

**BUILDING TRUST:  
A FOUNDATION OF RISK MANAGEMENT**

*A Paper Developed for  
CCMD's Action-Research Roundtable on Risk Management  
Chaired by Ian Shugart*

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## Foreword

Last year, CCMD conducted various consultations with managers, and identified what came to be called four management issues of immediate and critical concern:

- \$implementation of the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA);
- \$building the learning organization;
- \$managing horizontal issues; and
- \$risk management.

In response to these issues, CCMD launched four action-research roundtables; one for each of the above noted topics. This report has been released by the Action-Research Roundtable on Risk Management.

Throughout its work, the Roundtable members concluded that a fundamental ingredient of risk management requiring public service attention is building and maintaining trust. As a result, we decided to produce this report. It is designed to act as a companion piece to the Roundtable's primary report, *A Foundation for Building Risk Management Learning Strategies in the Public Service*.

This document represents a simple synthesis of much of the current literature. It seeks to convey to readers in government organizations some straightforward messages about earning and keeping the trust of Canadians. It does this through a discussion of four cornerstones of trust — integrity, openness, competence, and empathy.

The messages you will find within these pages are easy to understand and difficult to implement consistently and over time. They speak to the people dimension of the public service, as well as to the organizational dimension.

Overall, it is hoped that this paper will be both informative and inspire greater interest and discussion within the Public Service of Canada on the issue of trust and risk management.

Ian Shugart  
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## Acknowledgements

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## 1. Introduction

Canadians are better educated now than at any other time in history, and through information technologies are more informed than ever before. As a result, they are well equipped to contribute to the risk management process.

Increasingly, however, the risk issues facing government defy the kind of scientific analysis that in the past have allowed the likelihood and severity of risks to be clearly determined (think of global warming, biogenetics and genetically modified foods). Even if perfect information were available, it is impossible for citizens — or public servants — to be involved in every aspect of every risk management process. Under such circumstances, citizens' trust in government is critical. In fact, citizens' trust and confidence in government's ability to protect and advance the public interest are fundamental underpinnings of Canada's democratic system.

**Building trust is no trivial matter. It is something that should be nurtured in a continuous and ongoing manner.**

Why is trust especially critical for risk management? Because good risk management involves:

- Addressing situations of uncertainty in which the likelihood and consequences of a particular risk are not certain;
- Addressing situations in which groups of citizens could be negatively affected by the risk at hand; and
- Fairly apportioning the potential benefits and costs of risk.

Building trust is no trivial matter. It is something that should be nurtured in a continuous and ongoing manner. Once established, governments can draw on this trust when working with citizens and stakeholders. This paper is about building and maintaining that trust.

## 2. Trust in Various Contexts: Setting the Stage

### 2.1 Trust in government<sup>1</sup>

Over the past three decades, citizens' trust and confidence in government appears to have dropped significantly. Illustrating the present low level of trust in government, an Ekos Research Associates Inc. survey, *Rethinking Government 2000*, found that only 16% of Canadians believe "...the federal government makes decisions in the overall public interest." But while people's trust in government is low, it is not necessarily decreasing. The survey demonstrated that while people's views of the federal government's ethical standard continued to shift, the approval rate is higher now than in 1994.

Research suggests that major reasons for generalized mistrust of government are popular disillusionment with political leaders, and criticism of the way the public service carries out its work. Specifically, the public service is seen to be tied in red tape and inefficient. Research has also found explanations of an economic, cultural, social and psychological nature:

- The profound economic changes caused by globalization and the information revolution;
- New social values vis-à-vis work, religion, education, recreation and interpersonal relations;
- The major socio-cultural changes in attitudes towards authority and the traditional power structure, which have occurred since the early 1960s;
- Demographic changes, especially the overall ageing of the population and its higher general level of education; and
- More negative press coverage of government and the public service.

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<sup>1</sup> Trust in government could be further disaggregated so that the elected and public service dimensions of government are separated. For the purposes of this paper, it seemed sufficient to speak of trust in government — a term used here to include both the elected and public service dimensions of government.

All these factors have a major impact on the public's perception of government and influence the public's expectations vis-à-vis politicians and public servants. Worthy of special note is the last item in the above list — the media. In the 1997 Ekos survey, *Rethinking Government VI*, 83% of respondents indicated that newspapers and television are somewhat influential or very influential in forming their opinions about political and governmental issues. Of the respondents, 75% said the same thing about news magazines. That the media influences such a large percentage of citizens is important because research conducted by Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson shows that the media generally characterizes government in a way that stimulates cynicism (Nye 1997).

## 2.2 Trust in government organizations

In organizations, risk is managed in a group context. This implies that the responsibility for managing risk is spread among several individuals and trust is therefore vested in these various individuals collectively.

We trust the people we work with as team members, colleagues and superiors. We also expect that they will act in accordance with their respective responsibilities and for the good of the organization. This trust is critical since one serious mistake in one part of an organization can hurt the reputation, and thus lower the level of trust in the entire organization.

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## 2.3 Trust in public servants

At present, trust in public servants could not be considered as being high, but it is higher than in some other occupational groups. To illustrate, in *Rethinking Government 2000*, 16% of respondents indicated that they have a lot of trust in lobbyists, 37% of respondents had a lot of trust in federal public servants, and 89% percent had a lot of trust in nurses.

Of course, it is difficult for any one public servant to significantly change citizens' perceptions of government. But with each encounter with citizens and interest groups, public servants can influence — positively or negatively — citizens' perceptions of trust in government. These opportunities can be thought of as defining moments. Scholars, such as Cufau (1999), argue that over the course of an organization's life, defining moments can significantly influence how people assign trust to that organization. If they are managed well, they will form a group of reference points that can positively influence citizens' perceptions of the public servants and government organizations they are dealing with, and ultimately of the whole of government.

It is worth noting that the public service has uniform rules and procedures it must conform to in order to ensure that all citizens are served equitably. Unfortunately, these procedures, and their execution, can be perceived as disinterest in, or an unwillingness to consider, the personal circumstances of each citizen. When members of the public encounter this "uniform" approach, they often have the impression that the public service is an unfeeling machine. Citizens can find it difficult to develop a trusting interpersonal relationship with public servants who do not seem interested in their personal concerns.

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In the end, public servants can work with the best intentions, but mistakes do happen and crises do arise. However, that will not necessarily cause citizens to lose faith in their government. The public is well educated and sophisticated, and will look at the type of misconduct involved, and how the government is responding to it. From this standpoint, action taken by government officials has to be legitimate, transparent and accountable, and thereby provide the basis for citizens to make up their own minds about how well the government has performed.



### 3. Developing and Maintaining Trust

Trust is a complex, multi-faceted concept. There is no simple formula for building trust. It is more an art than a science, and it is hard to build, and easy to lose. Building trust requires the consistent and repeated demonstration of ethical behaviour, whereas one perceived wrongdoing might destroy it. Put differently, one negative event can be more destructive than a positive event is helpful.

The reality is that you can do the right things and still undermine trust. Perceptions of events are subjective by definition. Still, acting in an ethical and consistent manner can help ensure higher levels of trust over the long run. It is worth repeating that every exchange with citizens is an opportunity to demonstrate that public servants are working in the public interest; that they are doing their best to serve Canada and Canadians. It is about demonstrating beliefs, ideals and standards.

**There is no simple formula for building trust. It is hard to build, and easy to lose.**

#### 3.1 The essential components of trust

The components of trust are closely inter-related and are difficult to examine independent of the others. As a result, the literature abounds with different groupings of trust terms. For example, two thousand years ago, Aristotle opined that the following pairs of elements were preconditions of trust: (1) knowledge and expertise; (2) openness and honesty; and, (3) concern and care.<sup>2</sup>

Research shows that to date there is no consistent empirical methodology for prioritizing trust elements. The literature also indicates that the importance the public assigns to an element will vary depending on who is called on to act, and what needs to be done. For these reasons, risk managers should be cautioned against adhering rigidly to the ranking set out below. Before prioritizing one element over another, managers should first examine the

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<sup>2</sup> More recently, Covello expanded this list and proposed the following four groupings: (1) caring and empathy; (2) dedication and commitment; (3) competence and expertise; and, (4) honesty and openness. Shindler and Thomas also set out five similar elements, but ranked them differently: (1) consistency (2) openness (3) competence, (4)

nature of their objectives. Further, they should assess their capacity to improve an element, taking into account the structure, culture and mandate of their respective organizations and the characteristics of the trusted person(s). Peters, Covello, and McCullum (1997) isolated the public's ranking of the elements in relation to the activities of government, as well as of industry and citizen groups. When they looked at trust in government as a whole, increases in perceptions of commitment had the greatest impact on the public's perception of trustworthiness. Commitment was followed by knowledge and expertise, concern and care, and information receipt, in descending order of importance.

The Roundtable did not feel it appropriate to identify a clear prioritization of trust elements, but felt instead that four elements, in no particular order, were essential to building and maintaining trust — integrity, competence, empathy and openness. In fact, there was agreement that these four elements are applicable for building trust with respect to any government activity. Whatever the context, the absence of any one of these elements can undermine trust.

**The Roundtable members felt that four elements were essential to building and maintaining trust— integrity, competence, empathy and openness.**

These cornerstones are not new considerations for managers. They are consistent with the personal competencies developed by the Public Service Commission for public service managers. Indeed, the descriptor for the “Values and Ethics” competency states:

Public servants treat others fairly, contributing to a climate of trust, acceptance and respect for others’ principle, values and beliefs. They honour their work commitments and strive to act in the public interest. Public servants exemplify the organization’s values of integrity, respect and honesty.

The following cornerstones build and elaborate upon the ethos expressed in this passage.

### 3.1.1 Integrity

When there is uncertainty, public confidence has to rest in the knowledge that decisions being made keep with a stated criterion and process. People need to feel confident that public servants are playing appropriate roles with respect to risk assessment and decision making. Citizens should be able to trust that relevant laws are being upheld, and that the public interest is being protected and advanced. Overall, a pattern of behaviour characterized by integrity provides a foundation for that confidence.

**Citizens should be able to trust that relevant laws are being upheld, and that the public interest is being protected.**

Integrity, as it is commonly used, can be seen to include terms such as honesty, predictability, consistency, character, credibility, legitimacy, and dependability. It is often thought of as a very broad term. Covey (1989), for example, has observed that “. . . integrity includes but goes beyond honesty. Honesty is telling the truth — in other words, conforming our words to reality. Integrity is conforming our reality to our words — in other words, keeping promises.” Put more succinctly, “. . . [a] good way to gauge a manager’s integrity is the discrepancy between the promises made and the promises fulfilled” (Scarniti 1997).

If public servants can consistently demonstrate that they are guided by the public interest, this track record will help build credibility and help to maintain trust even when there are negative consequences. If it is possible to articulate why a certain course of action is in the public interest (not why something is good for their group, but why it is in the larger public interest), people will be more accepting of the decision taken. This way, even when stakeholders are not fully satisfied by a decision, they are unlikely to lose trust in the government actors.

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As a final piece of guidance, Shaw (1998) has theorized that integrity can be improved if leaders recognize and pursue the following principles:

- First, integrity requires that organizations develop a set of values and practices that affirm the rights of [clients], associates, and stakeholders. This is the “outer core,” or conventional notion, of integrity.
- Second, integrity requires that organizations and their leaders develop a consistent and cohesive approach to [their activities]. Here integrity means that the various parts of the organization, from its values to its work practices, fit together into a coherent approach. This is the “inner core” of integrity, one that is perhaps more important for establishing trust than any other factor.

### ***3.1.2 Competence***

As made clear in the Roundtable’s report, *A Foundation for Developing Risk Management Learning Strategies in the Public Service*, risk decision making

occurs by definition in situations of uncertainty where the consequences of poor decisions can be harmful, or more harmful than they would otherwise be. Competence is also related to leading-edge capability, especially in addressing situations that are technically demanding. The implication is that organizations must remain fully competent if they are to meet their responsibilities.

**Demonstrated competence in reducing uncertainty as much as possible, and making decisions on the basis of all know and relevant information is critical to building trust.**

Demonstrated competence in reducing uncertainty as much as possible, and making decisions on the basis of all known and relevant information, is critical to building trust.

Competence is often referred to as knowledge, expertise and ability, and is regarded at least as highly as integrity in studies that measure the public’s ranking of trust elements in both government and private sector institutions. Because most issues are interdisciplinary in nature, competence often requires a team

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approach in order to properly address the issue at hand. Unfortunately, too often people view their area of expertise as predominant. Too often individuals are defenders or proponents of a single view, and not integrators of many views. The truth is, an effective decision often requires a balanced interdisciplinary analysis.

All senior managers, especially those in organizations undergoing change, should take steps to ensure that their employees share a common understanding of the organization’s mission, goals, position on issues, and key messages. If the organization is to be viewed as competent, overarching messages sent from various parts of the organization should be consistent so that citizens and stakeholders do not receive conflicting messages from different persons in different — or even the same — parts of the organization.

Competence, especially the idea of demonstrating competence, is directly linked to self-confidence. In fact, the literature suggests that “self-confidence” on the part of managers can contribute to trust in individuals. Interestingly, the Reinas (1999) have observed that “...[t]he starting point of a trusting relationship is your relationship with yourself..” Similarly, the *Harvard Management Update* (2000) proposed that one’s ability to trust others grows in relation to one’s ability to trust oneself: self-confidence “...creates a positive feedback loop, because others’ willingness to put their trust in you is influenced by their perception that you see yourself as trustworthy.” The literature also suggests that the appearance of self-confidence is especially relevant in situations where no history exists between an actor, who has been put in charge of a new activity, and the public.

**Overconfidence can become arrogance and ultimately undermine levels of trust and credibility.**

The Roundtable members felt that the greatest demonstration of self-confidence is the ability to be open to others’ views and give genuine consideration to them. But self-confidence should not be confused with arrogance. As one of the Roundtable members noted, overconfidence can become arrogance and ultimately undermine levels of trust and credibility.

A related issue is the ability of people to admit what they do not know. Experts are renowned for being knowledgeable about a given topic, but may fear that they will look incompetent if they share their uncertainty with the public. They may even allude to possessing greater competence than their knowledge or experience merits. This tendency must be resisted. If the

tendency is not resisted, it can thwart individuals from learning valuable lessons, and thus detract from levels of competence.

### ***3.1.3 Empathy***

Empathy is a particularly important ingredient for building and retaining trust in risk decision making because of the potential for negative consequences that good risk management seeks to avoid. Protecting the public interest requires looking at issues through the eyes of the stakeholder groups and citizens that may be affected by the risk at hand. Ultimately, the benefits entailed in risk are encouraged by a desire for the well-being of individuals and society. The investment in avoiding or reducing harm is likewise motivated by concern for citizens and their community.

**It is through empathy that individuals convey fundamental public service values to citizens.**

Empathy is referred to as “concern and care” in the study by Peters et al.(1997). For the purpose of this paper, empathy is seen simply as fully appreciating or being sensitive to another person’s feelings or motives. Empathy generally flows from the understanding of another’s concerns. This understanding or awareness is dependent upon first learning about the concerns and situation of another person, through conversation for example. Empathy is felt, but is not always recognizable; people deal with their feelings and thoughts in different — and not always conspicuous — ways. But it is important for public servants to let stakeholders know that they understand, genuinely appreciate, and are truly sensitive to their issues.

Benevolence can be seen as the extension of empathy, as it involves taking action once a person becomes aware of another’s situation. The issue of benevolence — or the related issues of respect, loyalty, goodwill, reciprocity and altruism — is well documented in the literature. Most of the studies that identify this component view it as “. . . benevolent motives, the willingness to protect and save face for a person” (Schindler and Thomas 1993).

### 3.1.4 Openness

It is intrinsic to risk decision making that circumstances are surrounded by uncertainty. There are no guaranteed outcomes. In order for the public to have confidence in public servants, therefore, their expectations have to be realistic. Furthermore, since risk decisions can lead to negative consequences for segments of the population, citizens should be able to determine what steps the government took in its handling of a particular situation, and understand why those steps were undertaken. The only way to have all this is to foster openness.

**By sharing information, citizens will hold more reasonable expectations, can determine what steps the government took in its handling of a risk situation, and understand why those steps were taken.**

Also referred to as transparency, clarity or simply communication, openness about the risks of an activity is another vital consideration highlighted in all the studies reviewed. The term “communication” refers to a two-way flow of information. It means not only keeping the public informed of developments but providing them with useful opportunities to contribute their ideas. It means not just letting citizens talk, but truly listening to what they are saying. Government has a responsibility to convey the fact that citizens’ ideas have been given serious consideration.

**Effective communication requires more than just letting citizens talk, but truly listening to what citizens and stakeholders have to say.**

Citizens want to know that their thoughts have been seriously listened to, and they want to know what transpired — how the issue was ultimately handled. Timely communication that offers full disclosure and is shared with the appropriate parties can help to engender a culture of high trust. Conversely, late and/or poor communication can have a severely detrimental effect.

Often, if managers are certain about information, they will make it available to the public. When there is uncertainty, however, it is perhaps more important to communicate the extent and nature of this uncertainty. As noted earlier, the pressure to overstate what is known should be resisted. In the end, public servants erode trust by pretending to know more than they do. Most citizens will understand that public servants, like all persons, cannot predict

the future.

But before sending a message to the public or making information available, it is critical to identify who all the different stakeholder groups are and how each will perceive the message. Indeed, different groups can perceive the same message differently. How could each of these groups be affected by the risk at hand or the decision being made? What will be their concerns? How can you address them? Is there a common understanding or meaning of the words you will use? “In an inter-organizational relationship, trust grows out of a communication process in which shared meanings develop to provide the necessary foundation for non-opportunistic behaviour. Accordingly, trust can be conceptualized as a communicative, sense-making process that bridges disparate groups. This approach emphasizes the shared meanings that partners use to signal trust and trustworthiness in each other” (Lane and Bachmann 1998).

Public servants must also ask and remain vigilant about who is, or will be, mediating their message. The media, interest groups, or pressure groups can act as intermediaries in communications between government and stakeholders, whether this is desired or not. This is especially true if public servants are ineffective at communicating their message. Powell and Liess (1997) have argued that failures in risk communication (i.e., the social amplification of risk, Kasperson et al. 1988) are the result of an information vacuum, where those who are responsible for scientific risk assessment make no *special* effort to regularly communicate their results to the public. Instead, the information vacuum is filled by other sources. There is a need to prevent such a vacuum, and to consider how intermediaries could affect the message being sent, and the actions that should be taken in response.

**In the end, we erode trust by pretending to know more than we do.**

Managers might want to consider the following “Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication,” as listed by Covello et al. (1989):

- (1) Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner;
- (2) Plan carefully and evaluate performance;



- (3) Listen to your audience;
- (4) Be honest, frank and open;
- (5) Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources;
- (6) Meet the needs of the media; and
- (7) Speak clearly and with compassion.

At times, especially for science-based risk decisions, scientists and their managers believe that the public cannot grasp the science behind a decision. This is, of course, wrong — on occasion the problem may be the inability of a scientist to communicate effectively the nature of the science in clear and understandable language.

In some situations, an in-depth form of communication and dialogue is required in order to build trust. It is particularly relevant in situations that entail

- value-related issues,
- various uncertainties as to outcomes,
- the need to make difficult choices, and
- direct impact on specific segments of the population.

In such cases, it is often appropriate for decision makers to engage citizens in a dialogue early on in the decision-making process. This engagement can engender greater transparency, legitimacy, stakeholder understanding, and general acceptance of the resulting consequences.

As noted by Ham (2000), citizen engagement involves a continuum of citizen involvement and influence, and can be enabled by a variety of processes and tools.

[At its essence] Citizen engagement differs from more traditional forms of consultation by encouraging reflection and learning, promoting a focus on common ground, assuming that citizens will add value, and allowing new options to emerge (O'Hara 1998). Several other aspects differentiate citizen engagement from consultation:

- Citizen engagement involves the discussion of values, trade-offs and choices;
- Citizen engagement recognizes that citizens — in addition to stakeholders — can play an important role in government decision making; and
- Citizen engagement helps to build civic capacity in individuals and communities.

In fact, it is often easier to build consensus around processes that involve several stakeholders, than on the results themselves. Moreover, participants who are part of the process are generally

more comfortable with, and accepting of, the results of that process, be they positive or negative. However, when considering undertaking a citizen engagement exercise, it is necessary to discern when citizens want to be engaged, and when situations practicably permit their engagement.

In general, the public service needs to demonstrate that it is responsive to the public's growing desire to be involved in the decision-making process. Managers should therefore modify their procedures to take into account the opinions of members of the public and to involve them more in the decision making process, especially in situations that involve risks. It is absolutely essential to minimize the negative effects of paternalist approaches that too often allow individuals or groups of individuals to influence the decision-making process to the detriment of the public interest. Of course, citizen engagement is not appropriate in every situation and should not replace more traditional forms of consultation.

**Participants that are part of the decision making process are generally more comfortable with, and accepting of, the results of that process.**

### **3.2 An additional element: accountability**

While the elements described above are essential to developing trust, they are not the only factors that affect levels of trust. Another factor is accountability and public reporting, both of which support openness, competence, and integrity. At its essence, the process of accountability is really about identifying key results (openness), measuring performance (demonstrating competence), and reporting to the public and parliament on performance compared to the original key results identified (integrity). Citizens have the right to know how decisions are arrived at, the results achieved, and that there is a traceable decision-making process for accountability purposes. In the end, consistent and effective accountability processes can help to build levels of trust and public confidence. Senior public servants should view accountability positively as a means to assure the responsible exercise of authority and as part of the continuous improvement process.

## 4. Conclusion

Building trust requires that public servants align with clear ethical standards. A public service that advocates and applies the standards of integrity, competence, empathy and openness should be well equipped to build and maintain trust with citizens. But building trust is not a one-time endeavour.

**Every exchange with citizens is an opportunity for public servants to demonstrate that they are doing their best to serve Canada and Canadians.**

Trust needs to be nurtured and built in a diligent and ongoing manner. When managing risks, an emphasis should be placed on informing citizens and, whenever feasible and appropriate, involving them in the process. Every exchange with citizens and stakeholders is an opportunity to demonstrate these cornerstones of trust, and to enrich the relationship between public servants and Canadians.

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