There's a trust crisis right now and it matters.

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Recent global events demonstrate how the breakdown of trust has real world, destructive consequences. Arguably, what we see right now in geopolitics is a manifestation of the wholesale loss of trust in institutions and the rise of a win-lose approach to all problems.

This matters whether you run a country or a business. Trust is not a fluffy nice-to-have. Rather, it is the fundamental foundation of value creation. But old assumptions that connected us are rapidly breaking down, and now require a proactive and intentional approach for rebuilding — one that challenges transactional thinking and focuses on high trust, high value relationships. In today's context, there is the immediate challenge of being more human in the age of AI. Leaders and firms who succeed in this will stand out in a world of mistrust.

Trust faces strong headwinds. In business, increasing pressure to perform in a challenging environment is fuelling transactional behavior by leaders. People are anxious about what the rapid development of AI means for them. On top of this, if not managed well, technology can be a way of depersonalising employee and customer experiences to such an extent that human relationships feel less important. Throw into this the conflicting views that different generations have about the nature of work and where loyalty lies.

This year's Edelman Trust Barometer put it this way: "Widespread grievance is eroding trust across the board."

If not actively tackled, low levels of trust will destroy any value that might otherwise be created. Here's an example of how distrust manifests itself on a daily basis in large businesses.

This has always been the case, even before our increasingly digitized society changed the speed and means by which we collect and discern opinion. That said, our work has become harder to carry out — even as it has arguably become more important than ever to produce.

A transformation project goes wrong

The leadership of a Europe-based company in the business services sector was attempting to deliver a transformation project to standardize its business strategy across multiple countries, and they kept getting stuck. The project faced resistance from within, as most countries had developed affinities for specialized technologies and were reluctant to change. Lacking standardization, the company had on its hands a patchwork problem. In seeking to embrace a more unified strategy, it found some leaders embraced simplification. Others protested change, arguing they were succeeding under the status quo.

But senior leaders determined change was necessary for cross-selling across national boundaries to large customers. Without it,

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customer databases and work processes would remain siloed in different territories.

When I got involved, it was clear that there was no trust between the three sets of people involved: the country heads, European leadership and the CIO's team.

Why? They were all highly motivated to do the right thing: help the business succeed. But their efforts were focused on the technical, delivery, and cost aspects of the project, and none on the relationships involved. As a result, they behaved in a transactional way, which meant all discussions were contractual in nature. It was if they were customers and supplier, not colleagues.

This transactional mindset led to defensive behaviours, finger pointing and communication breakdown.

I helped them align around the ambition, commit to partnership, define what that meant in practice, and reset their relationship so that they could truly collaborate to create more value together and for their customers.

But this story contains two critical lessons that illustrate why it is so important to focus on building high trust relationships in business: change is challenging, which means you need to have relationships which can adapt in a collaborative

way; and people are risk-averse, which means they have to trust the change and those behind it before they will choose to work with them.

To this end, the imperative to all leaders and teams is simple: choose trust.

The Trust Triangle

Trust is something to be built and grown in an intentional, conscious way, not as a hoped-for aspect of professional relationships. And in a world where there is so much mistrust, being a trusted leader or firm is a shining advantage when it comes to winning business, leading people and building capital value.

So, if you are going to actively choose trust as a central plank in your sales or leadership, how will you do this? The key is to actively design high trust relationships, and then ensure you follow through. And here are the design guidelines.

There have been a number of definitions of trust in business. One was in a book written in 2001 by my cousin David Maister and others, and resulted in the Trust Equation. Our definition of trust builds on this and others and, we believe, is a practical framework which provides the basis for relationships that emphasise the win-win approach to doing business.

The key is to actively design high trust relationships, and then ensure you follow through.

It is the Trust Triangle and says that trust between people has three dimensions: clarity, character and capability. You can use this framework as the basis of your own approach to key relationships or initiatives and, even more usefully, as an agenda for discussion and agreement with those with whom you want to build trust.

Clarity

Have you ever completed a project, knowing you have done a great job, but the key decision maker is unhappy? The reason is usually misalignment of expectations. This is lack of clarity. It results in mistrust; 'next time I will make sure they do it right'.

Clarity

Strategic Narrative: alignment of ambition, purpose, mission, vision and value creation. 'Why'

Capability

The way we combine our competencies and manage the relationship. 'What'

Character

The way we show up: behaviours that build trust and bring to life the Strategic narrative. 'How'
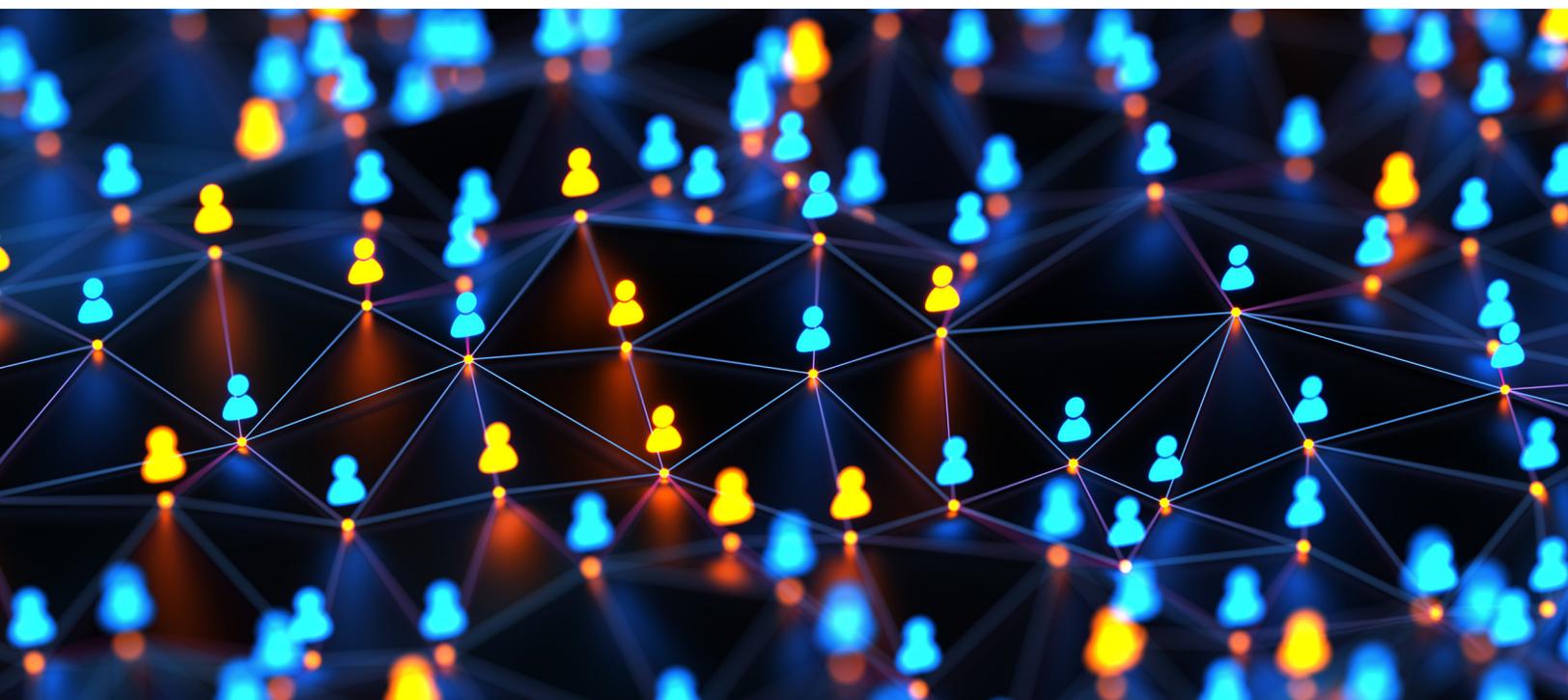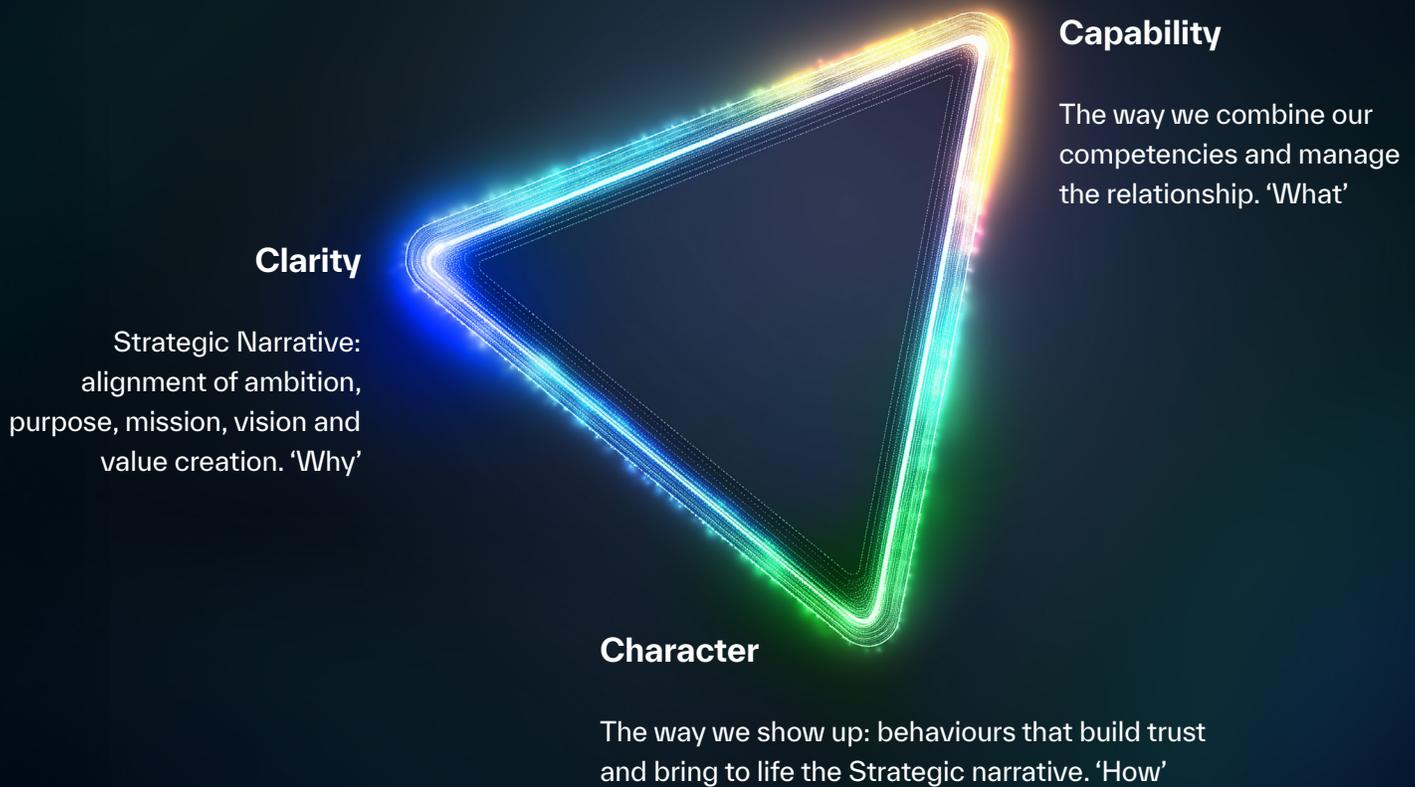
So, clarity right at the start is critical as the basis of trust. It means those involved are completely clear and aligned on what they are trying to achieve together and why. This is what I call the Strategic Narrative of the relationship, and it is the 'why'. It makes it easier to respond to challenges and opportunities because those involved are pointing in the same direction.

Capability

The danger is that these become warm words which get forgotten. I call the start of a relationship the wedding. Everyone loves each other and declares how wonderful it will all be. In business this is typically the time when the deal is struck, the transformation programme is agreed, the new leader is appointed, the board meets for the first time.

But it is in the marriage where the real work takes place. The professional equivalent of the baby crying at 3am one year on. Things are challenging, there are complications, something has happened which puts stress on the relationship.

That is when trust is really built and grown. It demonstrates the capability of this relationship to really create value together. That is how we define this dimension: the capability created by the combination of the parties involved and how the relationship is consistently governed to make sure this potential is achieved.

Character

What is characteristic of this relationship? It is defined by the behaviours of those involved. There are some core behaviours which build trust, such as honest and open communication, consistency and integrity. There are others that we identify which are courage to always do the right thing for the relationship, to be fair and loyal and to be ambitious about what can be achieved together.

What is critical is to actively consider which behaviours are right for this relationship and identify what this means in practice in the context of what you are seeking to accomplish.

Using this approach in the real world

Behind each of these dimensions is complexity, emotion and human beings doing their best under pressure. That is why intention is so important. Nothing will be perfect but if people have been clear from the start about how they intend to work together, focusing on building and maintaining trust, then issues can be more easily tackled - and even challenges can strengthen the relationship if they are dealt with in line with these principles.

Here are some ways to apply this Trust Triangle to real world situations. In every case it is important to consider and discuss how warm words will apply in real situations which are often easily predicted, because they have all happened before, usually in the experience of those involved.

- A high-trust leadership style sets the foundation for stronger teams and more valuable collaboration. Leaders that prioritize trust create clarity around their ambitions, model consistent behaviors, and encourage teamwork.

- Within teams, insisting on high-trust behaviors requires definition of what that looks like in practice and in the context of this team and its objectives. This model provides a framework for doing so.

- When it comes to client relationships, it becomes a true differentiator. Many firms use terms like "Trusted Advisor" or "Trusted Partner" without defining what they mean. Establishing a clear methodology for trust strengthens relationships and serves as a powerful way to win business. Relationship agreements for major accounts help ensure accountability and consistency across all touchpoints.

- This approach also transforms how firms manage key accounts. When trust and collaboration drive business development, account management, and frontline service —

rather than a purely transactional mindset — client relationships become deeper and more productive.

- Similarly, rethinking supplier relationships as an interconnected ecosystem rather than a rigid supply chain fosters agility and responsiveness. However, a major challenge lies in shifting the mindset of buyers, who often rely on transactional behaviors while expecting collaboration from suppliers. True trust-based relationships require commitment from both sides, and the first step is ensuring that those in buying roles lead with trust themselves.
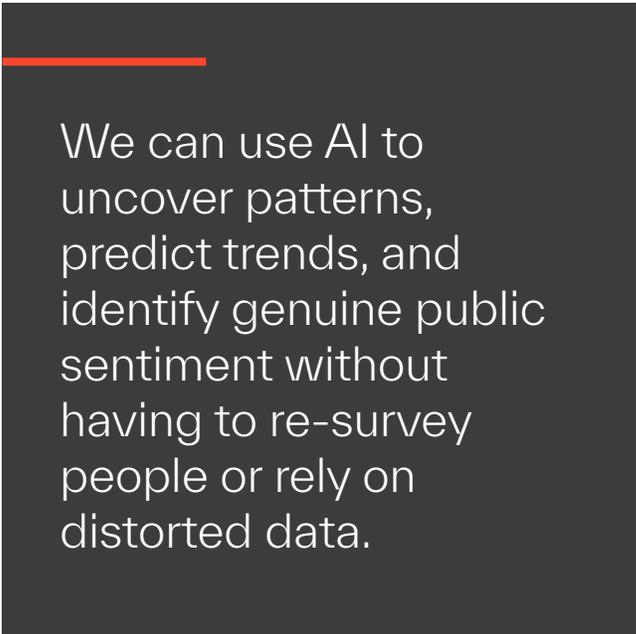
> We can use AI to uncover patterns, predict trends, and identify genuine public sentiment without having to re-survey people or rely on distorted data.

Facing the future with trust

Things are changing, faster and faster. It means whatever assumptions you made when you begin a working relationship will continually require revision, face challenge and need collective problem-solving.

If the relationship is trustful, then those involved are more likely to be able to respond to change collaboratively, having a win-win mindset that sees any challenges and solutions as collective. Right now, this approach can make the difference between success and failure.

The opposite is also true: a transactional relationship will be contractual and mistrustful; a change may be seen by one side as an opportunity to exploit the situation. Win-lose.

This rapid change is also giving people more choice. This applies to customers, of course, and especially when they decide who to appoint for additional work from existing vendors. But it's also true of employees, partners and suppliers. Those who work for you can choose to go the extra mile or just do their job; they can adapt to change or resist it; those who supply or partner with you also have agency over where they focus their attention and respond to new needs. If a purely transactional relationship was established from the start then any challenge can trigger blame or excuse.

No-one goes to work intending to damage trust in themselves or their company. No leader decides to destroy trust among their team, no professional plans to reduce the trust their clients have in them.

Yet it happens every day in every context because of the tendency towards transactional behaviours and under the many pressures to perform at pace.

With trust, you deposit in cents and withdraw in dollars. And that results in poorer performance over time.

The answer is to recognise this, decide to make it central to the way you work, especially with your most important relationships, and then actively engage in designing high levels of trust and making sure this is consistent. The Trust Triangle is one framework that provides a simple lens through which to do this.

This is how most people would want to be if they spent any time thinking about it. It makes working life more enjoyable as well as successful. It provides the basis for longer term relationships that are more adaptable to change.

In the age of rapidly advancing technology, being more human may be the secret to facing the future with confidence. ▬