Building Trust for Collective Action:
A Framework for Capacity Building

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Trust is widely understood to be a key factor in strong democracies and economies.[1,2] It helps us live alongside each other, learn together, collaborate, and engage in collective action[3]. It is considered to be an element of social capital, the relational "glue" that holds societies together.[4] Yet, as political polarization rises, Americans have come to trust each other less and less over the past few decades.[5] Social trust, our tendency to trust people we don't know well, has reached historic lows.

Voluntary civic engagement is often presented as a solution to the "trust problem" because civic engagement tends to result in higher levels of social trust.[6] In other words, working together for the social good might help us trust others more in general. This speaks to the important role of voluntary and civil society organizations in weaving the fabric of our society. However, the benefits of voluntary participation for social trust appear to depend on the quality and type of interactions among the people involved.[7] It's not just *whether* we engage with each other, but *how* we engage with each other that matters.

Meanwhile, collaborative efforts to build a better world, whether through civic engagement, community development, grassroots organizing, governance, or policy, must today overcome big political, cultural and economic divides. Solving the problems our time requires building trust across these differences. However, surprisingly little research has been done on the competencies involved in trust-building or on the relationship between learning and trust-building. We are left with many questions. What is the role of individual people in supporting trust-building in collective efforts or diverse partnerships? Can leaders play a catalytic role on trust-building? **How can we, both individually and collectively, get better at building trust?**

The white paper you are reading summarizes a study, conducted at the Teachers College at Columbia University, on trust-building for collective action. The study applies an adult learning perspective to better understand how trust is built and how people learn to build trust for voluntary collective action. Here you will find a simple, high-level and plain language overview of the study and its findings. If you are a community practitioner, educator, or anyone else interested in building trust, this report is for you. A full academic report on the study will available later in 2026.

About This Project and Its Purpose

The purpose of this project was to understand **how effective leaders of voluntary civic engagement efforts build trust with and among diverse people, and how they learned to do so.** We explored the practices, mindsets, and learning processes involved in building trust for successful collective action. Our main focus is on voluntary settings in which groups are trying to practice self-governance and self-determination towards shared goals.

The project was designed to identify core capacities for trust-building that could be used to train and support everyday leaders engaged in collective action. We have used the research findings to develop the framework you will see here.

Research Methods

Data collection for the project took about two years to complete. It took place in four phases:

Phase 1	**Review of existing literature on trust, learning, and collective action** to collect what is already known about this topic.
Phase 2	**Interviews with 18 experts in collective action,** to explore which leaders these experts viewed as the most effective trust-builders, and why.
Phase 3	**Interviews with 21 strong trust-building leaders,** nominated by the Phase 2 participants, to explore their approaches to building trust across differences and how they learned their approaches.
Phase 4	**Five in-depth case studies** of exemplary trust-building leaders from the Phase 3 group, delving more deeply into their personal stories, learning histories and trust-building practices. Case studies drew on: - Interviews with the five leaders themselves - Survey responses from 50 of their collaborators, including quantitative and open-ended questions - Additional interviews with 8 of their collaborators - A review of documents on each leader's accomplishments

Altogether, a total of **98 people** from across the U.S. participated in the study. All were involved in in some form of voluntary collective action, hailing from three arenas of practice: grassroots political advocacy, natural resource management, and community development.

Data was coded and analyzed for themes in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. The five case studies are not described in this Executive Summary, but were used to shape the research conclusions, and are included in the full report of the study.

Findings

To understand trust-building leadership, we focused on the leaders in Phases 3 and 4, who were nominated for the study others saw them as skillful at building trust. We heard from the leaders themselves, their nominators (in Phase 2), and some of their collaborators (in Phase 4) about how they were supporting trust-building in group efforts. We learned that they were doing three things:

1. They catalyzed trust within groups by first earning it themselves.
2. They made collaborations feel safer by helping collaborators manage the specific risks involved.

3. They applied six Trust-Building Leadership Competencies to build trust between others.

The next few sections give an overview of the findings.

Finding 1: Earning trust individually can catalyze group trust

One of the commonly used models of interpersonal trust says that a person can earn another person's trust by demonstrating three elements of trustworthiness:[8]

Ability: Possessing a set of skills, competencies, and characteristics needed to exert influence or produce effective results in the kind of work they are doing.

Benevolence: Showing a genuine desire to help others for unselfish reasons.

Integrity: Following and demonstrating a set of values that others in the group find acceptable.

It's a simple model, but in this study, it mirrored much of what people said about personal trust. Collaborators gave numerous examples of how the leaders in the study had earned their trust by showing ability, benevolence and integrity. They described trusting the leaders because they were strategically and technically savvy; were generous with their caring or their knowledge; and modeled high standards for transparency, inclusivity and work ethic. Benevolence, in particular, seemed to play a very strong role; participants saw personal generosity as very important for building trust. Openness, listening, humility, authenticity, and receptivity to others also inspired trust.

Additionally, collaborators discussed how the personal trustworthiness of particular leaders made them feel more confident about trusting group efforts in which those leaders took part. For example, leaders transformed personal trust into group trust by:

- Forming new connections that people saw as trustworthy because they trusted the introducer
- Demonstrating values of inclusivity and being trusted to facilitate inclusive group processes
- Demonstrating ability to move groups towards effective strategy and implementation
- Leveraging personal trust to coach group members on the sidelines and help them move through group conflicts

Importantly, leaders did not have to occupy a positional role of leadership in order to catalyze trust in a group effort. There were many stories of individuals "leading from the middle" within a group to improve trust among members. Several leaders leveraged connections, facilitation skills, active questioning skills, coaching skills and strategic knowledge to build group trust without having a formal leadership role.

Finding 2: Trust involves helping people manage relevant types of risk

When collaboration with someone feels risky, there's obviously a chance that risk might prevent collaboration. However, many trust theorists see risks as an *opportunity* for trust, not just a barrier. We might trust someone implicitly if we already know them well, have what some people call "thick" or family-like social ties to them[9], or have information that convinces us they are trustworthy. Otherwise,

we might need to gather firsthand evidence to decide if they deserve our trust. Taking risks with someone, even small ones, gives us the chance to test out the relationship and see what the other person does. One popular trust model calls this process "risk taking in relationship."[v] It imagines trust-building as a kind of learning cycle, in which a person is constantly taking risks in a relationship with someone else, assessing the results, and updating how they think or feel about that person's trustworthiness. Then, they decide whether to take risks together again. By this logic, the more positive experiences we have in taking risks together, the more we will tend to trust each other.

In our research study, risk played an important role in how people thought about collective action and trust. Participants described many different types of risk that can come up when taking action with a group of other people, including:

- **Psychological risks** of interpersonal interaction, such as being insulted, ignored, deceived, taken advantage of, misunderstood, or verbally attacked in ways that damaged their self-image;
- **Risks of harm to desired goals**, in which a group's actions undercut or interfere with what an individual wants, whether deliberately or due to unclear or misaligned goals;
- **Reputational risks** of losing one's social capital through association with a person, group or action that comes to be perceived negatively by outsiders;
- **Physical risks**, including risks of violent confrontation and other threats to physical safety;
- **Legal and punitive risks**, such as being charged with a crime, sued, or surveilled by the state in ways that lead to a loss of privacy; and
- **Risks of failure**, in which the group does not achieve what it set out to do, for example because it lacks sufficient knowledge, agreement, commitment, focus, resources, influence, or a viable strategy.

Different forms of collective action were described by participants as involving different risks, which require different kinds of preparation. For example, a policy coalition needed to worry about risks of conflicting goals, while people doing door knocking outreach need to prepare for physical risks of door knocking. A community development project needed to avoid squandering the reputations of its community outreach people, while a protest campaign needed to manage the risk of possible arrests.

The leaders in the study appeared to play an important a role in transforming risk from a barrier into a trust-building opportunity. They were described as helping people to manage, prepare for, and/or prevent relevant risks in appropriate ways. For example, some leaders helped reduce psychological risks by building up other people's confidence or by helping them to navigate conflict. Others helped reduce risks of harm to people's goals by helping groups agree on very clear objectives for their work together. Being supported to manage the specific risks of a collaboration ultimately helped people take action together, which in turn, created opportunities to build trust.

Finding 3: Leaders used Six Trust-Building Leadership Competencies

Trust-building leaders and their collaborators described many skills and practices that contribute to building trust between other people. These skills can be generally grouped into six clusters, or Trust-Building Leadership Competencies, that build trust between others in partnerships and group efforts. These competencies helped the leaders address and manage various different types of risk involved in collective action. Figure 1 shows the six Trust-Building Leadership Competencies.

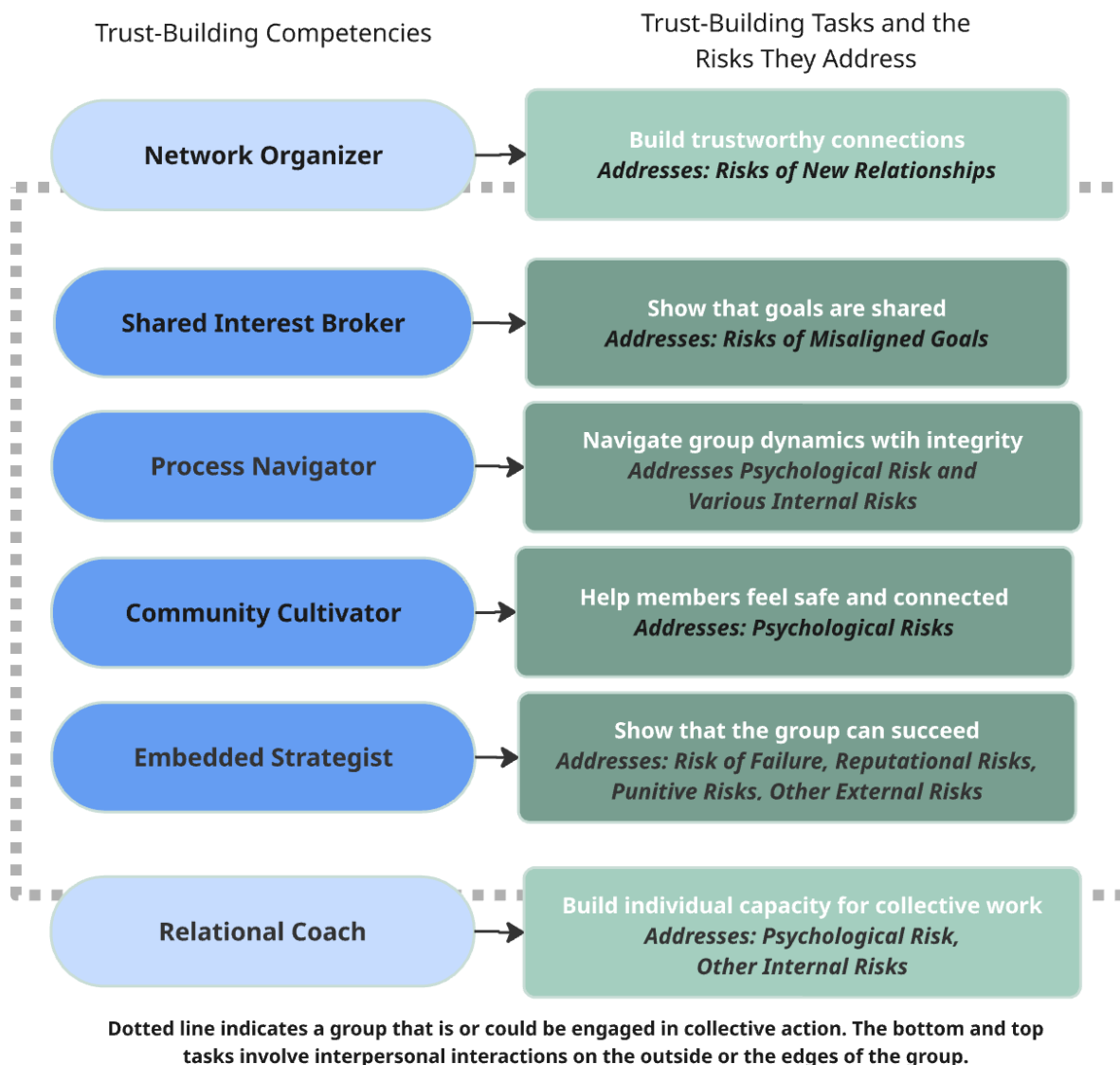**Figure 1: Six Trust-Building Leadership Competencies**

1. Network Organizer	2. Shared Interest Broker	3. Process Navigator
❖ Gets to know many people ❖ Weaves strategic interpersonal ties ❖ Connects groups across boundaries	❖ Knows all parties' interests ❖ Sets goals and parameters for collaboration ❖ Synthesizes consensus ❖ Keeps everyone focused on the group's shared "why"	❖ Addresses group dynamics, inequities, tensions and harm ❖ Slows conversations down so that more voices can be heard ❖ Promotes perspective-taking ❖ Frames relationships in a bigger-picture context
4. Community Cultivator	**5. Embedded Strategist**	**6. Relational Coach**
❖ Encourages interpersonal relationships within group ❖ Promotes positive feelings when group is together ❖ Fosters psychological safety ❖ Practices cultural awareness	❖ Finds a practical path forward ❖ Engages members efficiently ❖ Leverages resources and partnerships strategically ❖ Delivers on goals & interests	❖ Encourages individual engagement ❖ Teaches, models and mentors ❖ Shares informal advice on relationships ❖ Supports individual risk-taking

Some of these competencies were more important for building *affective trust* – the kind of trust that arises when people feel emotionally safe and connected with each other -- while others were more important for building *cognitive trust* – the kind of trust that arises from people judging and evaluating each other's behaviors.[10] For example, Community Cultivators and Relational Coaches tended to emphasize affective trust and emotional connection, while Shared Interest Brokers, Process Navigators and Embedded Strategists tended to rely more on logical reasoning and action to help people trust the actions and intentions of the group. Consistently, affective and cognitive approaches both came up as important for building trust.

The six competencies were used by groups and individuals to mitigate the different types of risks involved in collective action. Figure 2 shows how each of the six competencies helped address specific kinds of risks.

Importantly, not all of the trust-building leaders in the study appeared to have mastered all six competencies. Rather, different leaders specialized in or were known for different competencies, and combined them in different ways.

Figure 2: Addressing Risks of Collective Action with the Six Competencies

Trust-Building Competencies   Trust-Building Tasks and the
                                                         Risks They Address

Network Organizer	**Build trustworthy connections** *Addresses: Risks of New Relationships*
Shared Interest Broker	**Show that goals are shared** *Addresses: Risks of Misaligned Goals*
Process Navigator	**Navigate group dynamics wtih integrity** *Addresses Psychological Risk and* *Various Internal Risks*
Community Cultivator	**Help members feel safe and connected** *Addresses: Psychological Risks*
Embedded Strategist	**Show that the group can succeed** *Addresses: Risk of Failure, Reputational Risks,* *Punitive Risks, Other External Risks*
Relational Coach	**Build individual capacity for collective work** *Addresses: Psychological Risk,* *Other Internal Risks*

**Dotted line indicates a group that is or could be engaged in collective action. The bottom and top
tasks involve interpersonal interactions on the outside or the edges of the group.**

Implications for Practice

The diversity of leadership approaches seen in this study, particularly in regard to the Six Trust-Building Leadership Competencies, points towards a strengths-based approach to trust-building. There are opportunities for each person to match their own skills and qualities with the needs and risks of the situation, contributing to group trust in their own way. For example:

A people person who enjoys getting to know others could be a skilled **Network Organizer.** This is a valuable trust-building competency when a new collaboration is first forming or needs to gain more members. It can help people overcome the risks of new relationships.

Someone who is a rigorous thinker, skilled at noticing where people agree or at pointing out the logical next step, can be an effective **Shared Interest Broker**. This is valuable if a group is having trouble finding direction or if some members are worried that their goals might not align with other members.

Someone who is comfortable with conflict and skilled at getting people to see each other's point of view may make a good **Process Navigator**. This is a valuable competency for building trust when there are diverse perspectives in a group, tensions are high, or people are having trouble seeing eye to eye. It can help groups move past the psychological risks associated with being insulted or not being heard, as well as risks of having their goals undercut by other members.

A person who loves building community or has a knack for putting people in a good mood might make a good **Community Cultivator**. Community cultivators build affective (emotional) trust by helping people feel connected on a deep level, which can help them move more easily through both the psychological and tangible risks of working together.

Someone with a lot of insider knowledge or experience in a particular field of practice might be a valuable **Embedded Strategist,** helping a group make a viable, achievable plan to reach its goals. This is useful in any situation where knowledge and skill will be needed for the group to reach its goals, reducing the risk of a failed group effort.

Someone who is a good teacher or a trusted sounding board can help a group as a **Relational Coach,** working with group members collectively or on the sidelines to help them learn from their experiences or reflect on interpersonal difficulties. This can be an important function when people are new to group work, new to the kind of work being done, or struggling with the dynamics of collaboration.

The Six Trust-Building Competencies can provide a framework for self-reflection on one's own strengths and how to apply them in a trust-building context. Box 1 on the next page provides examples of reflective questions for individuals. The Six Trust-Building Competencies could also be used by groups to reflect, collectively, on their internal strengths and weaknesses at building trust. Box 2 suggests some reflective questions for groups.

Box 1   Shaping One's Own Trust-Building Approach: Reflective Questions

Personal questions

1. **Personal motivations:** Why do you want to build trust with others for collective action? What life experiences have shaped your standards for how people should relate to each other? What examples of personal or collective trust-building have you experienced in your own life, and what can these experiences teach you?
2. **Personal trustworthiness:** How do you show ability, benevolence and integrity in your interactions with others? How can you cultivate the basic dispositions of trust-building, including openness, listening, humility, authenticity, and receptivity, on a daily basis?
3. **Trust-building competencies***:* Which of the Trust-Building Leadership Competencies resonate with you -- which ones speak to the skills you have, what you like to do, and your sense of purpose? What skills, tactics and approaches have your past experiences taught you about how to build trust?

Questions about the collective action context

1. **Situational factors:** What are people trying to accomplish in this situation? What barriers might be impacting trust, and what risks do people face in coming together? What are the group's needs?
2. **Personal positioning in the situation:** Which Trust-Building Leadership Competencies fit the needs of the situation? How can you leverage your own skillsets, connections, positional roles, or knowledge, to build trust within this effort? How can you position yourself to commit to building trust in this space?

Box 2   Group Self-Assessment: Reflective Questions

- Where are our group's biggest challenges in regard to trust between our members? Where are the biggest opportunities?
- In our work together, which kinds of risks have the largest impact on our ability to trust in each other and in our collective power?
- What is our group currently practicing in each of the Trust-Building Leadership Competency areas? What is working well, and what could be improved?
- What else could the group try out in order to strengthen trust in these different ways?
- Who in our group can take the lead on the different competency areas? Who would like to experiment and grow in each of these areas?

Conclusions

Findings of the study suggest that leaders who are recognized as good trust-builders are skilled at gaining personal trust, care about building trust in groups, and have built upon their own strengths to find ways of doing so. These findings point towards myriad ways in which training and leadership development programs could help people get stronger at building trust. They also lay a groundwork for further research on trust-building. Future research could explore:

- Validation of survey measures for trust-building capacity: how can we quantify trust-building leadership capacity, at both individual and collective levels, in a consistent way?
- Predictive power of the six trust-building competencies: to what extent do reliable ratings of these competencies predict higher trust in groups?
- Utility and application of the framework: how can groups use this framework to improve their trust-building practice?

In our increasingly divided and unequal society, collective action remains an essential strategy for communities to meet their own needs, especially when they lack resources or have been historically dispossessed. The topic of how to build trust is therefore not only a question of civic engagement and democracy, but of justice. It demands more attention, both in both in research and in practice.

Questions? Comments? Ideas? Reach out here: https://savanna-lyons.com/

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