

BUILDING TRUST

Trust-building is a two-way street: your audience needs to trust you, you need to trust them, and you both have to trust your message. Does this emphasis on trust seem naïve and out of date in an era of sophisticated cynicism towards all authority figures, especially those in public life? Maybe so, but it's pretty clear that cynicism isn't working too well. Recent events demonstrate that a jaded public is easy prey to a disabling apathy that can turn into a dangerous paranoia at both ends of the political spectrum. Too often we feel ourselves at the mercy of exploitative journalists who delight in exposing even the slightest indication of impropriety—or of political handlers who flaunt their ability to sell any candidate, any party, any policy. It's no wonder that daily exposure to such cynicism can build a hard, self-protective shell of knee-jerk suspicion. These days audiences come prepared to disbelieve.

This situation presents a daunting challenge to those of us who still have the courage to speak in public. Even the strongest egos among us face an uphill battle when we try to come across as caring, honest, authentic, and upbeat in the face of widespread cynicism about leaders and advocates of all descriptions.

The best way to arm yourself against the potential mistrust of your audience is to analyze the problem. This means that speakers assess the trust situation before each important speech. If mistrust is in the air, is it likely to be caused by me, by my message, or by the nature of the situation? The good news is that in each case, I can suggest probable causes for the problem and concrete steps the speaker can take to make things better. Let's look first at the probable causes, and then suggest some concrete solutions.

When the Problem is You

- You lack personal credibility with your audience
- You've done something in the past to alienate them
- You represent an ideology, policy, or organization that a good portion of your audience rejects
- You have authority over the audience that makes them uncomfortable
- Your speaking style lacks confidence or enthusiasm
- Your tone or attitude is wrong--too condescending or formal or insincere
- You fail to establish a personal connection with your audience

When the Problem is Your Message

- Your talk is filled with bureaucratic jargon, clichés
- It lacks new information
- It's irrelevant to your listeners' concerns
- It's too complex or quantitative
- It's too controversial for this audience
- Your message is disrespectful of the audience's perspective
- Your ideas are too theoretical or academic
- Your rhetoric is too obviously manipulative

When the Problem is the Situation

- The audience is angry or fearful for reasons beyond your control
- They're highly polarized around some emotional issue
- They don't want to be there
- They've already heard too much
- Your predecessors were boring, irrelevant, or untrustworthy
- They can't understand you
- The room is uncomfortable

HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF TRUSTWORTHY

Establish your credibility

- Summarize your credentials in your introduction
- Tell personal stories
- Give concrete examples from your experience
- Refer to your readings or the latest studies
- Suggest new perspectives or solutions
- Identify yourself with trusted others—either famous or known to the audience
- Always stay “in the moment”

Acknowledge your limitations

- Express doubts, fears, past failures, changes of heart, disappointments, negative feelings, ambivalence
- Expose your assumptions, presuppositions, ideologies

Express concern for your audience

- Establish rapport in the first few minutes
- Show enthusiasm for being with them
- Particularize them
- Stress your shared values
- Praise them for some achievement
- Acknowledge their concerns, difficulties, and potential differences from your perspective
- Ask for their input

HOW TO MAKE YOUR MESSAGE TRUSTWORTHY

- Put your bottom line up top (**almost** always)
- Give a roadmap
- Personalize your message—especially by highlighting what it means to **them**
- Use concrete visual images, metaphors, analogies
- Use facts and statistics carefully, sparingly, and reveal where they came from
- Pre-empt their questions and then answer them
- Acknowledge potential counterarguments with respect and then respond to them
- Be upbeat in spite of difficulties
- Avoid clichés and bureaucratic jargon
- Be open about exactly what you want your audience to think or do

HOW TO LEARN TO TRUST YOUR AUDIENCE

- Find out in advance who they are and how they think
- Convince yourself they respect you, even if they don't agree with you
- Be confident that you can help them think through the issue at hand
- See them as partners in a dialogue or joint project, **not** adversaries
- Focus on a series of sympathetic faces in each section of the room
- Assume their intelligence and good faith, but not their automatic interest, agreement, or knowledge of details
- Remind yourself they're struggling, as you are, to understand the world in order to improve it
- Accept they have the right to disagree with you and go on from there

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