



Public Leaders' Guide to Engaged Trust



**PARTNERSHIP
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE**

Better government. Stronger democracy.

Many federal government leaders are concerned that the public’s increasing distrust in our government is making it harder for them to carry out their missions and keep our communities healthy and safe. Drawing on the Partnership for Public Service’s years of research and work with federal agencies, this guide introduces the concept of Engaged Trust™ and provides a framework for how government leaders—from department secretaries to team leads—can spread Engaged Trust with the public and within their own teams and agencies.

Trust in government is complicated. Our federal government is a diverse collection of individuals and teams, each of which may inspire different levels of trust in different contexts. For example, a government scientist may be trusted to research diseases but not to predict the weather. National surveys, including the Partnership’s annual survey, report [low public trust in government](#). However, research also indicates that [most people would still follow government guidance](#) despite saying they do not trust the government itself.

Very low trust in government can lead to risks, such as the public disengaging from voting and other civic activities or believing damaging or dangerous rumors. Low trust in particular leaders or agencies could result in program budget cuts, lengthier review and clearance processes, congressional investigations or high staff turnover.

On the other hand, in a democracy, there can also be risks when trust is very high. People might not verify government claims of success, or they might enable “trusted” leaders to amass unaccountable power. Very high trust may also lead to poor allocation of resources if programs are not properly evaluated and improved when needed.

[Many factors](#) can shape public trust in government. For instance, personal support for the political party in power has a strong link to trust in government, as does the feeling of having a voice in government decisions. [Negative experiences with government](#) programs have a strong link to distrust in government, while positive experiences have less of an effect in terms of increasing trust. People also rely on their [networks](#) to learn about whom and how to trust. These networks can include social media, community groups, issue-focused or advocacy organizations, professional associations, or news and entertainment channels.

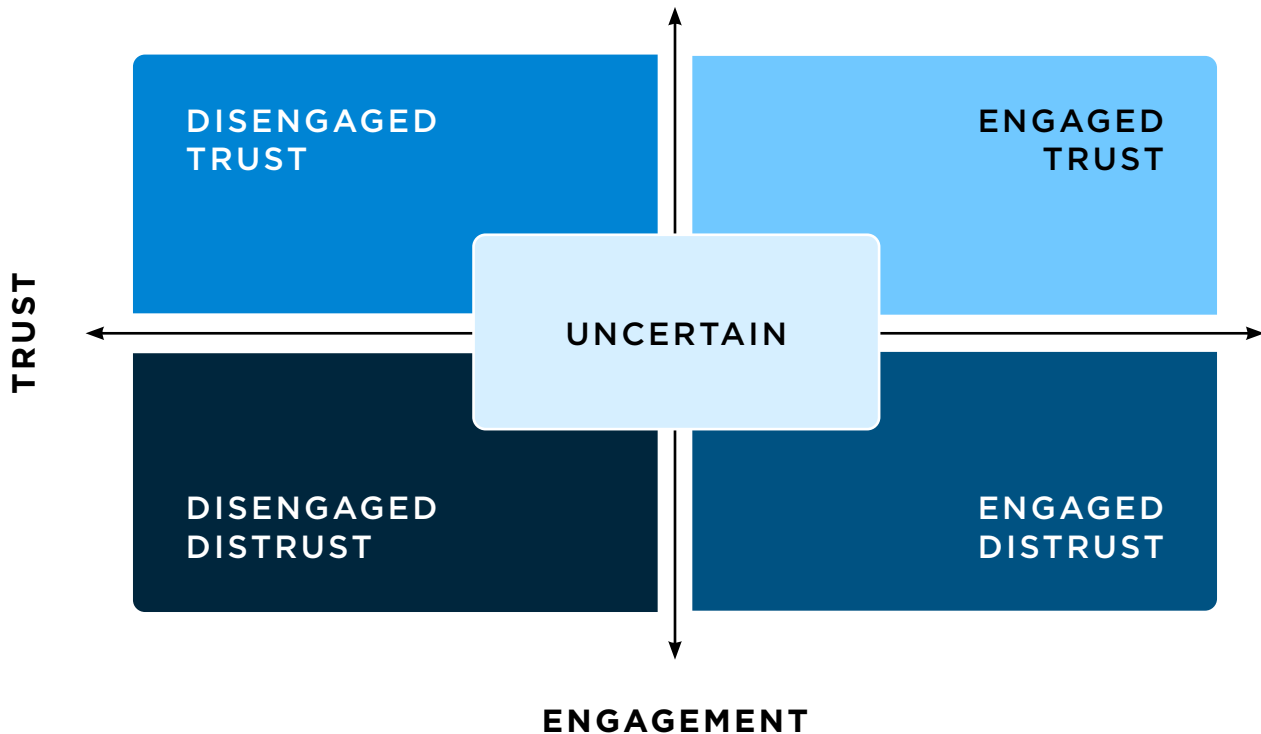
Several factors that affect trust are outside the control of federal leaders. So, the Engaged Trust framework focuses on a factor that federal leaders, employees, members of the public and others can apply to a wide range of situations: how leaders deliver on the commitments they make. This framework builds on years of research looking at how delivering on commitments influences trust across the public and private sectors. It also relies on trust [measures used by agencies such as VA](#).

Engaged Trust Framework

Show you are willing and able to deliver on your commitments in ways that spread Engaged Trust among the people involved.

What Does Engaged Trust Look Like?

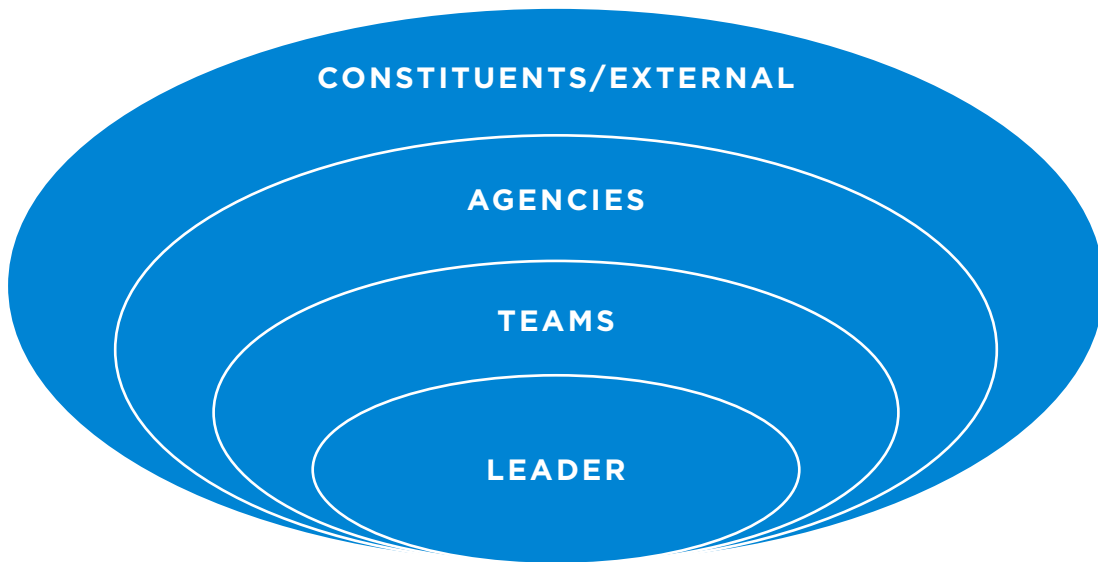
A functioning democracy requires more than passive or disengaged trust, which could, in fact, be harmful. That is why this framework focuses on creating opportunities for people to both engage and trust based on how federal leaders make and deliver on their commitments. Some ways people can engage include providing input on commitments, holding leaders accountable for delivery, and sharing with their networks about how leaders are delivering. Some ways people can trust leaders include believing those leaders' commitments respond to their input, that leaders are willing and able to deliver what they have committed to, and that the potential benefits of those commitments outweigh the risks.



Depending on the situation, people may trust or distrust and engage or disengage. People may also be in situations where they are uncertain and need more information or support to engage with and trust in leaders. When thinking about trust, leaders sometimes put too much focus on the people who are least engaged and trusting. However, this group is the least likely to spread trust. Encouraging engagement from people who are trusting will have more impact, since they are more likely to share information with their networks about their trust in government leaders or agencies.

Who Are the People Involved?

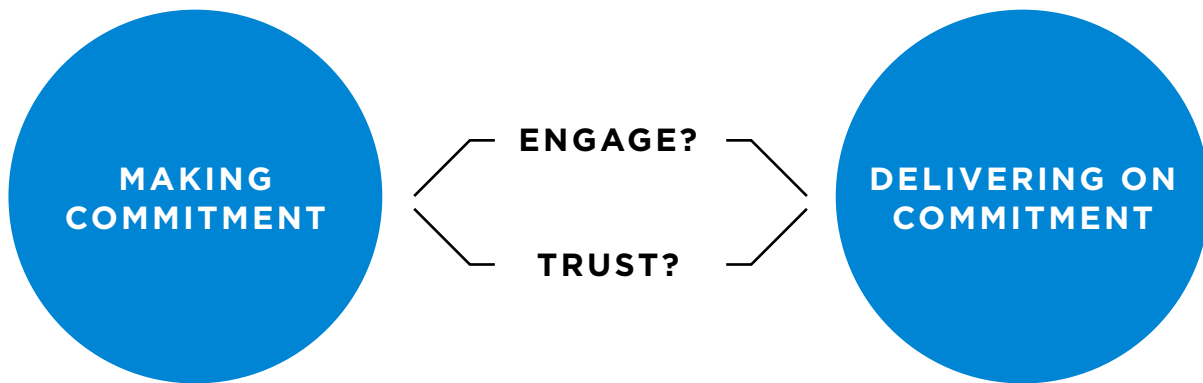
Government leaders' commitments often involve people at multiple levels at the same time—the leaders themselves, their teams, federal agency partners and members of the public or other external groups such as Congress or local governments. These people may have a role in delivering on a commitment, be affected by it, or both.



Here are examples of commitments public leaders may make:

- To themselves: Take a professional development class this quarter.
- To their team: Incorporate staff feedback into new office policies.
- To other federal agencies: Provide accurate service reports each month. Delivering on this commitment will also involve the leader's team.
- To the public: Launch a pilot version of an online service hub this year. Delivering on this commitment will also involve the leader's team and other federal agencies.

How Does Engaged Trust Spread?



Leaders can spread Engaged Trust in the risky space between making and delivering on commitments. Trust does not mean risk goes away. After all, if no risk is involved in delivering on a commitment, then trust is not needed. In this risky space after a leader makes a commitment, the people involved can decide to engage and trust (or not) based on whether they think the leader is willing and able to fulfill that commitment.



ENGAGED TRUST SPREADS THROUGH REPEATED SHARING OVER TIME

Engaged Trust is not static, which is why this framework focuses on spreading it among the people involved and their networks. If stories and other information that encourage trust are not being shared in these networks, a vacuum may be created where rumors, wrong information and disengagement can spread. Simply issuing a report or giving a speech is not enough to spread trust. Trust only spreads if people are repeatedly [sharing with their networks](#) about how leaders or agencies are willing and able to deliver on their commitments.



ENGAGED TRUST SPREADS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Engaged Trust starts with federal leaders and their teams and spreads outward to federal agencies and to the public and other external parties, including Congress. If leaders want the public's trust on a commitment, then they need to make sure their teams and interagency colleagues trust them and that, in turn, they can trust their teams and colleagues. [Research has found](#) that "workforce trust is an indicator of government effectiveness and a driver of public trust in government."



ENGAGED TRUST SPREADS FROM SMALL TO LARGE COMMITMENTS

People often do not focus on how much trust they have in the federal government and its leaders until a crisis hits. But that is also when it is much harder for leaders to spread trust. Leaders need to start spreading Engaged Trust early by delivering on small, meaningful commitments. For example, to build support among agencies to [reduce burdensome forms](#) across all of government, staff at the Office of Management and Budget began by delivering a memo to agency leaders and partnering with a few individual agencies to develop new approaches, rather than trying to institute change across all agencies at once.

What Kinds of Commitments Spread Engaged Trust?

COMMITMENTS THAT ARE UNDERSTANDABLE AND BELIEVABLE

How a leader makes commitments will help set the stage for spreading—or undermining—Engaged Trust. It is important for leaders to communicate about the commitment, and its potential benefits and risks, in ways the people involved can understand and believe. If people misunderstand a commitment or do not see the results they expected, they may be disappointed, leading them to disengage and lose trust. If a commitment is not believable, leaders may undermine trust from the start, as well as down the road, if they then fail to keep that commitment. To prevent this, leaders may need to focus initially on spreading trust through smaller but still meaningful commitments, rather than through large, complicated ones.



Understandable and Believable

To help people in crisis and distress, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration delivered on a commitment to implement a new and simplified nationwide three-digit voice and text hotline called 988.

COMMITMENTS THAT RESPOND TO THE INPUT OF THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

When making commitments, leaders need to respond to the input of the people involved, including their own team. If people feel their input was ignored, then trust and engagement could decrease even if the commitment was kept. Incorporating [Human Centered Design principles](#) can help leaders encourage meaningful input, especially from people who may face barriers to participating. This two-way communication with the people involved will also help ensure commitments are understandable and believable to them.



Responding to Input

Department of Housing and Urban Development staff ... listened to former foster care youths describe the impact housing insecurity had on their ability to finish school and hold a first job. The staff delivered on the youths' proposal to close the persistent housing and social service gaps facing those leaving foster care.

How Can Leaders Show They Are Willing and Able to Deliver?

First, leaders must make sure that they, their team, their agency or a combination are willing and able to keep their commitments. If delivery requires third parties (like contractors, nonprofit organizations or local governments), it is important to assess if those parties are also willing and able to deliver. Third-party failures can undermine trust in public leaders even when the leaders are not directly involved.

WILLING

Do leaders' words, incentives and values align with their commitments?

ABLE

Do leaders' resources, competencies and track record of delivering align with the requirements of delivering?

If leaders find they, their team or other parties are not willing and able to deliver, they should resolve those issues before moving forward. This may mean openly revising a commitment. When leaders are sure they are willing and able, they must show this to the people involved.

SHOW IN WAYS THAT ARE RELATABLE TO THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

People want to be able to explain what is happening to them in life, including government actions that may affect them. Public leaders must provide the information people need, and in ways they can relate to; otherwise people may turn to less accurate, but more relatable or understandable sources of information to make sense of their experiences.



Relatable to the People Involved

EPA's Maui Wildfires Emergency Response Team relied on the advice of Maui cultural leaders, who provided training to responders and advised on local culture to prevent missteps by nonresident team members as they delivered on their commitment to help communities rebuild and recover from the devastating 2023 Maui wildfires.

SHOW IN WAYS THAT PEOPLE WILL SHARE THROUGH THEIR NETWORKS

Spreading Engaged Trust can only happen when the people involved are sharing about how a leader, team or agency is willing and able to deliver. This means the leader must work to understand what and how information about them, their team or their agency spreads through the networks of the people involved. This understanding enables leaders to adapt their communications to be relatable and sharable by the people involved.



Sharing through Networks

The Transportation Security Administration partners with more than a hundred advocacy group networks, such as Wheels for the World and Guide Dogs of America, to share about TSA Cares—a program that assists people during the security screening process at airports.

SHOW CONSISTENTLY OVER TIME

Trust can be lost in a moment but takes time to spread. Leaders who show once or twice they are willing and able to deliver will not make much of a difference, especially if rumors or distrust about them are also spreading. The people involved in a commitment need to be reminded regularly that the leader is willing and able to fulfill that commitment, and leaders should continually provide those reminders as they are delivering on their commitments.



Showing Consistently

Consistent, personal engagement over many years by National Telecommunications and Information Administration staff with leaders of Historically Black Colleges and Universities has helped to bridge the digital divide for underserved communities.

How Can Leaders Spread Engaged Trust as They Deliver?

MAKE THE DELIVERY PROCESS VISIBLE

Leaders should focus on making the delivery of their commitment visible to the people involved throughout the process. Ideally, this will include accessible video, photos, graphics, dashboards and other visual media, rather than just long reports, press releases or speeches. These visuals are often easier for people to share with their networks. [Research has shown](#) that sharing clear visuals can increase trust both with the public and within government teams.



Making Delivery Visible

As the Transportation Department worked to ensure airlines refunded travelers for canceled or significantly delayed flights, it made the work visible by launching a consumer dashboard showing which carriers were taking customer-friendly steps to help travelers.

ADAPT THE DELIVERY TO THE SITUATION

Leaders should deliver commitments in stages, if possible, so they can adapt as needed along the way, incorporating the experiences and feedback of the people involved. Delivering in stages also enables leaders to build quickly on early successes and catch problems before they become bigger.



Making Delivery Adaptable

Before launching a fully redesigned website, the Social Security Administration collected and incorporated customer feedback from a beta website.

MAKE DELIVERY ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

Engaged Trust is not possible without accountability. Leaders should create opportunities for the people involved to hold them accountable for the positive and negative impact of how they deliver on their commitments. Accountability includes learning from the experiences of the people involved and applying that knowledge to future commitments. If leaders fail to deliver on a commitment, they can start again by making and fulfilling small, meaningful commitments.



Making Delivery Accountable

VA increased its use of customer experience surveys so that when issues are identified, VA employees can use real-time customer experience data to correct them.

What Comes Next?

Federal leaders can apply this framework to show they are willing and able to deliver on their commitments in ways that spread Engaged Trust among the people involved. Federal employees who are not in leadership positions can also use the framework.

Here are some questions to start the process:

- With whom do you want to spread trust and engagement?
- What networks do those people rely on when deciding whether to trust and engage with you?
- What are small, meaningful commitments you can make to them you can prioritize now?
- How can you make those commitments understandable, believable and responsive to their input?
- How can you show—in relatable, sharable and consistent ways—that you are willing and able to deliver on your commitments to them?
- How can you deliver in ways that are visible, adaptable and accountable?

We hope you will try out this framework and, as you do, please tell us about your experiences. We are continuing to develop trust resources through our research and collaborations with agencies. If you would like to learn more, schedule a workshop or explore a collaboration, please let us know.

Developed by Will Jenkins and Hanadi Jordan.

Additional thanks to Samantha Donaldson, Lindsay Laferriere, Ellen Perlman, Paul Hitlin, and Nadzeya Shutava.

More of the Partnership's trust research is [available online](#).




PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Better government. Stronger democracy.

600 14th Street NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

ourpublicservice.org

 [partnershipforpublicservice](https://www.facebook.com/partnershipforpublicservice)

 [@PublicService](https://twitter.com/PublicService)

 [rpublicservice](https://www.instagram.com/rpublicservice)

 [PartnershipforPublicService](https://www.youtube.com/PartnershipforPublicService)

