

Trust and Leadership in Crisis and Beyond

Visegrad Leadership Lesson for High School 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 leadership 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, play a game, and 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. Explain the concept of trust within the leadership process- its components and outcomes.
3. Portray 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.

Structure of the Lesson

This lesson is structured in an interactive way, based on constructivist learning theory¹ 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. Discuss the role of trust through a game
5. Discuss social trust in this country during the pandemic
6. Apply the lessons of trust to our own lives and challenges

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.

Case Study of Mann Gulch Wildfire

Read the following case study² 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 trust and how does it relate to leadership?

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)

Introduction to leadership

What does leadership involve? [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. 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."**³ At the heart of leadership is an intentional relationship toward real change and agreement on purpose(s).

³ Rost, J.C. (1991). *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Praeger

“Trust Game”



Teaching Note: Introduce this as a decision making activity. Assign students in pairs for this activity. The game has “tokens” but you can change this to extra credit points, or even coins if you have enough.

Instructions: (give to the partners separately)

Player 1: You have 10 tokens. You decide how many tokens to keep and how many to pass to player 2. Player 2 will get three times as many tokens as you decide to pass (for example, if you pass 4 tokens, player 2 gets 12). After seeing how many tokens you pass, player 2 may give some of them back to you. There is no multiplier on the number of tokens that player 2 decides to give back to you (if player 2 gives 4 tokens, you get 4 tokens).

- How many tokens would you like to pass to player 2? _____

Player 2: You get three times whatever amount of tokens that player 1 decides to pass on to you. How many tokens would you like to return to player 1? _____



Teaching Note: Debrief of the activity includes some questions and concluding facts about the game. Player 1 will make an offer to Player 2, so you need a way for them to do that (perhaps just a scrap sheet of paper)

Question to students: What did that activity have to do with trust? How did you decide to trust the other person?

Comments on the game:

- Trust: If player 2 is only interested in tokens (what they get), then why pass any tokens back? If player 1 anticipates the selfishness of player 2 they don't give anything in the first place. The only way that player 1 passes anything is that they trust.
- Students are cooperative at beginning then it may deteriorate
- An “altruistic” trustor might decide to transfer resources even if he or she does not expect any transfer back.
- Did your attitude toward risk influence what you did in the trust game? Research shows no relationship.

What is trust and how does it relate to leadership?

Philosopher Robert Solomon called trust “the emotional core of leadership.” He said, “it is a strength, a precondition of any alliance or mutual understanding.”⁴ What happens when you trust someone? You depend on them to do what they say they will do, you are willing to work together productively, there is no reason to be suspicious of what their goals really are. There is no cooperation, no community, no commerce, no conversation without trust. According to

⁴ Solomon, R. (2003) The Myth of Charisma. In Ciulla, J. *The Ethics of Leadership*. Sage.

Marianna Pogoyshan, “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.”⁵

According to psychologist Paul Thagard, trust is:

1. A set of behaviors, such as acting in ways that depend on another.
2. Belief in a probability that a person will behave in certain ways.
3. An abstract mental attitude toward a proposition that someone is dependable.
4. A feeling of confidence and security that a partner cares.
5. A complex neural process that binds diverse representations into a semantic pointer that includes emotions.⁶

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 scientist 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.

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.⁷ 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

⁵ Pogoyshan, M. (2017) Who do you trust? *Psychology Today*, Retrieved at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/between-cultures/201706/who-do-you-trust>

⁶ Thagard, P. (2018) What is Trust? *Psychology Today*, Retrieved at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hot-thought/201810/what-is-trust>

⁷ Ministerstvo zdravotnictví České republiky, “COVID-19: Přehled aktuální situace v ČR.”

reference are noticeably inconsistent.⁸ Within the time period of a few days, the government could reverse its declared policy position. Businesses and schools were allowed to reopen only to be limited or closed in short order.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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 rates¹². 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.”¹³ Do you see social trust or a lack of social trust during the pandemic?

⁸ Government of the Czech Republic, “Measures Adopted by the Czech government Against the Coronavirus.”

⁹ Government of the Czech Republic, “Measures Adopted by the Czech government Against the Coronavirus.”

¹⁰ Government of the Czech Republic, “Measures Adopted by the Czech government Against the Coronavirus.”

¹¹ Brandt, M.J., Wetherell, G. & Henry, P.J. (2015) *Changes in Income Predict Change in Social Trust: A Longitudinal Analysis*. *Political Psychology*, 36 (6).

¹² 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>

¹³ 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. A 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.”¹⁴

How can I build interpersonal trust?¹⁵

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
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

Closing Challenge Questions: (to be addressed, if time allows)

- Do do think any of the above could be used by the Czech government to improve social trust with citizens?
- If you were working on a project with some classmates, how would you use a few of the above to build trust with them?

What is one way you could work on building trust with others?



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

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.