
The Trust Gap

In the 1960s, 70 million children from the post-war baby boom became teenagers and young adults.

Concurrent with this phenomenon – or perhaps because of it – cultural change accelerated as the unprecedented size of this group and its members' newfound power, abundance and willingness to challenge conventional thinking reshaped music, fashion, societal norms, education, politics and the workplace.

Some of this change was refreshing and helpful. Some was not.

At the time, differences between Boomers (an endearing term applied years later) and their more conservative parents were explained as The Generation Gap.

At the core of the generational differences was a belief codified as "Don't trust anyone over 30."

Well, my friends, a gap is back. And it's inside your organization.

The Gap in the Workplace

The gap that's back in today's organizations is a Trust Gap. It's back because the worldwide recession has prompted significant change and, with it, uncertainty in the workplace.

Is our business model broken or is our execution ineffective? If sales remain flat to down, will there be more layoffs? Why does it feel like I'm the only leader willing to try something different? Is my role in the organization valued? Why isn't everyone pulling their weight? Does my boss have a plan to jump-start our engine?

The Trust Gap inside your organization was masked, minimized or simply ignored during more successful times. A rising tide may lift all ships, but that same tide covers lots of trash. The tide is now out, and the gap is evident once again.

The Trust Gap is the single greatest threat to organizational success.

Today's gap is not a generation gap in the purest sense. While the Trust Gap carries symptoms of the Generation Gap of 50 years ago, the issue lurking deep within your organization transcends demographics. It's true there are plenty of challenges related to leading an organization with as many as four generations comprising the workforce (Silents, Boomers, Xers and Millennials).

Marketplace pressures and workplace changes have flattened organizations and limited chances for advancement, causing many employees to compete for a handful of plum assignments. With fewer opportunities for advancement and less tolerance for under-performance, generational conflict is once more on the rise. But the conflict goes deeper.

Today's workplace conflict is based on a difference in values, ambitions, mindsets and demographics. These differences reflect misalignment of organizational purpose and they're fueled by inconsistent communication. Lack of alignment leads to morale problems and ineffectiveness. According to Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak in *Generations at Work* (AMACOM, 2000), these differences cause managers and employees to identify more closely with their generation and blame other generations for workplace problems.

The Trust Gap widens as the credibility and competence of leaders are called into question.

Closing the Trust Gap

In *The Trusted Advisor* (The Free Press, 2001), David Maister says that a trust-based relationship is marked by two primary factors: 1) the ability to converse about a broad range of issues, and 2) a deep personal relationship.

Maister further notes that trust means "keeping one's self-interest in check" and that trust can be won or lost very rapidly.

Many of the changes of the last 24 months are here to stay. More change lies ahead. These changes are testing leaders as they steer their organizations through the worst worldwide recession in 80 years. (See "[Leading in The New Normal](#)" [February 2010](#).) The forces driving these changes are expected to continue and could intensify: worldwide economic pressures; rapid workplace changes; downsizing; mergers, acquisitions and consolidations of companies; elimination of some middle management positions; shifting workforce demographics; seniority as only one element of promotion; and technology.

To close the Trust Gap, you must first recognize that the gap exists. It's wider in some organizations than others. But make no mistake: Unless leadership has done a remarkable job during the downturn to define reality and inspire hope with a credible plan for moving forward, your organization is at risk.

The next step in closing the Trust Gap is pinpointing your most significant trust issues. Go to www.bustin.com/resources and download free tools you can use to assess [how your values are showing up \(or not\) inside your organization](#) and to [assess the degree of unity that exists \(or is lacking\) within your organization](#). I'll make these free tools available through Labor Day before removing them from my website.

The third step is harder. Once the issues hindering trust have been pinpointed, they must be addressed. *Where is the breakdown occurring between our values and our behavior? Why is this so? How is this behavior showing up in our organization? Could I be the problem? What changes must I make in myself? What changes in the organization must I drive?*

Organizations whose fiscal year ends December 31 are entering the ideal period for holding [strategic planning](#) sessions. Whether you choose to finish the year strong with a planning session or assemble your leadership team in January when a fresh spirit of energy prevails, pull your team together and go to work.

My experience leading nearly 150 planning sessions is that the value of these sessions is more about trust-building and priority-setting than generating the next so-called big idea or building a budget. The process for an effective planning session is the subject of my most recent book ([Lead The Way, Wheatmark, 2008](#)).

The question is not *Is there a Trust Gap in our organization?*

The question is *How must we address the issue of trust in our organization?* ■