Fostering a Culture of Trust

Pandemic-related challenges and technological advances have made trust a central concern for countless organizations.

In 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM), a predominantly Black medical school in Atlanta, a $40 million grant to deliver COVID-19-related information to traditionally underserved communities. The goal was to establish trust between these groups and health care providers, so that everyone who needed care could access it with confidence and ease.

To craft a plan and put it in action, MSM joined forces with global professional services firm KPMG LLP. Trust was at the center of this relationship as well, says Todd Ellis, principal in the Health and Government Solutions practice at KPMG.

"We trusted MSM because of its nearly five-decade record of striving to establish health equity," he says. "MSM trusted KPMG because of our long history of tech expertise and the ability to generate data analysis and insights across a wide array of sectors."

Together, the two institutions examined demographic data on a granular level to expose vast discrepancies in health care access from ZIP code to ZIP code. The analysis also uncovered important insights regarding food insecurities, attitudes toward government intervention and internet access.

But data itself couldn't solve the problem, says Dr. Dominic Mack, director of the National Center for Primary Care and a professor of family medicine at MSM.

"Data is important to demonstrate that there is a need," he says. "At the same time, you have to take action based on the insights you gather. You can't just sit at your computer and look at the data."

To that end, KPMG and MSM created a "digital front door" to help previously underserved communities gain health care assistance. They also partnered with a leading broadband company to provide alternative forms of internet access to low-coverage areas, enabling people in these communities to more easily access the care they needed—and in the process, building a foundation of trust they believe will lead to a safer and healthier future.

Balancing Multiple Stakeholders

Establishing and preserving organizational trust has proven to be one of the central challenges of the pandemic era. "The pace of change, combined with a general uncertainty about what tomorrow might hold, has created a need to focus on building and sustaining the trust of stakeholders of all kinds," says Emily Frolick, the U.S. Trusted Imperative leader at KPMG, who helps clients navigate risk in the digital era.

The challenges organizations face in establishing trust are diverse. As more businesses move to third-party technology platforms, essential objectives like protecting customer and employee data are falling outside the direct control of the organization and subject to new cybersecurity risks. Moreover, advances in machine learning have led to trust gaps stemming from algorithmic bias and lack of confidence in AI-based decisions. A recent survey from KPMG International and HFS Research found that less than a quarter of technology leaders around the world are ready to make decisions based on the findings of an AI-driven machine.

> *"The pace of change, combined with a general uncertainty about what tomorrow might hold, has created a need to focus on building and sustaining the trust of stakeholders of all kinds."*
>
> **— Emily Frolick,**
> *U.S. Trusted Imperative Leader, KPMG LLP*

Then there's the challenge of supply chain disruption, which has demonstrated the need for organizations to work with partners that are financially resilient and able to pivot quickly in the face of unexpected changes. What's more, the shift to remote and hybrid work has given rise to privacy and safety concerns for many employees.

Management's Crucial Role

In the face of these challenges, organizations are taking several steps to establish trust. Management has a key role to play in the process, Frolick says, and it starts with treating employees with empathy and respect.

"When employees feel like they're valued stakeholders, they can be a great support to the organization in building trust among customers and partners," she says. "On the other hand, if employees don't feel valued, they're less likely to gain the trust of people outside the organization."

Company leaders can also earn trust by acknowledging that they're not perfect. "Own up to uncertainty,"

Frolick says. "Acknowledge that you might not always have all the answers, but that you're certain you can arrive at a good solution together if you try. Create an environment where diversity of thought is encouraged—and offering a dissenting view or raising a concern are not penalized, but rewarded."

Technology, while sometimes a contributor to trust gaps, also has a role in maintaining organizational trust. Creating redundancies in processes that rely on technology can help catch potential problems before they arise, and AI-based technology can be used to monitor indicators of potential challenges, like supply chain issues.

Ultimately, Frolick says, trust is something that organizations should bake into their culture. What that looks like may differ slightly from company to company, but all trustworthy organizations share certain characteristics: They're competent in their area of expertise, they're in business for a purpose that extends beyond profit and their interactions—both internal and external—are characterized by integrity and accountability.

"Establishing trust is not a task you can ever truly complete," Frolick says. "It's an ongoing effort that demands constant attention." The organizations that build trust into the core of their business, she says, are better positioned to manage risk and stay resilient during these unpredictable times.

Learn more about how KPMG can help your organization earn trust and thrive in today's complex business and environments.