The Role of Trust in the US Leadership Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Lessons in Trust for Public Health Crisis Preparedness

Summary of professional thesis for the HEC Executive Mastère Spécialisé® in Consulting and Coaching for Change

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Context & assumptions

- **COVID-19:** A global pandemic is a complex crisis (wicked problem)
- **The US response:** Leadership failures have led to over 600,000 deaths
- **Trust:** Leadership challenges intersected with a climate of distrust
- **Timeframe:** March 2020 to March 2021 (the first year of the pandemic)
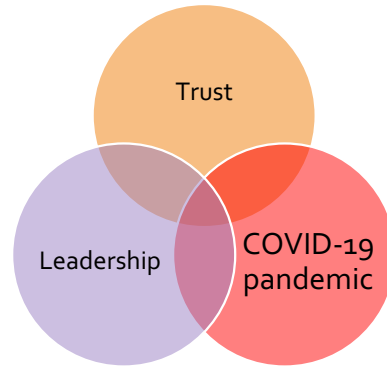
Research question

- **How has the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic informed our understanding of the role of trust in effective leadership through a public health crisis?**

Trust

Effective leadership

Future public health crises
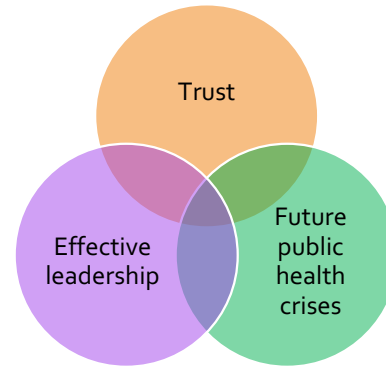
Literature review scope

- **Definitions:** Trust, distrust, mistrust, untrust, trustworthiness

- **Public opinion:** Trust in institutions, experts, government

- **Leadership:** General, political, health/medical, public health, crisis/emergency, complexity/systems

- **COVID-19:** Leadership challenges, role of trust, public opinion
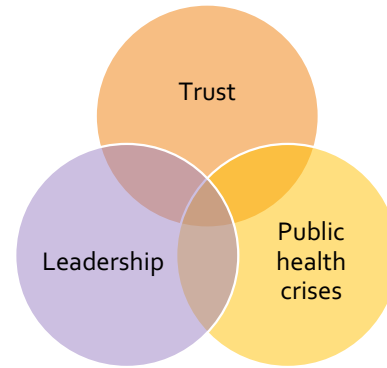
Useful formulas for trust

Trust is a "feeling" that provides the foundation of strong relationships and which has to be earned, not given. The three numerators in the equation are "credibility" (does this person know what they are talking about?), "reliability" (do they deliver on their commitments?), and "intimacy" (do they make me feel safe and secure?). When they increase, trust increases. The denominator is "self-orientation" (do they have my best interests at heart?). When this is reduced, trust also increases. (David Maister)

"The formula for trustworthiness is Ability x Integrity x Benevolence and if any one of those elements is zero, the result is zero trust." (John Blakey)

"Trust is the union of transparency, competency, and motive, sometimes held in tricky balance when values conflict." (Dave Chokshi, based on Dhruv Khullar)

Research methods

- **Qualitative research**
  - Grounded theory
  - Unstructured in-depth video interviews
  - Use of self, emotions, relationships, boundaries, and biases

- **24 élite interview participants**
  - Current/former leaders of US government/healthcare institutions
  - Experts on trust (academics, public intellectuals, citizen advocates)

- **Data analysis**
  - Generative approach
  - Indexing, clusters of themes
  - 7 themes emerged

- **Secondary research**
  - Sentiments from other sources to validate/enhance findings
  - Online events, talks, social media, opinion polls

Thanks to all 24 research interview participants

Rich Baron, MD, MACP
Don Berwick, MD, MPP, FRCP
Richard Besser, MD
John Blakey, DBA
David Brooks
Dave Chokshi, MD, MSc, FACP
Karen DeSalvo, MD, MPH, MSc, MACP
David Dotson, MSW
Tom Frieden, MD, MPH
Sara Holoubek, MBA
Sachin Jain, MD, MBA
Dhruv Khullar, MD, MPP

Mark McClellan, MD
Debra Ness, MS
David Nichols, MD, MBA
Sally Okun, RN, MMHS
Rosamond Rhodes, PhD
Gary Schwitzer
Micah Sifry, MA
Brian Southwell, PhD
Abbigail Tumpey, MPH, CHES
Bob Wachter, MD
Leana Wen, MD, MSc
Daniel Wolfson, MHSA

Note: Most research interviews were conducted from October-December 2020 before President Biden took office. The ongoing nature of the pandemic and evolving scientific understanding mean that research findings may represent a point in time and participants' insights might change with historical perspective. The themes that emerged remain relevant.

Research results

Trust was seen as the new currency of leadership…

"Power was the currency of leadership in the industrial age whereas trust is the currency of leadership in the social age … This pandemic, like Trump, Brexit, and Black Lives Matter, is symptomatic of the deeper shift from the industrial age to the social age … These very disruptive moments bring into sharp focus the difference between relying on power or relying on trust in your leadership." (John Blakey)

Every participant associated distrust with Trump…

"Trump is both a product of distrust and a sower of distrust." (David Brooks)

Seven recurring themes emerged…

- These themes help to explain the role of trust in leadership during a public health crisis like COVID-19 and to identify strategies for trustworthy leadership during future crises…

Practicing trustfulness

- **Before leaders can ask for trust, they must be able to put trust in others and trust themselves.**

  - Trust in yourself
  - Trust in citizens/the people
  - Trust in local communities
  - Trust in career civil servants
  - Trust in agency processes
  - Trust in experts
  - Trust in science

"The only way we stay sane and maintain some level of trust—and hope we can rebuild trust more broadly—is to do the work to be able to trust ourselves ... To think about rebuilding trust, think about yourself. Do you live a life that's worthy of trusting yourself in a profound way?" (Debra Ness)

"Political leaders need to be in lockstep with scientists, not pushing them under the bus." (Leana Wen)

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Exhibiting trustworthy behaviors

- **To be trusted, leaders must be worthy of trust and earn it through transparency, competency, and motivation to do good.**

"A relationship of trust … takes transparency—in what you know, what you don't know, what you're doing to get answers." (Richard Besser)

"Early in the pandemic, we saw the result of a fragmented response [with] no coherent plan to address the worst public health crisis of our lifetimes." (Name withheld)

"The Trump administration is manipulating science to get through their political agenda." (Don Berwick)

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Communicating honestly

- **Trust demands truthful and skilled communication based on the right frequency, place, content, and messengers.**

"By not hearing from CDC daily, we didn't walk the path of discovery with them." (Tom Frieden)

"We had a problem in this pandemic where the person who we should have been able to go to for trust was just feeding then the misinformation machine. It was difficult for people to know what to do and to know who to trust." (Karen DeSalvo)

"Especially when it comes to communities of color, trust comes from relationships ... The trusted intermediaries ... Like community health workers, people believe the people who look like them, come from their world, share their lived experience, and can talk their language." (Debra Ness)

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Establishing legitimacy

- **Public trust in leaders is dependent on the acceptance of their legitimacy—something that is conferred through engagement and not formal authority.**

"Institutions typically don't think much about where their legitimacy comes from ... You need to have a strategy that involves engagement and participation and connection and relationships, because your legitimacy is going to come from that ... It's not going to come from whatever else you thought it was going to come from--your resources, your reputation, your science ... It's going to come from the relationship-based trust you create." (Richard Baron)

"Half of the country won't believe in institutions once they're in the hands of the other side." (Sara Holoubek)

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Supporting structural change

- **Unless the root causes of mistrust are addressed at a policy level, trust will continue to be a barrier to success in response to future public health crises.**

"We have to understand that this [pandemic] was a crisis on top of a crisis—and we have to be willing to name the racism that exacerbated the crisis … In a more equitable society, we could have handled the problem [of the virus] better. So a reckoning is critical. And with it has to come a willingness to challenge the fundamentals of our economy, our education system, our health system, and even the way in which we design infrastructure and do urban planning. All of that has to be called into question and viewed as part of public health." (Debra Ness)

"Government is not really good at creating trusting relationships, but it's really good at creating some sort of economic security for people … And so I would start with that—just jobs programs, wage support, child tax credits, just to give people some economic security." (David Brooks)

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Recognizing culture change

- **Technology and populism have precipitated polarization based on social identity and leaders need to be attuned to the cultural forces driving mistrust.**

"Digital platforms intensify people's certainty of something they should distrust rather than enabling them to trust more." (Micah Sifry)

"Had there been more unity across society we would be in better place, if we'd put aside political differences and culture wars, we would have saved lives." (David Nichols)

"I don't think Trump will be in office much longer, but the conspiracy mindset will still be there ... The rise of right-wing populism is global and to me emerges out of a chasm between the media expert class on the left and a rural America that is completely excluded from the expert class and completely culturally divorced [from it]". (David Brooks)

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Learning to reflect on trust

- **Through conscious conversations about trust, leaders can bring a learning mindset to their personal development as leaders who can successfully respond to complex crises.**

"Before the [COVID-19] crisis, I would do workshops [on building trust] where people would find it very interesting and enlightening but wouldn't necessarily be saying 'this is what we need today'. Now people are saying 'we need to work this out … and we need tools and models to help us do that.'" (John Blakey)

"With trust there is optimism. Dolly's always optimistic. She's not Pollyannish. She and we are optimistic, we can do this, we see that it can be done. I can also translate it into having a vision of where you're headed … Usually when you see optimism, you also see joy and happiness. You're 'solid' (so to speak) because you're happy." (David Dotson)

Academic implications

- The **fragmentation** of research about trust and leadership provides opportunities for more **multi-disciplinary** research.

- Scholarship on trust and leadership needs to be grounded in awareness of **complexity** and **preparedness** for future threats.

Policy implications

- Three themes—**establishing legitimacy**, **supporting structural change**, and **recognizing culture change**—relate to systemic issues and reach into the policy domain.

- **Structural change** emerges from politics, culture and policy—radical change is needed to lay a **just foundation** for trust to thrive.

Practical implications

- Three themes—**practicing trustfulness**, **exhibiting trustworthy behaviors**, and **communicating honestly**—come with clear recommendations for what leaders can do.

- Leaders who want to be trusted can start right away by making a public commitment to **tell the truth** and to **prioritize** health, financial security, and our **recovery** from the COVID-19 crisis.

- Leaders can take steps in **all seven areas** of opportunity to earn the trust that will help them to heal a grieving populace and build systems to help protect the country from future threats.

Conclusion

- The seventh theme—**learning to reflect on trust** is most interesting to me. Not every leader is prepared to reflect deeply about their personal relationship with trust.

- A learning mindset is a feature of **adaptive leadership**. Trustworthy leaders are self-aware as **individuals** and aware of their role within **systems**.

- Leaders who **commit** to earning and repairing trust are **change agents** who are placing trust at the heart of adaptive leadership.

- As a **coach** & **advocate**, how can I help leaders with this process?

Limitations & further research

- **Further research** would address some of the limitations in the scope of this project and could focus on:

  - Political leadership (perspectives from Trump administration officials who declined to be interviewed in 2020)
  - State and local leadership
  - Global and comparative leadership
  - Private sector leadership
  - Qualitative research with the public
  - Trust and distrust in vaccines
  - Lessons for climate change (and insights from climate experts)
  - Current perspectives (2021)
  - Historical perspectives (later)

Thanks to...

- The 24 leaders who shared their expertise and experiences
- The SBS/HEC Consulting & Coaching for Change community
- The truth-tellers and trusted messengers
- The scientists, doctors, and frontline workers

Staying in touch

- Questions, feedback, and conversation are always welcome!

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