

RESEARCH REPORT

AN EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE ON  
ORGANISATIONAL TRUST DURING CHANGE

Sharon Varney and Julia Wellbelove

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to say thank you to our three case study organisations for their wholehearted participation in this research. In particular we would like to thank all those busy people who took the time to talk with us. We really appreciated your honesty and openness in sharing some of your personal experiences and perceptions about trust. Finally we acknowledge that producing a research report is always a team effort, so we would like to say a big thank you to our colleagues at Roffey Park for their contributions at various stages along the way.

## Key insights

An executive summary of key insights from the report:

### About trust and change

- Perceptions of organisational trustworthiness ebb and flow through processes of change.
- Constant flux and uncertainty can undermine employees' trust in their organisation's ability to meet its goals and responsibilities.
- Organisational trustworthiness is multi-levelled. Employees' perceptions may be influenced by their trust in key individuals, in their immediate business unit, in the wider organisation, the broader industry and the wider world. Change at any level may affect perceptions of an organisation's trustworthiness.

### About change management

- Change-ability is an important aspect of organisational trustworthiness. Managing change well can help strengthen trust, and doing it badly can erode confidence in the organisation's ability to meet its goals and responsibilities.
- How communication is managed can build (or damage) trust. People expect 8 Cs for trustworthy communication in change: clarity, consistency, continuity, congruence, content, consultation, conversation and confidence in the source.

- If the attention given to changing culture and behaviours – including role modelling by managers - lags behind vision and structure change, trust may be damaged.

### About line management

- Individual experiences of genuine care and support from managers (positive or negative) trump the organisational policies and practices.
- Yet a baseline of good management practice is vital. Inconsistent management, particularly in failing to manage poor performance or unacceptable behaviour, can also damage trust.
- Being visible is vital. People want to know you and to be clear what you stand for in a changing context. A lack of availability can damage trust, whatever the reasons for it.

# Introduction

We embarked on this research with the intention of exploring how organisational trust can be repaired when it has been broken.

As we engaged with our three case organisations, we noticed an insistent refrain of organisational change running through our conversations. Although we asked about trust, people told us about change. We heard that change had damaged perceptions of the trustworthiness of the organisation and we heard that managers were intent on rebuilding that trust. We met interviewees who were preoccupied with their experience of change as they shared perceptions about their organisation's trustworthiness. Indeed many felt they were still in the midst of ongoing flux and uncertainty.

We know from previous research that change in organisations makes trust issues salient (Lines et al., 2005) and our experience supports that notion.

**“Changes in organisations make trust issues salient and organisational members attend to and process trust relevant information resulting in a reassessment of their trust in management” (Lines et al., 2005: 221).**

It became clear to us that organisational change is not simply background, a contextual condition in which we can consider organisational trustworthiness and its repair. Change and trust are rather more intertwined and interdependent. So, we decided to foreground organisational change in this report in order to make some of the connections between trust and change more explicit.

## Report structure

- **Organisational trustworthiness** – what it is and why it is important
- **Research approach** – a brief summary of what we did
- **Our cases** – we offer a case comparison, so that readers can see some of the similarities and differences across the three cases. This is followed by individual case summaries. Each case summary explores what was going on in the words of employees from those organisations, and draws out our insights
- **Our learning** – we provide some reflections on trust and change. In doing so, we hope to spark off some insights for readers on trust and change in their own context.



# Organisational trustworthiness

Trust is an important topic for organisations. It is often said to be hard won and easily lost. So trust is something that leaders, managers, HR and OD professionals would be well-advised to pay attention to – especially during times of change.

With a flood of reputational disasters hitting the headlines in recent times, we can probably all think of companies, institutions and whole industries that have lost the trust of key stakeholders. In some, trust is broken overnight and, in others, it is eroded over years.

It is not just those media-worthy reputational disasters that damage trust. Internally, organisational trustworthiness can be unintentionally damaged during the many interactions which take place in the normal course of organisational life.

In their Megatrends report (CIPD, 2013), the CIPD asks; Are organisations losing the trust of their workers? We think it is an important question to ask.

“Are organisations losing the trust of their workers?” (CIPD, 2013)

It is especially important, we believe, to explore organisational trustworthiness in a working environment which is evermore volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA); where multiple change projects are a commonplace response to the challenges of a VUCA world.

However trust is damaged, it is the leaders and managers in those organisations who are left to pick up the pieces. Yet, while organisational downfalls often make the news, the painstaking work of rebuilding organisational trust typically goes unrecorded.

In this report, we explore perceptions of organisational trustworthiness from the perspective of employees. None of the organisations we worked with had been faced with catastrophic failures, yet each one had some way to go in rebuilding employee trust in the organisation.

## Organisational trustworthiness – what it is

Dr Graham Dietz from Durham University explains that an organisation is seen as trustworthy by employees when it operates effectively, it shows care and kindness towards its employees, and it acts fairly.

Organisational trustworthiness is influenced by multiple sources of evidence and actors operating at multiple organisational levels.

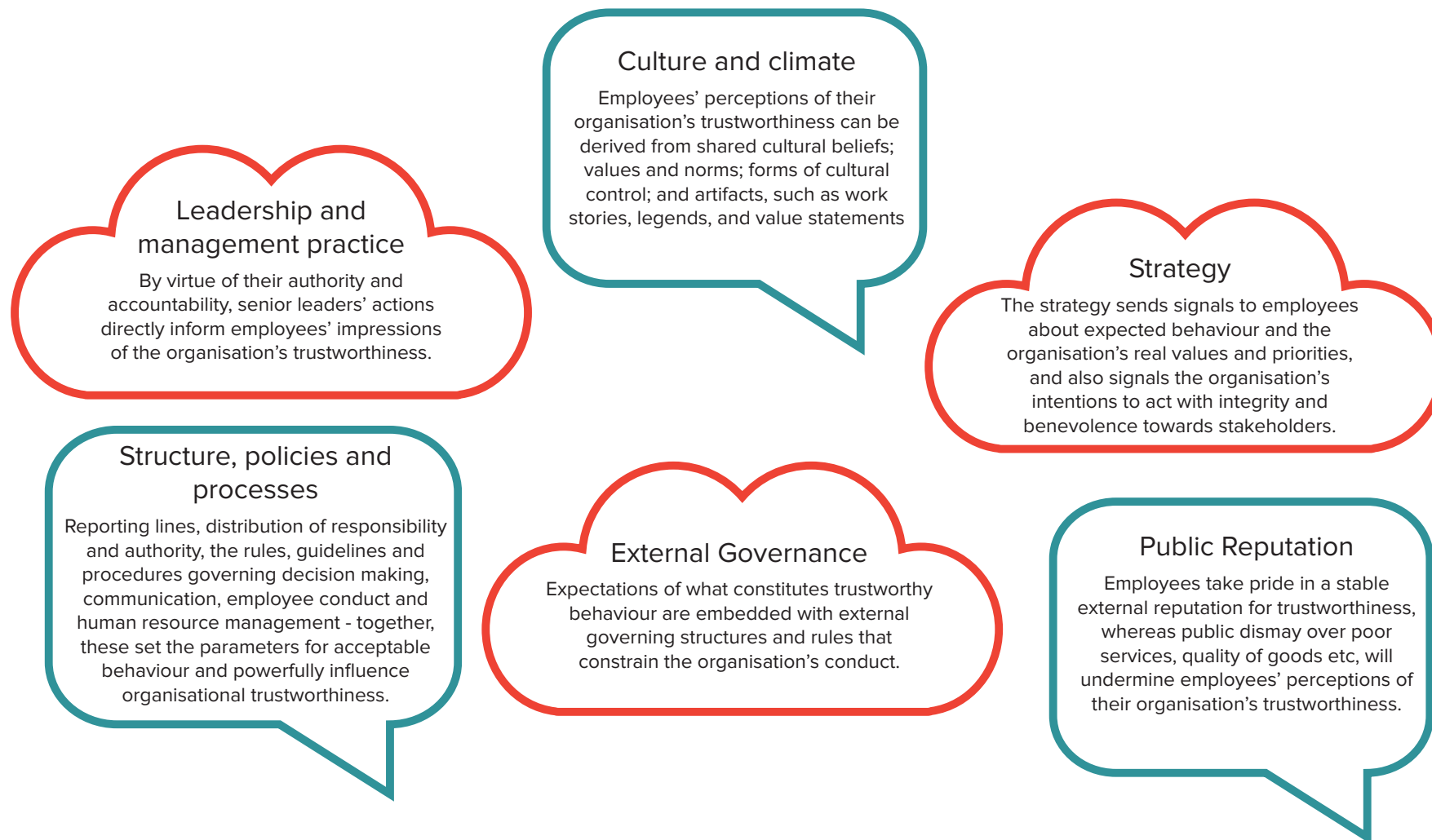
Gillespie and Dietz, who have developed a framework for organisation-level trust repair, explain:

*“Through the influence of the interconnected organisational components, certain interactions are facilitated and reinforced and, if repeated regularly over time, form institutionalized patterns of behaviour and thinking. These provide the cumulative evidence for employees to judge their employer’s trustworthiness. Thus, the organization does not display trustworthiness – its members do, through interaction and event cycles sanctioned by, and embedded in, the organization’s system components” (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009: 130).*

“A trustworthy organisation is one that operates effectively, acts with due concern for the interests of its stakeholders and conducts itself with integrity”

# Components of organisational trustworthiness

Gillespie and Dietz (2009) identify six system components of organisational trustworthiness:



# Research approach

- We interviewed 27 people across 3 case study organisations.
- Each interview lasted around 45 minutes.
- Interviews were recorded and transcribed.
- We focused on employees' perceptions of the trustworthiness of their organisation.
- We enquired about three characteristics of trust: ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995).
- We invited each interviewee to rate their organisation against each of the three trust characteristics:

| 1        | 2   | 3                    | 4    | 5         |
|----------|-----|----------------------|------|-----------|
| Very low | Low | Neither high nor low | High | Very High |

- We explored the reasons for their ratings, and any changes over time.
- We asked interviewees what actions their organisation had taken to reinforce trust.

Number of interviews: (n=27)



**Ability:** the organisation's collective competencies and characteristics that enable it to function reliably and effectively to meet its goals and responsibilities

**Benevolence:** organisational action indicating genuine care and concern for the wellbeing of stakeholders

**Integrity:** organisational action that consistently adheres to moral principles and a code of conduct acceptable to employees, such as honesty and fairness.

(Gillespie and Dietz, 2009: 128).

## Our cases

Table 1 introduces our three cases and offers some points of comparison between each. It is followed by individual case summaries.

Each case summary clarifies the change context; then it offers a pen picture of what was going on in the organisation, in the words of people who work there; and it concludes with our observations about what we noticed about trust and change from our immersion in the case data.

Rather than searching for cross-case themes, we have endeavoured to let each case speak for itself, insofar as that is possible in the confines of a short report, and to learn from each case in its own context. We have organised our observations using the trust framework - Ability Benevolence Integrity - which may help readers to make their own connections across the cases. Our key observations are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Introducing our three cases

| Characteristics               | Case 1: London Borough of Croydon  | Case 2: Institute of Development Studies (IDS)  | Case 3: University Art School  |
|-------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>Sector</b>                 | Local government   | Research and policy institute   | Higher Education   |
| <b>Size</b>                   | 3,000 staff  | 235 staff   | 250 staff, 2,000 students  |
| <b>About the organisation</b> | <p>Croydon Council provides essential services to almost 365,000 residents and provides over £1.1 billion of services every year.</p> <p>The Council's vision is to deliver 'a prosperous, safe, healthy and sustainable future for the whole community'. It has been working to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in how it does this.</p> | <p>The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global institution for development research, teaching and learning, and impact and communications, based at the University of Sussex.</p> <p>Founded in 1966, IDS enjoys an international reputation based on the quality of their work and their commitment to applying academic skills to real-world challenges.</p> | <p>The School of Art, Design and Media at this University was formed around two years ago.</p> <p>The School has evolved since its foundation in 1859. That long heritage and local connection remains important. The college is keen to position itself as 'a platform for education, research and community engagement that extends into and beyond the city'.</p> |

| Characteristics   | Case 1: London Borough of Croydon  | Case 2: Institute of Development Studies (IDS)   | Case 3: University Art School  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p><b>Context for the research : what was going on in the organisation at the time of our research?</b></p> | <p>A new change programme, the Croydon Challenge, was initiated in late 2013 to make £100 million in efficiency savings over three years.</p>  | <p>IDS was refreshing its vision, structures and strategy to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.</p> <p>The structural changes were having a great impact on the staff in the organisation. Whilst many of the main structural changes had been completed, there was still uncertainty for a number of staff.</p>   | <p>The School of Art, Design &amp; Media was created around two years ago.</p> <p>Managers have since made some changes to the structure to address issues arising from a merger. At the time of the research interviews, there was a temporary management structure in place.</p> <p>A University review of the administrative staff structure was underway during our research.</p>  |
| <p><b>What this case shows us</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change-ability is a key aspect of trustworthiness</li> <li>• Increased risk and uncertainty during change can damage trust</li> <li>• The ways that communication is managed during change can build or damage trust</li> <li>• Trust ebbs and flows in change</li> <li>• The pace of change may damage perceptions of care for staff</li> <li>• Individual cases of genuine care for staff trump the talk</li> <li>• How leavers are treated is key</li> <li>• Holding core values builds trust, neglecting them damages it</li> <li>• Managers visibly role-modelling the new culture builds integrity</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A strong reputation can shore up trust in changing times</li> <li>• Clarity on strategic and personal direction can maintain trust</li> <li>• Involving staff in change helps to maintain trust</li> <li>• Inconsistent management may damage trust for individuals</li> <li>• Culture and behaviour lagging behind vision and structure change may damage trust</li> <li>• Integrity is not only about lofty ideals, but the experience of feeling listened to and valued</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant flux and uncertainty can undermine trust</li> <li>• Being 'in the know' and knowing key people can enhance trust</li> <li>• Organisational trust is multi-levelled: individual &lt;-&gt; industry</li> <li>• Lack of availability can undermine credibility</li> <li>• A caring, human and personal approach by managers is vital</li> <li>• Managing performance and development is also vital</li> <li>• Perceptions of fairness are relative</li> <li>• Ethics and rigour in the work can create a culture of integrity</li> <li>• Heavy workloads in change and how change consultation is managed can damage trust</li> <li>• Maintaining qualities that people value is essential in change</li> </ul> |

# Case I summary

## London Borough of Croydon

### Context

- The Croydon Challenge – designed to deliver £100 million of efficiencies by focusing on effectiveness and making a difference to local people - was initiated in late 2013, with details articulated to staff in summer 2014.
- Interviewees spoke about Croydon being on a journey towards effectiveness; ‘we know what we want to do and where we want to be’. Although we heard that they have not ‘quite delivered yet’, there was a strong sense that Croydon was now very capable of reaching where it wants to be. As one interviewee put it; ‘I can’t see us not doing it’.
- Compared to other councils, one interviewee described Croydon as being more innovative, more agile, and ‘quite pacey’.
- The Croydon Challenge has helped to build clarity of purpose. The future success of this project in enabling the council to recreate itself is seen as vital in building staff perceptions of trust in their organisation.
- ‘I think at times the pressure of delivery and pace can be at the expense of caring’.
- ‘It’s almost just following process... even when the pressure’s full-on, don’t forget the people’.
- ‘They [senior managers] try very hard, they put a lot of effort into talking about the well-being of staff’.
- ‘The support that I’ve had from my line manager... has been tremendous’.
- ‘It just makes perfect business sense to create a good environment for people... I just think we’ve lost our way a bit with all hands to the deck to deliver (employee speaking about organisational values).
- ‘I think the right modelling has come down through the senior team... but it just takes time for that to filter down. So I think it’s a real positive place to be’.
- ‘They’ve spent time to build relationships and create that trust, of doing what they say they’re going to do’.

### What was going on – in their words

- ‘I’ve always felt quite confident about their central capability for managing change... and there have been some major change programmes that went very well indeed’.
- ‘With any change, it brings risks and... there’s more added pressure on people to do more and then things get overlooked... or could do if we’re not careful’.
- ‘So, initially it seemed that we were being involved, all the staff were being involved’.
- ‘They [the senior team] were being honest with us, I felt quite confident’.
- ‘And then... we heard nothing more, pretty much nothing whatsoever, so [staff] start to get anxious’.
- ‘Those rumours [were]... going round and round, and then people just feel the increased anxiety’.
- ‘You hear about things that you’ve tested out, therefore the implicit message from that is, I value what you think’.
- ‘The pace at which [the change process] is moving is relentless, and there’s probably a limit to how much detailed consultation there can be’.

## What we noticed

### Ability

- Successfully managed change processes can build trust, whilst a perception that staff are not being fully involved or consulted can destroy it. It is difficult to maintain high levels of consultation over long periods of time. Therefore, the skill to manage change well and maintain its momentum is an important aspect of the Ability dimension in organisational trustworthiness.
- Increased risk and uncertainty during change are likely to negatively affect employees' trust in their organisation.
- How communication is managed during times of change can help to build or to damage trust. Good communication which builds trust is clear about the rationale for change; the communication process is timely, consistent and continues throughout the change; the content contains substance about the change and how it will affect people; there is congruence in the messaging from various sources; people feel consulted because they feel listened to and believe their views have been acted upon; it is conversational because it is open and two-way; and they have confidence in the source of the communication because they trust the individuals it is coming from.
- Change is a highly dynamic process; perceptions of trustworthiness can ebb and flow.

### Benevolence

- The pressure of change means that caring for staff well-being is even more important than usual. Yet the pace of change may mean that the people get forgotten.
- Individual cases trump the talk. Talking about staff well-being counts for little in the face of individual stories where care and concern for staff-wellbeing has been lacking. Conversely, showing that staff well-being comes first, through genuine care and support during busy, challenging times is highly valued.
- How the organisation treats people who are leaving impacts on perceptions of benevolence for those left behind.

### Integrity

- Living the core values, and doing so consistently across the organisation, becomes more important during change. Good intentions to be honest and fair can go by the wayside when it is 'all hands on deck' to deliver change promises. Yet embracing espoused values may help to create a happier, more productive working environment.
- Seeing formal leaders visibly role modelling the desired culture of the organisation builds trust. Not delivering on change 'promises' can damage it.

building trust in  
change through good  
communication

clarity  
consistency  
continuity  
content  
congruence  
consultation  
conversation  
confidence in the source

## Case 2 summary

### Institute of Development Studies

#### Context

- At the time of our interviews, IDS was refreshing its vision, structures and strategy to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.
- The structural changes were having a substantial impact on the staff in the organisation. Whilst many of the main structural changes had been completed, there was still uncertainty for a number of staff.

#### What was going on – in their words

- ‘The profile of the work that we do, the quality of the work that we do is very high’.
- ‘We’re really reactive to changes that are happening globally, for example, Ebola’.
- ‘We do have a lot of big long term programmes... and we always deliver on those’.
- ‘I do think everybody in the building is aspiring to achieving the end goal of reducing poverty and increasing social justice and equity’.
- ‘People work incredibly hard here. It’s a really driven place’.
- ‘How can I be sure that what I’m doing meets what I’m supposed to do, but also what the wider organisation is doing?’
- ‘There’s going to be a lot of matrix managing going on, so everyone doesn’t quite know what matrix managing means... So, there’s just a lot of uncertainty’.
- ‘She [a senior manager] seems fairly honest actually, and frank about what she thinks and what she’s going to do’.
- ‘She’s a really good representative of IDS... has brought a new fresh energy and she’s very specific in her direction... which is really good.’
- ‘I’m welcoming moving to be in a group with other people who are doing similar kinds of work’.
- ‘I definitely don’t feel like my opinion or my skills or my profession is held in very high regard’.
- ‘I felt like [my manager] cared about managing me... She was very encouraging... but also she was interested in developing me as a person, as a professional.’
- ‘Linear line management controls [have]... never been a strength’.

- ‘If you know the right questions to ask and you know where to ask for support it is there.’
- ‘We’re very responsive to individual requests and needs outside of policy or a norm here, because we’re quite flexible and open’.
- ‘I think the way in which the organisational change process has happened is fairly good. I think people have been consulted. I think the vision is congruent with what we mostly as individuals see we’re trying to do in the world. I think mostly people who are taking that leadership role are personally people of integrity’.
- ‘It’s an area for improvement in terms of, you know, respect and working well with each other and the expectations that people have of each other need to be managed.’
- ‘I’d like people to listen to me and I’d like people to respect me and what I bring’.



## What we noticed

### Ability


- Dedicated staff and a strong external reputation can underpin an organisation's ability to reliably and effectively meet its goals and responsibilities during a period of change.
- Clarity about direction from key individuals is another important factor in perceptions of the organisation's ability during a period of uncertainty.
- Staff who feel they had some control over changes taking place feel more comfortable with them, while others are still sitting with uncertainty and ambiguity – a reminder of the importance of involving people in change that affects them.

### Benevolence

- Managers build trust when they show genuine care and concern for staff, and support is there for those who ask. But when formal line management is not seen as a strength or an organisational priority, ratings of benevolence can be low.
- When change processes focus on restructuring, attention paid to culture and behaviours can lag behind. This can be damaging to trust.

### Integrity

- The integrity of the work provides an important steer through the uncertainty of change, yet it is the everyday experience of feeling listened to, valued and respected (or not) which builds a culture of integrity (or not).



reputation  
can help  
to maintain  
trust  
during change

## Case 3 summary

### University Art School

#### Context

- The School of Art, Design and Media was formed around two years ago from a merger between the Art & Design Department and the Media Department. We heard that ‘there was a particular change when the schools merged... I think we’re suffering from some aftershocks’.
- Managers have since made changes to the structure to address issues arising from the merger. A temporary management structure was in place at the time of our research.
- Further University-wide structural reviews were underway at the time of the research interviews and there was a strong sense of uncertainty for many staff.

#### What was going on – in their words

- ‘Everything’s changing, and everything’s changing in an environment where everything has just changed anyway’.
- ‘We’ve been in constant flux. You always seem to be chasing something. No one knows what’s happening. It just feels more chaotic’.
- ‘I’m probably one of the few people that understand the current structure, although I’m not super sure’.
- ‘We’re blessed with a lot of progressive heads and managers who really do have a concrete vision’.
- ‘In terms of trust, I trust more now that we’re... aiming at a level that is appropriate’.
- ‘The localised vision is very much like Freddy Kruger, it’s a nightmare’.
- ‘When you’re removed from the school’s central hub, you don’t have that day-to-day communication or understanding of what might be happening’.
- ‘It’s getting bigger and you don’t know who’s who anymore’.
- ‘I think some people... don’t know what they’re trusting or who they’re trusting because they just don’t have enough... contact with management’.
- ‘They [employees] might see us [managers] as being ineffectual because we’re being undermined by the next level up’.
- ‘I don’t see it as always having to depend upon things happening centrally... we can influence things’.
- ‘I have good faith in my immediate managers. I think they’re effective and I think they’re resourceful’.
- ‘They [the senior managers] have a lot of personal skills which impress me in dealing with people, and making decisions, and introducing change’.
- ‘They’re [the senior managers] more than capable of doing the job, it’s just that, at the moment, they’re completely overloaded’.
- ‘The School does actually go beyond trying to be fair and take the staff’s wellbeing into account’.
- ‘I think that individuals are caring and want to support people’.
- ‘I’ve always been supported and I can trust the School to, yes, put my interests first... it just feels more humane at every level’.
- ‘The staff development review processes that are here have faded to nothing’.
- ‘You can’t just sit down and have a straight discussion about things that are working and things that aren’t’.
- ‘I see myself working here the rest of my working life, because it’s so interesting, and I never ever felt like that about a place before’.
- ‘The University relies upon what I describe as their love budget... there’s a workload allocation and then there’s the time that you’ll give because of your passion for your subject’.
- ‘Goodwill gets exploited, bad practice doesn’t get... dealt with’.
- ‘I do think other organisations are worse... I do always think they’ve treated staff fairer here [at the University] than in other places that I’ve worked at’.
- ‘I don’t... trust that there is a robust mechanism in place that enables and recognises gender equality’.
- ‘I’ve just come out of a pre-interim exam board... and I think it was conducted with real rigour, a real sense that the students’ best interests were being served all the time’.

- ‘There is a real awareness of ethical practice and ethical behaviours that are instilled into the student practice here, that feed through to the staff’.
- ‘Our actual performance, our strategies as a School, our governance, our finances, everything, are so open that I think that does filter through to the way that people work’.
- ‘You’re never finished. Your inbox is never empty, nothing is ever done. Everything is next, next, next. There’s only do, do, do, do, do, react, react, react, react, react. It’s very difficult to find a chunk of time for yourself, where you’re not reacting’.
- ‘I can’t think of one example where the opinion on the ground has made a difference. So... I do think you just have to go along with what they [University senior managers] decide. I don’t think there’s any way to fight it’.
- ‘There is a culture and a climate here that I would really want to retain, which is all about the leading edge work that is highly regarding, high scoring and... it is a great place to be’.

- In an organisation with highly engaged staff who love what they do, robust performance management and staff development processes are essential in ensuring that goodwill does not get exploited and that bad practice is dealt with.

### Integrity

- Perceptions of fairness are relative.
- Taking ethical practice seriously, demonstrating rigorous and transparent organisational processes in the work itself can help to develop a culture of integrity.
- Integrity may be affected by heavy workloads in change, and feeling listened to (or not) during consultation about change.
- Striving to maintain and enhance the qualities that people value about the organisation is an essential part of maintaining trust during change.

## What we noticed

### Ability

- Constant flux and uncertainty can undermine trust in terms of perceptions of an organisation’s ability to reliably and effectively meet its goals and responsibilities.
- Those who feel ‘in the know’ and close to decision-makers are more trusting that things are heading in the right direction during periods of increased uncertainty. Being at a distance from the conversations and the people can undermine trust.
- Trust is a multi-levelled phenomenon. Perceptions of organisational trustworthiness are affected by individuals’ perceptions of trust in key individuals, in the business unit, in the wider organisation and in the wider higher education sector.
- In the press of change, perceptions of the capability of key people can be undermined by people’s experience of their availability.

### Benevolence

- An organisation that takes well-being seriously through effective policies and processes is a baseline for trust.
- Having managers who care, who offer a personal and human approach to policy, and who back-up that care with action, enhances perceptions of the organisation’s effectiveness at demonstrating genuine care and concern for staff.



# Our learning from the research

## Our reflections

### **Trust – easy to win, hard to lose, even harder to regain**

We noticed how quickly people warmed to the subject of trust, without being briefed about the subject of our interview beforehand. We were struck by how readily interviewees opened up and were willing to share their experiences around organisational trustworthiness with someone they had never met before. It felt that people were willing to trust the process without us having to earn their trust. In this instance, trust seemed easily won.

We noticed an increase in emotional intensity when people recounted how their trust in the organisation had been damaged during change. We sensed that they wanted to trust their organisation and, where they felt that trust had been damaged, they seemed to experience it keenly, as a loss. Conventional wisdom suggests that trust is easy to lose, but it fails to consider how hard it might be for the trustor, the person who loses trust in their organisation.

We found that those who were intent on rebuilding trust recognised it as important work and were personally committed to it. Yet the constant press of attending to change on multiple fronts did not make it a straightforward endeavour. We noticed that, while specific initiatives to build trust were highlighted and appreciated, there was much less emotional intensity in the conversation. We reflected on that disparity in emotional intensity, the high intensity in the stories about trust being damaged and the lower intensity in the accounts of rebuilding trust. We wondered whether it might make trust much harder to regain than to win in the first place...

## On trust and change

Connecting deeply with a topic through the process of research brings new learning for those involved. Here we share some of our learning through the questions it has prompted. We hope that this report will help you to engage more deeply with the topic of trust and to generate further questions of your own.

### **How has our understanding of organisational trustworthiness developed?**

Our research has strengthened an initial sense of trust being a complex, dynamic

phenomenon. Two things, in particular, have become more sharply focused. The first is the relationship between trust and change. We asked about trust and we were told about organisational change. The second is that trust ebbs and flows during change. These observations suggest that paying attention to the complex dynamics of trust may be particularly important during times of change.

If trust is a complex phenomenon, then what are the potential benefits (and risks) for managers in using frameworks to categorise trust?

We found that explicitly identifying components of organisational trustworthiness (cf. Mayer et al., 1995; Gillespie and Dietz, 2009) enabled interviewees, and ourselves, to apply differing lenses in making sense of the experience of trust.

Rather than being confronted with the notion of trust as a singular concept, highlighting various aspects of trust enabled us to acknowledge its multi-faceted nature and to recognise which aspects of trust were more salient for particular people at particular times. If you are a manager who wants to build or rebuild trust, understanding what is salient for people will be important in helping you make decisions about how to focus attention and resources.

Yet a risk with such frameworks is making an implicit assumption that trust can be broken down into components and put neatly into boxes. We found that the experience of trust is rather messier. One aspect of trust that we feel is not adequately considered in the frameworks is the felt emotional intensity of the experience of trust, as described in the reflections above.

### **So, how do employees make judgements about organisational trustworthiness?**

We learned that employees' judgements about organisational trustworthiness - in relation to ability, benevolence and integrity - are relative and highly contextual.

We found that employees make judgements about trustworthiness relative to what has gone before and perceptions of what is going on elsewhere. They consider whether their organisation is more or less trustworthy than it was before, and they make these judgements based on perceptions of organisational history and their personal experience. They also consider whether their organisation is more or less trustworthy than other places they have worked, or perceptions of what other organisations might be like.

But it is more complex than that. Employees may make multi-levelled judgements. Their judgements around the trustworthiness of their organisation were variously related to their trust in key individuals, in their own part of the organisation, in the wider organisation, the

industry and wider world.

Since individual employees have different experiences, we would not expect a high degree of agreement about the degree of organisational trustworthiness. But what about during times of change, might there be a tendency for perceptions of trustworthiness to fall?

### **Is a loss of trust inevitable at times of change? And does it matter?**

We cannot generalise from our data to provide a definitive answer. But here are some of the things we noticed in our research.

Firstly, we sensed that there might be some issues about trustworthiness lurking in our case organisations which have become more sharply delineated during change. Issues may be lurking around any or all of the six system components of organisational trustworthiness (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009):

- Leadership and management practice
- Culture and climate
- Strategy
- Structure, policies and processes
- External governance
- Public reputation.

Such issues might be known about but not discussed, at least not openly. Or perhaps if they are, they are not adequately addressed. These lurking issues may pose risks to perceptions of the trustworthiness of the organisation and may be exacerbated by organisational change. Shining a light on the above components may help an organisation to (1) highlight lurking issues that may damage trust; and (2) to then have a more open dialogue about the issues they have highlighted; so that (3) leaders and managers can choose how to respond.

But trust is not just about the trustee (here the organisation), it is also about the trustor (here the individual employee) who makes a judgement about the trustworthiness of their organisation. In trusting another party, a trustor is accepting a willingness to be vulnerable (Mayer et al., 1995). During periods of flux and uncertainty, many people may be feeling more vulnerable anyway. If so, might they be less willing to be vulnerable to the actions of their employer?

Yet, if change makes trust issues salient, periods of change may also provide opportunities for building or re-building trust. There were some indications in our case studies that particular leaders and managers were well-regarded for their actions during change.

From what we have learned, we would not expect that loss of trust is inevitable at times of change. But the salience of trust issues during change does suggest that there are increased risks, so we would advise managers to pay special attention to issues of trust during periods of flux and uncertainty. Making trust issues salient and discussable may help leaders and managers to build trust and, perhaps even more importantly, to avoid inadvertently damaging it.

### **But, can leaders and managers ever get it completely right?**

Trust is not something that you can tick off. As we have shown, it is a complex, dynamic, multi-levelled phenomenon. It is messy and will not sit neatly within the boxes of any framework.

So, there is a great deal that leaders and managers can trip up on. Take the 8 'C's of communication, for example, and you have eight interdependent elements to work on. Juggling eight elements is very difficult to do in practice, especially in a fluctuating environment where you will not have all the answers and where you are likely to be pressed for time and resources.

Another challenge for leaders and managers is that trust is personal. Furthermore, building trust is personally demanding. The personal element of trust means that specific actions taken to build trust may work better for some people than others. It is easy to criticise actions taken and not taken. When leaders and managers have invested a lot in trying to build trust, it may be difficult not to take such criticisms personally.

There are many avoidable ways that managers and leaders can get trust wrong. So the difficulties of getting trust 'right' is not a good reason for neglecting it. But where to start?

## Where should you focus your attention and resources during change to maintain trust?

1. **Identify the lurking issues.** There is quite enough that can potentially derail change without tripping over issues that are already known, even if not by you. Getting people together to surface and explore lurking issues is an important step.
2. **Don't underestimate the value of genuine care and concern for people's wellbeing.** As a leader you may not be able to address everything, at every level, and all at once. But it is in your gift to show you care. You may not be able to give certainty, but you can listen and support people in dealing with their uncertainty during change. Organisations, and HR in particular, also need to enable managers to provide support, care and concern.
3. **Get out there.** Being visible is vital. Senior leaders' role modelling desired behaviours is crucial for building staff perceptions of organisational trustworthiness.
4. **Be consistent.** It is not enough to espouse desired behaviours. Inappropriate behaviour inconsistent with values must also be challenged and dealt with in a fair and consistent manner
5. **Remember the 8 c's.** People expect 8 C's for trustworthy communication in change: Clarity, Consistency, Continuity, Congruence, Content, Consultation, Conversation and Confidence in the source. Communication must also flow up, down and across the organisation.

Now you have read this report, what would be your top five areas of focus?

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# Appendix I

## Interview questions

Q1. How would you rate your organisation's ability to reliably and effectively meet its goals and responsibilities?

| 1        | 2   | 3                       | 4    | 5         |
|----------|-----|-------------------------|------|-----------|
| Very low | Low | Neither high<br>nor low | High | Very High |

What makes you say that? Would your rating have been different a few years ago?

Looking at the cards what actions has your organisation taken to reinforce their competence?

What has been the impact?

How long has it taken for the impact to be noticed?

Q2. How would you rate your organisation's effectiveness at demonstrating genuine care and concern for the well-being of staff?

| 1        | 2   | 3                       | 4    | 5         |
|----------|-----|-------------------------|------|-----------|
| Very low | Low | Neither high<br>nor low | High | Very High |

What makes you say that? Would your rating have been different a few years ago?

Looking at the cards what actions has your organisation taken to reinforce their care and concern for staff?

What has been the impact?

How long has it taken for the impact to be noticed?

Q3. How would you rate your organisation's ability to act in an honest and fair way and consistently adhere to moral principles and a code of conduct acceptable to employees?

| 1        | 2   | 3                       | 4    | 5         |
|----------|-----|-------------------------|------|-----------|
| Very low | Low | Neither high<br>nor low | High | Very High |

What makes you say that? Would your rating have been different a few years ago?

Looking at the cards what actions has your organisation taken to reinforce their integrity?

What has been the impact?

How long has it taken for the impact to be noticed?



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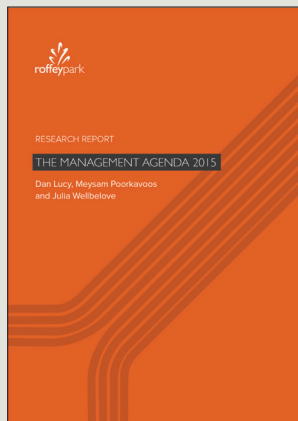
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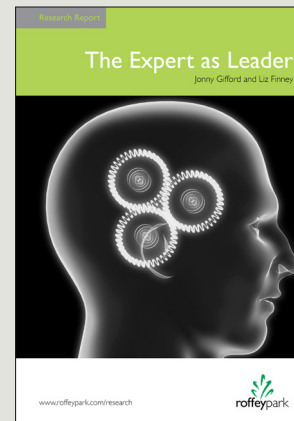
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### UK Management Agenda

Roffey Park's annual barometer of manager views and opinions on working life. This year, the survey covers questions such as: how effective are organisations at appointing internal successors to key roles?; how effective has the HR Business Partner model been?; how open are managers to innovation?; how trusting are employees of their organisation?

### Building trusting relationships – the role of anticipation and risk

A collaboration with academics from the University of Chichester, this study explores individuals' lived experiences of trust through a series of thought-provoking stories and personal reflections.

### Psychological flexibility

This research paper will explore the research behind the concept of psychological flexibility, and look at how it can be developed using Acceptance Commitment Training (ACT).

### HR Views on the Nine Box Grid

As a follow-up to this year's research report into the experiences of employees of the Nine Box Grid, this research paper will explore the views of HR practitioners on the Nine Box and ask how successful it is at supporting talent management and succession planning.

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How do employees view the trustworthiness of their organisation during change? What informs their judgments of organisational trustworthiness?

What can leaders do to sustain trust during turbulent times of organisational change? What can HR/OD practitioners do?

This research explores the employee view of organisational change, and in particular its impact on perceptions of trust. Three in-depth case studies of organisations undergoing transformational change are used to investigate employee reactions to change and the types of action that support or undermine feelings of trust.

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