

# LEADING WITH PURPOSE

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## Drowning in Information, Starving for Truth

After 40 years in the fire service, Chief Randy Bruegman founded The Leadership Crucible Foundation to reshape future leadership with a focus on fostering courage, empathy, and humility in leadership positions.

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### *“Why Leadership Must Become the Last Trusted Voice”*

It's no wonder people are increasingly distrustful of what's really going on around them when you watch the news. When I was growing up, there were only three channels on television. You could flip through every newscast, and while the delivery might have been different, the facts were largely the same. The facts were the facts.

Today, we can watch the same incident, someone being shot in the middle of the street, and see it reported five different ways, five different explanations, and endless conjecture. Much of it isn't grounded in verified information, but rather shaped by personal perspective, political leaning, or the outlet's branding.

It's not hard to understand why distrust has become so pervasive.

According to Gallup, only about 28–31% of Americans say they have a “great deal” or even a “fair amount” of trust in mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly, one of the lowest levels ever recorded.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Pew Research Center reports that just 17% of Americans say they trust the federal government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time,” reflecting decades-long declines in institutional confidence.<sup>2</sup>

This erosion of trust is not limited to the United States. The Edelman Trust Barometer, which surveys tens of thousands of people across dozens of countries each year, consistently finds that majorities of respondents worldwide believe media, government, and other institutions frequently mislead the public, and that societal grievances and polarization are accelerating this breakdown in confidence.<sup>3</sup>

Another consequence of this erosion of trust is that people begin to react instead of reflecting. We live in a world where people are saturated with information but starving for truth. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to conflicting narratives, selective facts, and emotionally charged commentary, day after day, they don't just become confused; they become skeptical, guarded, and eventually stop believing almost everyone. Over time, that skepticism turns into emotional self-protection.

**“Over time, that skepticism turns into emotional self-protection.”**





People stop slowing down, stop asking questions, and stop seeking context. They engage before they understand, choose sides before they know the full story, and share headlines without reading beyond them. Not because they're bad people, but because constant noise trains the brain to move fast and think shallowly. That environment makes trust even harder to build and leadership even more necessary, because in a world full of reaction, leaders must be the ones who choose reflection, bring clarity instead of chaos, composure instead of volatility, and truth instead of spin.

And This is not something that appeared overnight.

## The steady breakdown of trust has been building for a long time

The steady breakdown of trust has been building for a long time, and in many respects, it has become learned behavior. Over the last generation, people have watched institutions they once believed in, leaders they once respected, and systems they once relied upon fail to be honest, transparent, or consistent. Corporate scandals that wiped out retirement savings, financial collapses driven by hidden risk, shifting public health messaging without clear explanation, political misconduct across administrations, and a media environment increasingly driven by clicks rather than clarity have all taken their toll. At the same time, social media has poured fuel on the fire, amplifying outrage, rewarding extremes, and turning complex issues into oversimplified sound bites. The result is that many react solely based up on the emotional hook and pay little attention to facts.

That matters. Because it also means this: the same way trust has been eroded, it can be rebuilt.

Not through slogans.

Not through sound bites.

Not through grandstanding.

It gets rebuilt the way it always has, one leader, one decision, one conversation, one act of integrity at a time.

We don't fix this by waiting for Washington to change, or by hoping someone else goes first. When this happens at scale, something powerful begins to take shape. When thousands of leaders across the country start modeling the same standard in their homes, teams, and organizations, those behaviors don't stay local. They ripple outward, shape expectations, influence how people treat one another, and reset what is considered normal and acceptable. Over time, that collective shift becomes culture. And culture, more than any single policy or election, is what ultimately determines the direction of a nation.

## Trust Is Earned in Moments of Pressure, Not Convenience

Trust is easy to talk about when things are going well. It's much harder to live when decisions are difficult, emotions are high, and the stakes are real. That's where trust is actually formed, not in polished statements, not in strategic plans, and not in town hall speeches. Trust is earned in moments of pressure, not convenience. It's revealed in how leaders show up when it would be easier to avoid a conversation, how they respond when they make a mistake, and how they behave when no one is watching. Those everyday moments, far more than any title or position, tell people everything they need to know about who they can trust and who they cannot.

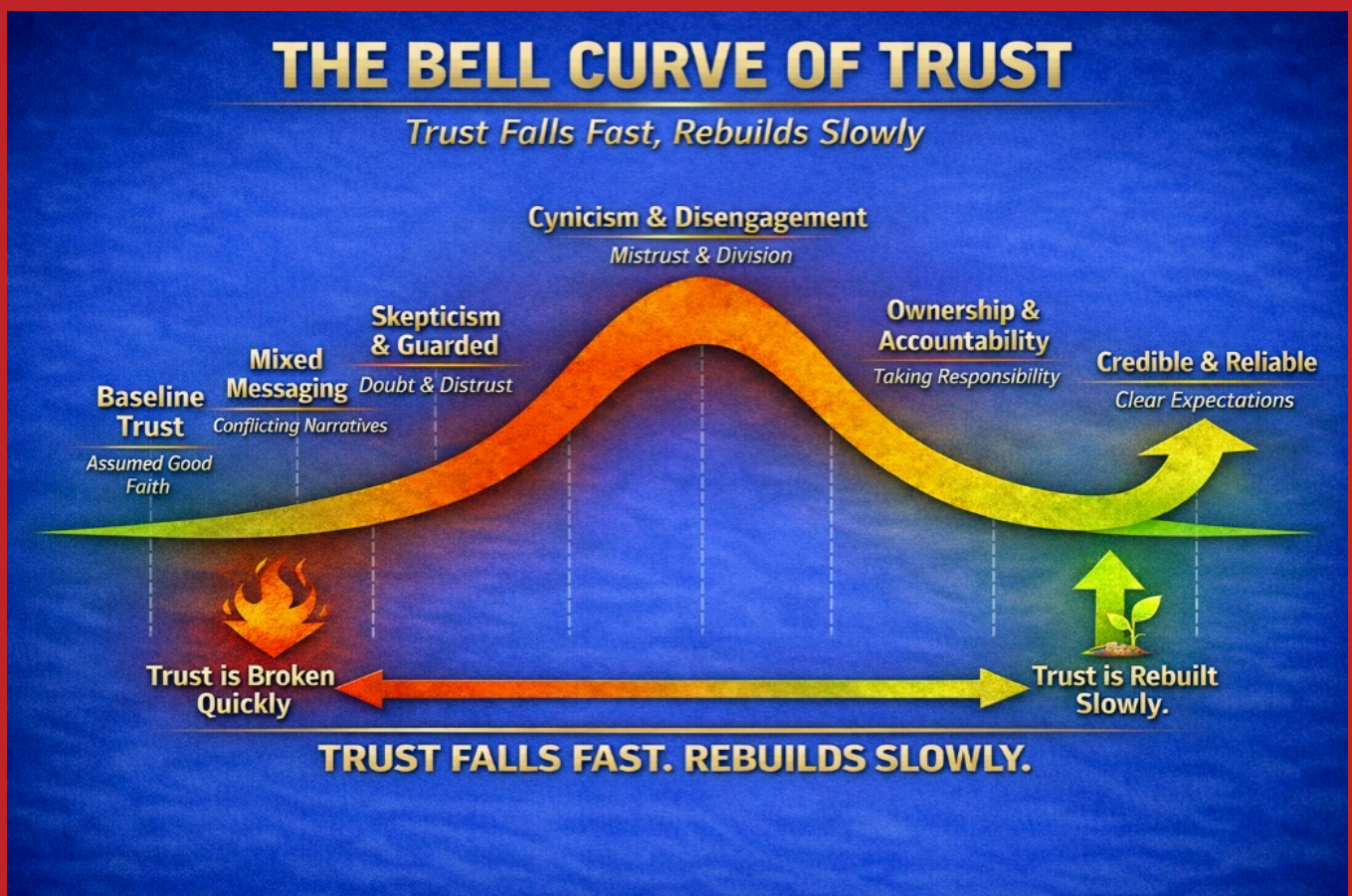


Rebuilding trust always starts in the same place, with the leader, not with a policy, not with a memo, and not with a rebrand. It starts with you. If we're serious about changing the trajectory, we have to accept that no one else is coming to fix this for us. Each of us has a responsibility to lead ourselves first. That means getting clear on our values and being honest about whether our behavior actually matches them. It means demonstrating courage by addressing issues early and directly instead of letting them fester. It means practicing humility by owning mistakes without excuses, defensiveness, or spin. And it means building consistency through repeated, values-aligned behavior, day after day, especially when it's inconvenient. But personal ownership doesn't stop with how we lead ourselves. It also means we expect the same standard from others. If your employer consistently violates your values, you don't stay silent, you have a conversation, and if nothing changes, you find a new place to work. If an elected official

repeatedly betrays the public's trust, you don't complain and move on, you vote for someone else. If a leader in your organization refuses to grow, refuses to be accountable, and refuses to live the values, you stop excusing them and you stop enabling it. Expecting trust means expecting responsibility. And expecting responsibility means being willing to make hard choices.

### THE BELL CURVE OF TRUST

Trust follows a predictable pattern. Over time, repeated inconsistency, mixed messages, and broken promises erode trust. And only through sustained ownership, accountability, and values-driven behavior does it begin to rise again. The graphic below illustrates that journey, how trust is broken quickly, how it reaches a dangerous low point, and how it is rebuilt slowly through consistent leadership. It's a reminder that while the downward slope can happen fast, the climb back requires discipline, patience, and leaders willing to do the work.



**TRUST BREAKS QUICKLY.**

**TRUST REBUILDS SLOWLY.**

**LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR DETERMINES THE DIRECTION.**

The curve makes something very clear. If trust is going to move upward, it will not be because of words, branding, or public relations. It will move upward only when leaders choose to change their behavior. Which brings us to the most important question.

What does rebuilding trust actually look like in practice?

### **Rebuilding Trust After It's Been Damaged**

The path forward to rebuilding trust is not complicated, but it is hard. It starts with owning your mistakes and demanding that others do the same. We've all seen the difference between leaders who deflect and leaders who step up. When a CEO publicly acknowledges a product failure, recalls it, compensates customers, and fixes the process, trust begins to come back. When a fire chief, police chief, or superintendent stands in front of their people and their community and says, "We got this wrong. Here's what we're changing. And here's how we'll be held accountable," credibility grows.

Rebuilding trust requires telling the truth, even when it's uncomfortable, and expecting truthfulness from those around you. It means doing the hard things necessary to actually fix problems, not taking the easy path and not settling for cosmetic solutions that simply put a bandage on deeper wounds. Real reform looks like changing hiring practices, improving training, addressing toxic culture, and holding people accountable, not just issuing new slogans or rolling out another policy manual.



If you're in politics, it means putting people first and addressing the real issues communities are facing, even when those issues are complex, uncomfortable, or unpopular. It means quitting the endless gamesmanship that prioritizes winning over governing. It means working across lines to fix broken infrastructure, improve public safety, strengthen education, and address affordability, even when doing so doesn't score easy points with a base. Trust begins to return when leaders put country over politics, service over self, and doing what is right for the people we serve ahead of doing what is convenient for ourselves. That standard applies no matter what profession you're in.

When trust has been broken, pretending everything is fine only makes it worse. Rebuilding begins with acknowledgment. Acknowledge the breakdown without minimizing it and without deflecting blame. Reset expectations and invite accountability, from yourself and others. Demonstrate change through visible, consistent action. Not once. Not for a week. Not when it's being measured. But over time. Because trust is rebuilt through behavior, not words.

## What is one decision you can make this week that pays trust forward?

Over the course of my career, I've had the opportunity to work with many great leaders who were deeply committed to building trust, not only within their organizations, but within the communities they served. I've also worked with leaders who were just the opposite. They were in it for themselves. They were skilled at projecting the image of caring, while their actions told a very different story. Some were elected. Some were appointed. Some were hired. The titles were different, but the pattern was the same. And what I learned is this. No matter the position, no matter the profession, trust is the single most important factor in a leader's impact and long-term success with the people they are given the privilege to lead and to serve.

### Final Thought

Rebuilding trust will not happen all at once. And it will not be driven by a single institution, election, or movement. It will happen the same way it always has, through everyday leaders making better choices in the moments that matter.

That is what paying it forward looks like.

It looks like choosing integrity when no one is forcing you to.

It looks like telling the truth when a lie would be easier.

It looks like stepping in when it would be more comfortable to step back.

It looks like modeling the behavior you want to see, even if you're the only one doing it.

You may never see the full impact of those choices.

But someone else will.

Someone is always watching.

Someone is always learning.

Someone is always deciding what kind of leader they want to become based on what they observe in you.

Paying it forward means understanding that the way you lead today shapes the culture of tomorrow.

And when enough leaders make that choice, trust doesn't just return.

It takes root.

So, I'll leave you with this question.

What is one decision you can make this week that pays trust forward?

If this message resonates with you, share it with someone who influences others. Forward it to a colleague, discuss it with your team, or use it as a starting point for a leadership conversation this week.

That's how we begin to change the trajectory, one leader at a time.



## Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways

- Tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable
- Own mistakes quickly and publicly
- Do what you say you're going to do
- Address issues early and directly
- Treat people with dignity and respect
- Apply standards consistently
- Put service ahead of self

## Recommended Reading

If you're looking to go deeper into the themes of leadership, culture, engagement, and organizational health, here are five powerful books that align closely with the challenges and opportunities we explored this month:

### **The Culture Code – Daniel Coyl**

A highly readable exploration of how strong cultures are intentionally built through everyday behaviors and signals. Particularly helpful for leaders who want a practical understanding of how culture is shaped, reinforced, and sustained over time.

### **Turn the Ship Around! – L. David Marquet**

A powerful account of transforming a culture of compliance into one of shared ownership and leadership at every level. A strong reminder that engagement grows when leaders intentionally create space for responsibility, trust, and decision-making.

### **Good to Great – Jim Collins**

Examines how disciplined leadership, humility, and relentless focus on the right priorities separate enduring organizations from those that plateau or decline.

### **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team – Patrick Lencioni**

Provides a practical framework for overcoming dysfunction by building trust, encouraging healthy conflict, driving commitment, reinforcing accountability, and focusing on results.

### **The Advantage – Patrick Lencioni**

Makes the case that organizational health, clarity, alignment, and consistent leadership behavior are the greatest competitive advantages any organization can achieve.