

Addressing the Erosion of Trust in Local Government

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2025

Presented at the League of California Cities Annual Conference and Expo



WELCOME



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CEO & Executive Director
MODERATOR

SESSION GOALS



Understand drivers of
eroding public trust



Hear from city leaders
on the front lines



Explore leadership
practices to strengthen
trust in local government



Share actionable
strategies and tools

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT



WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO...

- Non-profit, non-partisan and committed to supporting Local Government
- Founded by the League of California Cities
- Serving all 483 cities
- Delivering practical training and easy-to-use resources so city leaders can effectively implement policies on the ground
- Celebrating 70 years of serving and supporting local government!



HELPING CITIES IMPLEMENT POLICY ON THE GROUND



SETTING THE STAGE



WHY TRUST MATTERS

“Trust is the currency of democracy.”
– Karen Cook, Sociologist

Local government is the most trusted level of government (Edelman, 2024).

Without trust:



Harder to adopt
policies



Lower community
satisfaction



Declining civic
engagement

KEY DRIVERS OF TRUST (...OR LACK THEREOF)



Perception of Government: Only 30% trust federal government; ~50% trust local government (Edelman, 2024)



Increased Divisiveness: Polarization doubled in last decade (Pew, 2023)



Decline in Reputable News Institutions: 250+ local newspapers lost in CA since 2005 (Brookings, 2023)



Negative Recall Bias: People remember bad news 5x stronger than good (Baumeister, 2001)



Squeaky Wheels: Dissatisfied residents are 3x more likely to give feedback (Cornell, 2019)

EROSION OF TRUST

California Context



Hostility against
city officials is rising:
harassment, recalls,
threats
(CalMatters, 2023)

Federal & state policy
turbulence – complex
budgets, mandates,
executive orders –
confuses residents

Social media spreads
misinformation **6x**
faster than facts
(MIT Media Lab, 2020)

PANELIST DISCUSSION



TOOLS TO BRING BACK TO YOUR CITIES



TIPS & TOOLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

Communicate transparently – Share both successes & challenges

Demonstrate good governance, ethics & values – Model civility & ethical behavior at all levels

Facilitate civil discourse – Facilitate structured public engagement

Go beyond the squeaky wheels & usual suspects – Engage hardly reached residents

Focus on rule of law & accountability – Explain decisions clearly



TIPS & TOOLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

Build mutual respect – Storytelling & roundtables

Leverage trusted messengers – Nonprofits, faith leaders, local voices

Model operational excellence – Incorporate core values into daily operations & showcase them

Build relationships & show compassion – Schedule informal check-ins and listening sessions when the city doesn't need anything formal from the community

TRUST BUILDING IN ACTION

Real-World Applications



Open data
dashboards for
budget
transparency



Ethics &
civility
ordinances



Deliberative
dialogues to
reduce hostility



Neighborhood
leadership
academies



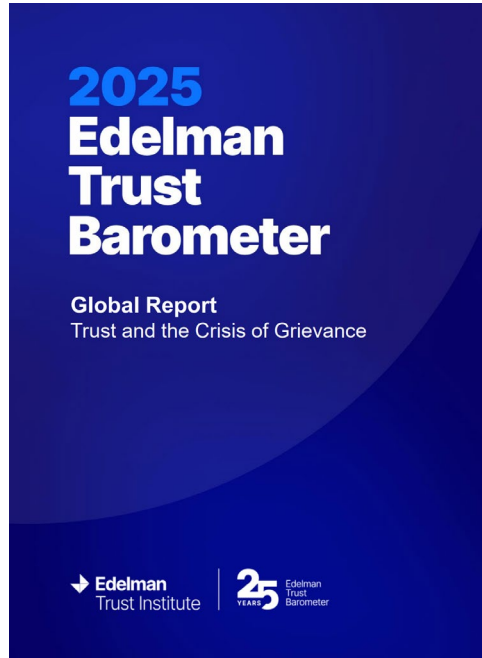
Community
partnerships

AUDIENCE Q&A

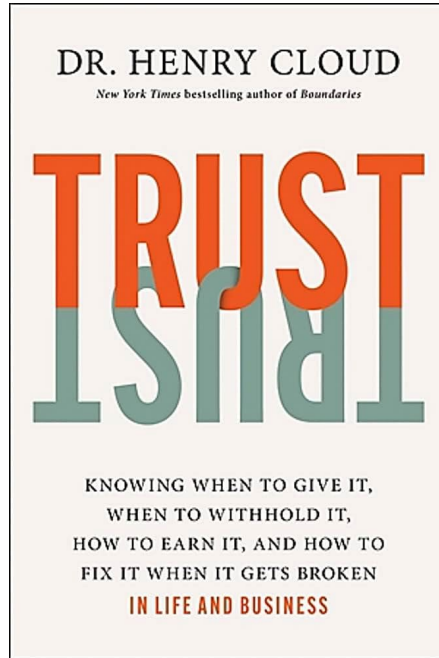


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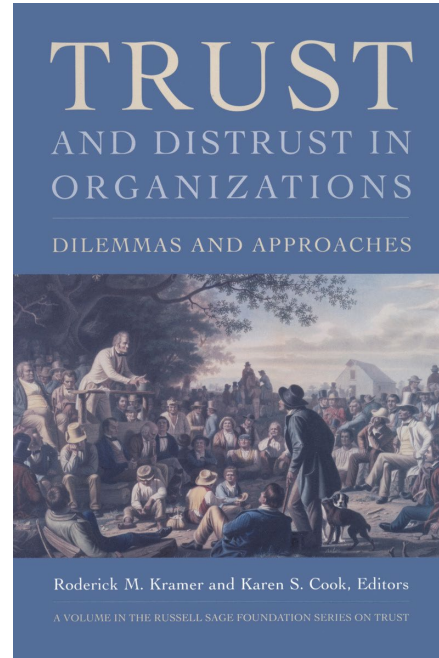
Recommended Reading List (different perspectives & viewpoints on the issue)



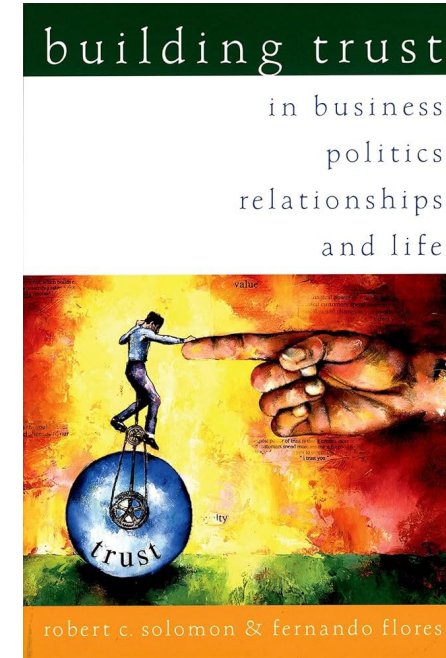
Edelman Trust Barometer
Edelman Trust Institute
Published Annually



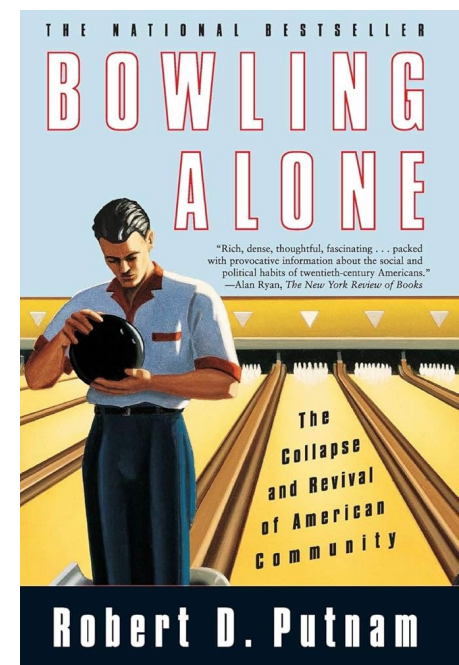
Trust
Dr. Henry Cloud
Published 2023



Trust and Distrust In Organizations
Roderick M. Kramer & Karen S. Cook
Published 2004



Building Trust
Robert C. Solomon & Fernando Flores
Published 2001



Bowling Alone
Robert Putnam
Published 2000

LOCAL GOVERNMENT-SPECIFIC INSIGHTS

Organizations with trust & engagement related tools and trainings for local leaders

Institute for Local Government – www.ca-ilg.org

ICMA – www.icma.org

National Civic League –
<https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/>



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Contact Us Anytime!



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THANK YOU!

"Local government is the foundation of democracy. If it fails, democracy will fail."

- Robert W. Flack, political scholar



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