



Preserving Organisational trust during disruption such as a pandemic

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Practical advice on how employers can ensure that employees feel supported during periods of significant disruption – such as the COVID-19 pandemic; mitigating the risk of potential staff disaffection.

Aim of Guidance

This factsheet highlights how organisations can preserve the trust already established with employees, despite serious disruptions caused by such events as the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruption can have a negative effect on how some employees perceive or trust their employers, especially in how the latter responds to the crisis. If there is a breakdown in trust and employees see limited efforts to support them during the crisis, some might seek to undertake unauthorised insider acts for their own benefit or even just to exact revenge against their employers.

CPNI's Insider Data Collection Study (2013) identified that "*general disaffection with the employing organisation continued to be a contributory factor*" in many insider cases. The study also discovered that poor management practices, where there was a failure to address and resolve workplace issues such as grievances against the organisation, contributed to that sense of dissatisfaction.

The advice provided here is based on the 2020 research paper funded by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) "*Preserving organizational trust during times of threat*" co-written by Stefanie Gustafsson (University of Bath), Nicole Gillespie (University of Queensland), Rosalind Searle (University of Glasgow) and Veronica Hope-Hailey (University of Bath).

The paper concentrates on the impact of the global financial crisis on the organisational trust of four distinct employers (retail, engineering, local council and central government) but the findings and recommendations can be easily transferred to any type of major disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The full paper can be obtained at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0170840620912705?journalCode=ossa>

We are grateful to the authors for giving us permission to share key points from their paper, especially at this critical time for all organisations.

1. Trust in peril

1.1 Organisations spend time and resource ensuring that their workforce have confidence in the decisions made by employers; resulting in building trust over time in new organisations, and in some cases repairing trust due to poor decisions made by the organisation. Where trust is established and active, a single external disruptive event, out of the control of the organisation, can lead to two conditions in the workforce:

- a) disruption of familiarity; and
- b) an increased sense of vulnerability

1.2 Employees who are faced with new ways of operation or even the possibility of loss of employment, look to the organisation for reassurance

2. Practices to preserve trust

2.1 There are three practices an organisation can deploy which can preserve established trust, which have been identified by the above research paper:

i) **Developing a vision after the crisis - “Cognitive bridging”**: taking the organisation on a “walk over the bridge” moving from a position which is no longer viable due to the crisis, even if the other side of the bridge seems different or unknown. A clear vision of what the future looks like for the organisation will provide certainty and positivity, in a time when employees feel vulnerable and nervous of change. The communications surrounding this vision therefore have to be:

- open
- honest
- consistent across the organisation
- respectful/ non-patronising

ii) **Understanding that personal emotions are important – “Emotional embodying”**: organisations must accept that employee emotions, triggered by the disruption, are an important factor to consider when going through this change. Therefore, organisations should:

- emphasize that emotional responses are taken seriously by the organisation
- ensure that employees have time and space to share these emotions, so they can be worked through collectively
- be caring of employees who are emotionally affected by the disruption to them and others
- understand that some employees may need time to come to terms with the changes, especially if they are fast paced

iii) **Collective decisions - “Inclusive enacting”**: involving organisational members in the decision-making process, giving them a voice during the disruption, will reduce employees’ sense of vulnerability. This provides a sense of personal control when the situation seems out of their control.

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3. Enabling mechanisms

3.1 To enable organisations to carry out the preservation of trust through the above practices, they should use the following mechanisms where appropriate:

- i. **Use of existing foundations of trust:** deploying those established organisational structures which engender familiarity and confidence in employees i.e.:
reference to a similar situation which the organisation was able to successfully navigate through
 - confidence in robust organisational processes
 - emphasis on organisational values and principles
 - where possible, depending on the disruption, continuation of organisational rituals and social practices;
- ii. **Importance of management role:** it is key to preserving employee trust in the organisation that they see management fulfilling a role that is supportive and protective during a period of disruption. In the first instance, management should be seen as 'guardians' or 'stewards' of the organisation, and not primarily as 'change agents' seeking to make a name for themselves.

4. Summary

4.1 Significant disruptive periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, could have a detrimental effect on the trust already built between an organisation and their employees, leaving them with feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability.

4.2 Employers can preserve established or active trust by adopting effective practices which ensure employees will have confidence in the direction chosen by organisations in response to a crisis.

4.3 This advice can be read in conjunction with other CPNI guidance such as:

[Staying Secure during COVID-19](#)

[Pandemic Security Behaviours](#)

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