Trust and Leadership in Crisis and Beyond
Visegrad Leadership Lesson for University Students

Note to instructor: Please feel free to adapt this lesson to your needs and style of teaching. This is meant to give you a lesson that can be finished in 45 minutes, but you can spend more time discussing and applying this lesson and stretch it to much longer, if desired. The following is based on our research, supported by a grant from the Visegrad Fund. You may use the content in the lesson verbatim to speak to the students, or put them in your own words, or summarize them. Materials: You will need to print page 2 as a handout for students.

Introduction to the Lesson

This lesson is about the importance of trust as the emotional core of the leadership relationship in crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. We will ground our study of leadership with contemporary leadership scholarship, which concerns what leaders do, how followers can influence, and the importance of understanding the context in which they operate. We will start with a scenario to stimulate our thinking about leadership, draw on resources from academic sources, discuss together and then ultimately apply the principles we learn to our own lives.

Learning outcomes

1. Understand leadership as a process, a relationship between leaders, followers and context.
2. Integrate the concept of trust within the leadership process- its components and outcomes.
3. Apply the consequences of interpersonal and social trust within the crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Describe the how to build interpersonal and social/institutional trust.
5. Construct ways to build social and interpersonal trust in our own lives and communities.

Structure of the Lesson

This lesson is structured in an interactive way, based on constructivist learning theory[1] and will include some time for individual application and group sharing.

1. Read the case study
2. Respond to the challenge questions individually (or as a group)
3. Discuss resources that provide insights about the case
4. Learn about leadership and the role of trust
5. Discuss interpersonal and social trust in this country during the pandemic
6. Apply the lessons of trust to our own lives and challenges

Case Study of Mann Gulch Wildfire

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[1] See Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., and Cocking, R.R. (Eds.) (1999). How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Read the following case study[2] and respond to the challenge questions:

On August 5, 1949 in a forest fire in Mann Gulch, Montana, 12 United States Forest Service smokejumpers. Wagner Dodge, an experienced and accomplished foreman, led the team of firefighters who dropped from an airplane to fight the fire.

"Roughly one hour after the smokejumpers landed on the ground, the blaze accelerated dramatically. Dodge and his crew tried to sprint to safety at the top of a ridge. He soon came to the realization that the crew could not outrace the blaze. Dodge came to a rapid, intuitive decision without consulting with any of his crewmembers; in fact, he invented a tactic that no one had ever employed. He bent down and lit a small fire in the grassy area roughly 200 yards from the top of the ridge, placed a handkerchief over his mouth, and lay down in the smoldering ashes."

'Dodge's crew did not understand what he was trying to accomplish. He pointed to his fire and yelled, "This way! This way!" Imagine what the smokejumpers thought as they watched Dodge pull out his tiny matchbook, a raging fire directly behind him. One firefighter described his impression at the time: "I thought, with the fire almost on our back, what the hell is the boss doing lighting another fire in front of us?" As the crew raced by, one person reacted to Dodge by shouting, "To hell with that! I'm getting out of here!" Everyone ran past Dodge, ignoring his frantic pleas, carrying their heavy tools up the hill. Sadly, all but two of the crewmembers perished in the race for the top of the ridge, whereas Dodge emerged completely unscathed after just a few moments. The fire blew right over him, because he had deprived it of grassy fuel in a small area. '

Wagner Dodge, the leader of the group, did not attend a three-week training session with the other crew-members during that summer. In fact, many of the men had never worked with Dodge prior to that day. Many smokejumpers considered Dodge to be a man of few words. Dodge, in fact, did not even know the names of many men on his crew. After the tragedy, one survivor told investigators, "Dodge had a characteristic in him...It is hard to tell what he is thinking." During the landing and initial attempts to fight the fire, Dodge had communicated very little with his crew. He did not ask for their assessments of the situation or for their advice regarding how to fight the fire. Dodge also never explained why he chose to attack the blaze as he did.

Challenge Questions:

1. Why do you think the firefighters responded to Dodge the way they did?

2. Before and during the crisis, what are some things Dodge could have done to get the other fire fighters to trust his approach to the dangerous situation?

3. What is good leadership and what is its relationship to trust?

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[2] The case study is adapted from a telling of the story in Roberto, M. (2005) *Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer*. Wharton School Publishing.

Teaching note: Print the case study on page 2 for students. Have students think on their own about the case study and questions before you have them discuss it. Then discuss these questions as a group. You may want to capture some key ideas on the board.

Insights about the case

Let's explore some ideas about leadership and trust. Please read and discuss the following resources as they relate to our learning goals.

Michael Roberto, expert in leadership and decision-making about the Mann Gulch case, from his book *Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer*:
"[This] tragic story illustrates vividly that a leader's style of communication and approach to making decisions shapes the extent to which he garners the trust and respect of his subordinates. Despite respect for a leader's expertise and position of authority, individuals will not put their full and complete trust in someone who has not been open with them, built a relationship with them, and given them some input on past decisions. They also will not put their faith in someone who has not explained his rationale for past choices or illustrated how he approaches and solves tough problems." (pg. 219)

Leadership takes us beyond our own mental agility to helping others develop the same. Dodge failed to do this in the crisis. Organizational psychologist Adam Grant explained, "If you're a firefighter, dropping your tools doesn't just require you to unlearn habits and disregard instincts. Discarding your equipment means admitting failure and shedding part of your identity"[3]. This is the challenge of leadership: sometimes you have help people admit failure and rethink their assumptions, and renegotiate their identity.

Introduction to leadership

What does leadership involve? How do scholars operationalize this term that is used so much today without much clarity? Barbara Kellerman of Harvard University emphasizes that leadership is not just about "a leader doing something", but about the dynamic interplay, the ecosystem of three main components: leaders, followers and context. Understanding the leadership failure at Mann Gulch doesn't simply involve highlighting what Wagner Dodge did or did not do, but understanding his relationship to the other firejumpers and their relationship and actions toward their common goal. Too often studying leadership becomes 'leader centric' and we could get caught up in idealizing or putting an undue amount of blame on a single person. Followers also have responsibilities and choices. Third, is the context that leaders and followers find themselves in. The men at Mann Gulch needed to act quickly in an emergency where their skills were needed, but in this situation their skills and intuition actually impaired their ability to act in a novel way. They didn't listen to Dodge because he had not built trust with them, but they also didn't rethink in the moment how their experience did not match the

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[3] Grant, A. (2021) Think Again. Penguin Random House. Page 7.

moment, carrying their heavy tools which slowed them down[4]. The context also has to do with the common goal, change, or purpose that leaders and followers are pursuing. In one of the most famous definitions of leadership, scholar Joseph Rost defined it as "an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes."[5] At the heart of leadership is an intentional relationship toward real change and agreement on purpose(s).

Philosopher Robert Solomon called trust "the emotional core of leadership." He said, "it is a strength, a precondition of any alliance or mutual understanding."[6] There is no cooperation, no community, no commerce, no conversation without trust. According to Marianna Pogosyan, "The word trust has its origins in the Indo-European root droust meaning "solid" and "lasting." In Old English it referred to "confidence" and "dependence," while in the 14th century Chaucer used the word trust to mean "virtual certainty and well-grounded hope." Trust and reciprocity are considered to be the "basis of all human systems of morality." If a leader does not have the trust of her followers, there are two casualties: money and time.

There are two aspects of interpersonal trust: cognitive and affective.
1. **Cognitive trust** is based on our knowledge and evidence about those we choose to trust.
2. **Affective trust**, on the other hand, is born out of our emotional ties with others, including the security and the confidence we place in others based on the feelings generated by our interactions.

Let's think of examples of cognitive and affective trust. If we think about a scientist providing reasons for getting vaccines during the pandemic, we use cognitive trust to assess the scientist's competence and credentials. We use affective trust to assess whether that scientists is working in our best interest as well as the emotional reactions to science informing our actions about our bodies, based on previous experience or culture.

Why is trust so important? *(may want to discuss with students, if time allows)*
1. When we're connected with others, we gain more information, which helps us solve problems more easily.
2. Trust begets belonging: Affective impact of social network- being part of a group is intrinsically good for well-being and support.
3. It makes our lives more efficient- If I can trust you to do something, I don't have to check in on you doing it. This frees up time for you do focus on your tasks
4. Oxytocin released in the brain when we trust, it is linked with joy
5. It helps others. It is one of the ways we exercise faith- but it benefits the other person (they grow and gain confidence because you trusted them)

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[4] In his book *Think Again*, organizational psychologist Adam Grant makes the case that according to investigators of the Mann Gulch incident the crew could have made it up the hill ahead of the blaze 15-20% faster.
[5] Rost, J.C. (1991). *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Praeger
[6] Solomon, R. (2003) The Myth of Charisma. In Ciulla, J. *The Ethics of Leadership*. Sage.

Populism Breeds Distrust

To turn to the political sphere, populist leadership ultimately undermines trust. Jan-Werner Müller defines populism in his book *What is Populism*? as 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and unified – but ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior'. While populist leadership wears the mask of similarity with the people—and speaking for the 'will of the people'—to try to gain trust, in a crisis like COVID-19, populists like Donald Trump in the U.S. lost trust with the public. As researchers suggest,

> "At the end of 2020, the United States and Brazil had two of the highest number of COVID-19 cases globally, as well as COVID-19-related deaths. These numbers stood in stark contrast to those reported in other countries where expert advice had been followed. And this juxtaposition, we submit, evidenced to the people who had originally trusted Trump and Bolsonaro that, contrary to their message of self-trust, the people do not always 'know best'. In a complex matter like COVID-19, common sense is not preferable to expert knowledge and analysis. The people are not competent to make decisions regarding COVID-19, including how to minimize the virus's spread; they are in a 'zone of incompetence'."[7]

According to Moffit, populist leadership thrives especially in crises, which begins with the actual presentation of the problem/crisis and the use of various emotions such as fear. The features of crisis management include manufacturing or identifying failure, framing the crisis in terms of people, using media and promotion, and designing simple solutions and advocating strong leadership to the leader. Populism also reinforces mistrust within its supporters, as shown in The 2020 Global Attitudes Survey- right-wing populist party supporters in Europe are less likely than other groups to say that most people can be trusted[8].

COVID-19 in the Czech Republic: A leadership study

"During the first wave, there was a "wartime" appeal to solidarity and social responsibility, the acceptance of which helped ensure a surprisingly minor caseload.[9] This message was particularly strong around masking. Masking, as well as adhering to lockdown measures, were expressed in terms of group identity and group effort against a common enemy. The lack of victory after the combined individual as well as group sacrifice helped swing the pendulum from the Czech Republic being negligibly affected during the first wave to consistently being among the worst affected in subsequent waves.

Individual statements of information were disseminated broadly and clearly during the pandemic. The problem emerges when the various bits of information are engaged with across time and across waves. Clear statements about what is going on beyond the immediate day of reference are noticeably inconsistent.[10] Within the time period of a few days, the government

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[7] Vitale, D. & Girard, R. (2022) Public trust and the populist leader: A theoretical argument. *Global Constitutionalism*. Cambridge University Press.

[8] See Global Attitudes Survey 2020: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/03/social-trust-in-advanced-economies-is-lower-among-young-people-and-those-with-less-education/

[9] Ministerstvo zdravotnictví České republiky, "COVID-19: Přehled aktuální situace v ČR."

[10] Government of the Czech Republic, "Measures Adopted by the Czech government Against the Coronavirus."

could reverse its declared policy position. Businesses and schools were allowed to reopen only to be limited or closed in short order.[11] For safety, masks had to be worn in public transport except for the drivers, who one would expect would be at greatest risk of infection and vectoring.[12] The information was disseminated across multiple media, as well as posted by businesses and other effected establishments. This did not translate to the information being easily understood.

These mixed messages led to the pandemic response presenting a challenge to popular conceptualizations of science. Popularly conceived, science is a static statement of truth. In actuality, science is a dynamic process of searching for truth. As the pandemic progressed, statements by decision makers "supported by science" became less and less convincing. To the popular ear, science kept changing its mind. This gave far greater breathing space to anti-science and anti-leadership positions, muddying the waters of credibility. This situation would be bad enough if it were not exacerbated by the consequences of the health/economy debate within the government. Once it became evident that the worth of the individual lives of the population had ben reassessed, trust in the leadership and their claims to support were irreparably damaged."

Teaching Note (if time allows) Question for discussion: What damaged trust between the public and the government in the Czech Republic during the pandemic? (this is a comprehension question from this short case study, but you may ask students for their observations of leadership and trust during the pandemic).

Interpersonal and Social trust During the Pandemic

We can assess trust on two levels: interpersonal (as we've been discussing) and social (or institutional) trust. Social trust is defined as, "an individual's expectation that other people and groups can be relied on…[It] is one of the most important synthetic forces within society."[13] Not only is social trust an elixir for social functioning, but as part of a nation's social capital, trust affects vital economic variables such as GDP growth and inflation rates[14]. Tarun Khanna points out that when citizens lack trust, they are less likely to comply with laws and regulations, pay taxes, tolerate different viewpoints or ways of life, contribute to economic vitality, resist the appeals of demagogues, or support their neighbors. Without trust, societies are at risk of chaos and conflict. They are less likely to create and invent."[15]

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[11] Government of the Czech Republic, "Measures Adopted by the Czech government Against the Coronavirus."

[12] Government of the Czech Republic, "Measures Adopted by the Czech government Against the Coronavirus."

[13] Brandt, M.J., Wetherell, G. & Henry, P.J. (2015) *Changes in Income Predict Change in Social Trust: A Longitudinal Analysis*. Political Psychology, 36 (6).

[14] E.g. Knack & Keefer (1997) Does Social Capital Have an Economic Payoff? A Cross-Country Investigation. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. See: https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/112/4/1251/1911732?login=false

[15] Khanna, T. (2018) *Trust: Creating the Foundation for Entrepreneurship in Developing Countries.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic we saw grave consequences connected to a lack of both interpersonal and social trust. The following research study analyzed infection and fatality rates relative to population and other characteristics, and found that interpersonal and social distrust were major contributing factors.

(if time) Read the excerpt below and discuss/ think about: How would you explain these results in terms of what happened in your country? How did trust affect our health so profoundly?

Research focus: How did interpersonal and social trust influence outcomes of the pandemic? A study by: Dieleman, J. & COVID-19 National Preparedness Collaborators (2022) Pandemic preparedness and COVID-19: an exploratory analysis of infection and fatality rates, and contextual factors associated with preparedness in 177 countries.

The large research team found that "Measures of trust in the government and interpersonal trust, as well as less government corruption, had larger, statistically significant associations with lower standardised infection rates. High levels of government and interpersonal trust, as well as less government corruption, were also associated with higher COVID-19 vaccine coverage among middle-income and high-income countries where vaccine availability was more widespread, and lower corruption was associated with greater reductions in mobility."

The medical research team's findings perfectly coincide with our discussion of leadership and trust: "Fortunately, trust is something that can be fostered, even in a crisis. Governments and communities maintain or increase the public's trust by providing accurate, timely information about the pandemic, even when that information is still limited, and by clearly communicating the risk and relevant vulnerabilities. The identity of the messenger in risk communication can also improve or damage trust." The team stated that the lessons of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa illustrate the critical importance of building the public's trust in the government response. For example, in Liberia, Ebola survivors were celebrated in communities, while community youth leaders, pastors, and imams were trained to conduct daily household surveillance and identify infected patients.

How about building interpersonal trust?[16]
1. Enact solidarity: show care and concern for others and their interests.
2. Take responsibility instead of blaming situation or others
3. Give help or assistance
4. Invite and accept changes to your decisions

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[16] Source: Six, F., Nooteboom, B. & Hoogendorn, A. (2010) Actions that build interpersonal trust: A relational signaling perspective. *Review of Social Economy*, 68 (3). Pg. 295.

5. Seek the advice of others
6. Give responsibility to others, depend on them
7. Be open and direct about task problems and motives
8. Disclose information in an accurate and timely way

Conclusion: Now what? How you can build trust and lead well

The Mann Gulch case offers us a crisis scenario not unlike COVID-19 in some ways:

- Lack of trust affects communication during a crisis moment. Since the firefighters lacked affective trust with Dodge, they did not understand his commands even though he was highly experienced in his profession.
- A pandemic called for new ways of operating in society, ways that go against people's prior habits and experiences. The firefighters were being asked to do something contrary to what they knew and could not give it up because they couldn't see the new objective (get out of there in time). Leaders must confront people with loss, but in a crisis people need to know that the loss will actually have a material effect.
- Populist leaders in Central Europe wanted to declare an early victory over the pandemic even when experts (e.g. EU & WHO) were predicting a new wave of infection. Leadership is hard when you have to focus attention on preparation, but that is why engaging your stakeholders is all the more powerful. With trust you save time, you collaborate and coordinate action much more effectively.

What about you? There are many situations that you are in right now that you could be a leader and follower: among your friends, in the classroom, at your university, in the community. You may or may not have a formal position. If you see a change that is needed, will you take the initiative? If you do, then you will need to build trust with your collaborators. What have you learned from this lesson about it? Take the above lists on how to build social and interpersonal trust and apply them to one specific situation in your life:

- How could you take steps to be more trusting?
- How could you build trust with those with whom you work and study?

Then, when it comes to crisis you will have built the cognitive and affective trust needed to work through the ambiguity and challenge.

Teaching note: Students should write down their challenge to themselves. Wrap up with some final words or a quick review.