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The Psychology of Trust Amid Covid-19 Challenges

By DAVID CHAN



To build a high-trust climate, leaders need to understand better how humans think, feel and act in the context of the issues that people care about. Why and how does the psychology of trust matter in navigating Covid-19 challenges?

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused and will continue to cause great disruption to lives, livelihoods, ways of life, and quality of life. Yet, post the pandemic, daily functioning will not be the same. The immense, unexpected impact of Covid-19 has highlighted the urgency to restructure the way we live, work, learn and play, in anticipation of a future "Disease X" that could be more virulent and infectious.

To effectively function in the new normal, a principled, adaptive leadership in which leaders' decisions, words and actions are highly trusted by the public is needed. Trust is critical for problem-solving because a baseline level of trust

is foundational for people to believe their leaders and decide to cooperate or be motivated to perform actions towards achieving the intended outcome.

When public trust is low, effective functioning is hampered – leaders, be they in governments, businesses or nonprofit organisations, will find it extremely difficult to implement a control measure or an initiative, change a prior decision or explain the change, and galvanise people to collectively manage a crisis. Research in behavioural sciences has consistently shown that trust in leaders is difficult to build, easily eroded, and difficult to restore once lost.

In addition, leaders are susceptible to the same human biases of overconfidence and low self-awareness. Many leaders not only think they are better than they actually are, they also overestimate their followers' perception of their trustworthiness.

An evidence-based approach to building trust, that understands how humans think, feel and act in the context of the issues people care about, can help leaders prevent trust erosion, repair trust violation and enhance trust development.

For this to happen, it is important to have the humility, learning orientation and objectivity to draw lessons on trust in leadership. Singapore's responses and experiences in the Covid-19 crisis so far provide rich case examples of public trust issues.

To contextualise trust, we need to define the specific issue, situation and time period. A useful framework is what I call the 3Ms of trust matters, which looks at trust as Multi-level, Multi-dimensional and Malleable.

Trust is multi-level

Trust is multi-level. It is essential to recognise the different aspects of trust at different levels, from individual to group to institution.

Individual level

The individual level is fundamental because trust is essentially a psychological construct, and it is really the perception of trust that matters. A trustee (e.g., the leader seeking to be trusted) may be objectively trustworthy on an issue, but if the trustor (e.g., the person deciding whether to trust the leader) does not perceive the trustee as trustworthy (because other factors such as coordination or communication have negatively affected the trust perception), there will still be low trust. The level of distrust matters because it affects how the trustor thinks, feels and acts,

which, in turn, could lead to important individual and collective actions or reactions.

Group level

Trust can also occur at the team or group level. Do you trust the 4G leaders (fourth generation of political leaders in Singapore)? When answering this question, you are thinking of the 4G as a team, as the abstract trustee, without necessarily thinking of any particular individual leader. But it may take just one individual leader in the team to behave in a certain way to increase or decrease your level of trust for the 4G as a team. This can also happen at the organisational level when we talk about the level of trust that an employee has in the senior management leadership team.

Inter-group level

At the team or group level, we can examine inter-team trust or inter-group trust. In Singapore, we often talk about social cohesion and harmony in terms of trust between groups, such as between different racial groups or religious groups. Singapore needs to pay attention to other emergent group differences, such as trust between locals and foreigners, or between other emergent groups categorised according to variables like age or socioeconomic class demographics, and even value beliefs or positions (such as attitudes towards LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] issues).

Inter-group trust is important for social cohesion. Without it, there would be wider social divides in the larger society in which the groups are a part. Inter-group trust is also critical to enable groups to work together and turn group differences into complementary strengths in diversity rather than conflicting weaknesses in disagreements. So, it is crucial to develop a climate of inter-group trust. For example, when creating public spaces and amenities or common facilities at the workplace, leaders should consider how this can be done to

facilitate positive naturalistic interactions among diverse groups of people.

Institutional level

There is also public trust at the level of institutions and the government. When we talk about public trust in Singapore, we often refer to trust in the Singapore Government and specific public institutions such as the enforcement agencies. Although this notion of public trust is clear in terms of the trustee, the issues are complex, such as which dimensions of trust are in question and how they are related. This brings us to the concept of multi-dimensionality, which is the second M of trust matters.

Trust is multi-dimensional

Trust is multi-dimensional, for both parties (the trustor and the trustee) in a trust relationship.

Beliefs

A citizen's propensity to trust the government is affected by his or her personal beliefs and perceptions about the government. This subjectivity is only partly dependent on, and sometimes even independent of, the government's objective trustworthiness. This is because the government's objective trustworthiness is sometimes not evident to the citizen for various reasons.

For example, the citizen may lack access to relevant information. Alternatively, a failure in government coordination or public communication may have confounded the issues and led to a negative trust perception. Also, the citizen may have misinterpreted certain facts or been misled to believe that some falsehoods or inaccuracies are factually true.

Expectations

Trust also comes with the public having certain expectations, such as what the government and leaders will or will not do. For example, we

expect leaders to have public consultations when designing or implementing certain policies, and we expect leaders to not omit important information when providing us facts to make our personal decisions. When this expectation is not met, it leads to negative emotions, perceptions or even retaliatory actions.

On the other side of the relationship, the trustee's trustworthiness as perceived by the trustor, is based on what the trustor thinks about the trustee's competence, integrity and benevolence.

Trust in competence

Trust in competence refers to people's perception of the leader's ability to solve problems and effectively address their concerns. In the case of governments, this trust dimension refers to the public's confidence in national leaders and the governing bodies to perform and solve problems affecting people's lives, such as those relating to infrastructure, public transport, delivery of public services, and the effectiveness in managing crises.

Trust in integrity

Trust in integrity has to do with the perception of the leader's character. It involves issues of honesty, incorruptibility and impartiality. The focus is on the integrity of the person (such as public service officers and political leaders), but it also involves the perception of how breaches of integrity are handled. In Singapore, the Government's vigorous actions against those caught for corruption, regardless of who they are, may mitigate the erosion of trust due to integrity breaches to some extent and reinforce the government's position on zero tolerance for such wrongdoings.

Trust in benevolence

Trust in benevolence refers to public confidence that the leader or government is authentic (saying what it means and meaning what it says) and has good intentions or motivations when

making a decision or undertaking a particular action or policy.

Trust in benevolence increases when people believe that the policy or government action is intended to serve their interests and is motivated by genuine concern for citizen well-being, rather than personal vested interests. It gets eroded when people think that policies and decisions affecting them are made by an elite who is disconnected from ground sentiments and is unable or unwilling to empathise with or does not care enough for the less fortunate and the ordinary folk.

Trust in benevolence is one of the hardest forms of trust to gain. It is one that means a lot to the public or followers, but is often neglected by leaders. Often, the problem may not be that the leadership is insincere, but that it is not perceived as sincere because it has not paid adequate attention to the nature of its actions, engagement and communications.

See box, “Trust, Engagement, Implementation” for how all the different dimensions of trust come into play in the issues related to the TraceTogether contact tracing technology and privacy protection.

Trust, Engagement, Implementation



Public trust, public engagement and policy implementation are inter-related. Take, for example, the issues involved in the implementation of the TraceTogether contact tracing technology and privacy protection.

Public engagement should be clear on how privacy concerns are addressed. The explanation of the government’s decisions should focus on the significant increase in speed and accuracy that these technologies and data collected offer in contact tracing when used to complement and supplement the human efforts and judgments of the contact tracers. The key point is this is not just a “good-to-have” add-on feature in contact tracing but a critical toolkit to save lives and livelihoods by protecting public health and preventing community transmission.

Privacy protection is more than an ideological debate. It is as much an issue of trust perception of the government’s competence, integrity and benevolence.

If the government is well-coordinated across agencies; effective in its whole-of-government approach; prompt, open and transparent in its public communication; focused on individual well-being; shows humility and empathy in its public engagement efforts, then the TraceTogether adoption (usage) rate will increase substantially. This will, in turn, translate into the intended public health outcomes that benefit the people, and public trust in the leadership (competence, integrity, benevolence) will increase as people observe the government’s attitudes and actions and see the outcomes.

Conversely, if the government fails to uphold trust in competence, integrity and benevolence, then people will experience various negative emotions, from anger and anxiety to disappointment and frustration. They become cynical when reacting to new policies or announcements on new technology, and the technological adoption rate will remain low. Even if made compulsory, people will find ways not to use it.

Trust is malleable

Trust is malleable, which simply means it can change. This may seem obvious, but many often fail to appreciate its implications.

Trust takes time to build, but it is easy to lose, and once lost, it is difficult to restore. The point is not to lament on the fragility of trust, but to understand what it means for trust building since trust can change.

Changes over time

The first step is to know that trust is dynamic and sensitive to the context. A trust level at any one point in time must never be taken as fixed or a given. The level of trust can change gradually or abruptly. It may increase or decrease depending on the prevailing factors that impact trust, thereby producing a pattern or change trajectory over time.

The dynamic nature of trust is why it is very difficult to predict future levels of public trust based on historical trends. For example, you could have trusted the government for the past 20 years, but if it does something now that really violates your values, you may stop trusting it.

Trust need not change gradually – it can move rapidly and abruptly, depending on changes in context. Therefore, leaders need to be careful when making decisions and policies based on trends and projections. Many leaders underestimate the overdependence on past trends. Trust levels in previous years may give the leader some relevant context and data reference. But what happens in the next year depends a lot on what the leaders do this year, and what the people perceive of their leaders.

Lived experiences

The limitation of using past trends of trust levels to predict current and future levels of

trust must not be confused with the separate issue of changes in people's lived experiences over time. The pattern of these changes is critical in influencing trust levels. When citizens go to vote at the ballot box or decide on how to respond to their leaders on an issue, they do not care where Singapore stands in a global ranking of country trust levels or how their organisations fared as compared to trust in other organisations. What they care about is where their well-being stands today as compared to the past few years of their lives.

It is the lived experiences that the people go through that will determine their trust levels and their reactions, in both their attitudes and actions. So, it is intra-individual, intra-country and intra-organisational changes in trust levels, and not inter-country or inter-organisation rankings, that are more and most important for leaders to bear in mind.

Understanding, developing and maintaining trust

In order to develop and maintain trust, we have to understand the science of trust and also translate it into practice. The key issues in the science and practice of trust may be summarised in the following areas:

- Assess the dimensionality of trust (competence, integrity, benevolence).
- Understand the content and context of trust, distrust (low trust), mistrust (trusting when should not).
- Monitor trust levels and dynamics (how trust evolves and changes over time).
- Deal with “trust-in-transition” (responding to feelings of doubt and ambivalence by the trustors towards the trustee. See box, “Trust-in-Transition Cases”).

Trust-In-Transition Cases



In the challenges concerning the migrant worker dormitory outbreak and TraceTogether technology, many of the issues relate to trust perceptions.

There were issues of trust in leadership competence with the rapid spike and sustained numbers of high daily confirmed Covid-19 cases in the dormitories. Questions were raised on how this could have occurred or could have been prevented or mitigated earlier.

In the use of TraceTogether technology for contact tracing, there were issues of trust (in competence, integrity, benevolence) related to the collection, storage and use of personal data. In June 2020, the Government had provided categorical assurance that the data collected by TraceTogether are used for and only for contact tracing of Covid-19. However, a ministerial response in Parliament in January 2021 said that the police is also authorised to access and use TraceTogether data for criminal investigation purposes, and had done so. This sparked a public debate and negative public perception.

The Government has since acknowledged that it made an error and passed new laws in February 2021 to restrict police access to TraceTogether data to only seven specific categories of serious crimes. Importantly, it made explicit reference to the importance of upholding public trust in leaders and its commitment to do so.

In the context of decision-making under rapid changes, uncertainty, incomplete information

and new revelations, the public has legitimate queries and trust concerns. Some of these issues and concerns have been addressed. However, the extent to which the public find the explanations and safeguards satisfactory will vary across individuals, depending on how they view the Government's account.

Some may be experiencing what I have called "trust-in-transition". This is a transition period in which the trustor (the individual member of the public) has feelings of doubt and ambivalence towards the trustee (the Government). It is a critical period because what occurs during this time can be highly impactful and "tilts" the trustor towards trust or distrust.

During trust-in-transition, the trustor experiences conflicting thoughts and mixed emotions. This occurs because the trustor had a previously positive perception of the trustee but is now undergoing negative experiences related to competence, integrity, benevolence or some combination of these dimensions.

Whether people move out of their transition into trust or distrust will depend on their belief in the Government's competence, integrity, and benevolence. They need to see that the Government can put citizen interests and well-being as the top priority and have the intention and sincerity to do so.

This public perception needs to be continuously earned by the Government – it does not come automatically just because it existed previously.

Strategic Approaches to Develop Trust



There are strategic approaches to address trust issues and build trust. Here are four pairs of Ps to do so:

- **Be principled and pragmatic**

Have a set of shared values and core guiding principles, while at the same time focus on what is most or more critical in the practical situation.

- **Focus on prevention and promotion**

Anticipate and be prepared to prevent negative outcomes from occurring while also aspire and pursue opportunities to bring about positive outcomes.

- **Have a pluralistic and paradoxical mindset**

Take a wider range of different perspectives into account, and do not always see difficult decisions as zero-sum trade-off situations but instead consider how two seemingly contradictory goals may in fact be complementary.

- **Practise people-centricity and perspective-taking**

Understand how people think, feel and act by appreciating people's expectations, evaluations and experiences and learn to see things from the other person's perspective.

- Repair trust violation (how trust erodes and how to prevent it; how to restore and rebuild trust).
- Develop and increase trust (efficacy of approaches to enhance trust levels).
- Create and influence trust climate (shared perceptions of trust among a group or community of individuals).

Trust does not occur or change in a vacuum – the way leaders approach issues matters a great deal. See box, “Strategic Approaches to Develop Trust” for how governments and organisations and their leaders can develop trust with their stakeholders.

Addressing public trust

Addressing public trust is critical. High trust is necessary for leaders in business, nonprofit organisations and especially government. They need to facilitate people to make good decisions, engage

in positive behaviours, and work together to emerge stronger and better as individuals and as a society.

As we have seen, trust is neither random nor predetermined. Trust levels can be predicted to some extent, and they can be enhanced. We need to go beyond the trust score at any one point in time and see that trust is a process, and there could be transitions.

To understand trust, we need to appreciate its fragility and power. That means understanding the science of trust and translating it into practice to deal with trust erosion, trust repair and trust development. ■

David Chan is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and Professor of Psychology at the Singapore Management University, and author of the bestselling book Combating a crisis: The psychology of Singapore's response to Covid-19 (World Scientific, 2020).