and the failure will look like a design problem when it is actually a foundation problem.

IMPLICATION 2: THE MOST TRUST-RELEVANT COMMUNICATIONS DECISION IS THE DISCLOSURE DECISION

Of all the communications choices an institution makes (what message, which channel, which spokesperson, what timing) the one most consequential for trust is the disclosure decision: what to share, when, and in what form, about the things that matter most to the people the institution serves. Not the marketing content. Not the branded communications. The operational information that constituencies most need to evaluate whether they can extend trust to this institution: costs, timelines, trade-offs, risks, and what happens when things go wrong.

Institutions that disclose proactively (including unfavorable information, including information they haven't been asked for, including the honest accounting of their own misses) build a track record of disclosure reliability that changes how all their subsequent communications are received. It is, in the full sense of the word, infrastructure: unglamorous, largely invisible when functioning well, and catastrophically missed when absent.

IMPLICATION 3: THIRD-PARTY VOICES CARRY WHAT INSTITUTIONAL VOICES CANNOT

In damaged trust environments, the institution's own voice is the problem, not the solution. No amount of institutional communication will out-credible the prior expectation that institutional communication is managed. But independent voices (voices with their own credibility, their own relationships with the constituencies in question, and their own genuine right to disagree) carry a different quality of signal. They are not borrowing the institution's credibility. They are providing their own.

This is why the most important communications investment for a distrusted institution is often not the campaign but the relationship-building that precedes it: developing genuine, non-transactional connections with independent credible voices who can validate institutional claims without coordination. Not endorsement programs. Not spokesperson agreements. Actual relationships built on shared evidence, shared access, and the preserved right of independent parties to publicly disagree.

IMPLICATION 4: PATIENCE IS A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

A long-standing finding in the trust literature, Paul Slovic's asymmetry principle, is that trust is built slowly and destroyed quickly. The accumulation of behavioral evidence that changes a prior expectation (the months and years of kept commitments, proactive disclosures, and acknowledged failures that gradually shift a community's standing prediction about an institution) cannot be accelerated through communications volume. It can be made visible through communications, but it cannot be manufactured by them.

This is among the most difficult things to communicate to institutional leadership, which is accustomed to thinking about communications as a lever: something that can be deployed, at scale, to move opinion quickly. For intact trust environments, that model has some validity. For damaged trust environments, it does not. The lever is not connected to the ground. And the communications consultant or internal advocate who can make this case clearly, with evidence, before the campaign budget is committed, is providing one of the most valuable services in the field.

The Institutional Conflation and Its Cost

There is a reason the conflation of trust and communication is so persistent in institutional life: it is organizationally convenient.

Treating trust as a communications problem allows institutions to address a behavioral problem with a communications solution. It allows leadership to commission a campaign rather than examine its own conduct. It allows the failure of a communications program to be attributed to execution quality rather than to the trust conditions that made effective execution impossible. And it allows institutions to continue the behaviors that damaged trust (the strategic disclosures, the unreliable commitments, the decisions made for institutional convenience rather than public benefit) while investing in the communications programs designed to manage the consequences.

This is not cynicism. Most institutional leaders who commission communications solutions to trust problems genuinely believe that communication is the lever. They have not been taught to think otherwise. The field itself (communications training, strategic communications curricula, professional associations) largely teaches the same conflation.

Breaking it requires a different framework: one that starts with the honest question of what the experiential record between this institution and its constituencies actually looks like, and what that record means for how any communication from this institution will be received. That question is uncomfortable. It surfaces evidence that institutions would rather manage than examine. And it is the most important question a communications professional can ask before beginning any significant piece of work.

Trust and communication are not the same thing. They are connected: deeply, consequentially, in ways that determine whether the most sophisticated communications program you can design will actually do what you intend it to do. Understanding that connection, and the direction of causality within it, is the beginning of communications practice that is not just professionally competent but genuinely effective.

The intersection is where the real work lives.

Where This Fits

This article sits at the root of the Links Global approach. The Links Global Trust Audit™ is the instrument that reads the trust condition before a plan is written, the Trust Condition Framework explains what each reading means for the work, and Trust Literacy describes the skill of reading it. For the behavioral side of trust repair, see the ERA™ white paper.

Schedule a conversation with Links Global: www.linksglobal.org

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