

# LEADING ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Why Trust Brokering is the new obligation of leaders



*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right  
doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*Rumi*



What happens when trust breaks down between people and institutions, and what should business leaders do in response?

That is one of the key leadership questions posed by Edelman's 2026 Trust Barometer – an annual global research study that measures the state of trust by tracking trust in key institutions. [↗](#)

The 2026 report is hard-hitting and packed with insight. It describes a world of “Trust amid insularity” – one where we are increasingly reluctant to trust those who differ from us. Given the wider economic, environmental, social and geopolitical climate, this is hardly surprising.

This is an issue for organisations as much as for society or politicians. Inside companies, insularity can make collaboration, engagement and change harder. And increase the risk of people withdrawing effort or moving teams. Across markets it shows up as a stark trust gap between companies headquartered in a respondent's own country and those with foreign HQs.



Edelman makes a strong case for something that we at 7 Seas believe to be one of the core leadership capabilities needed in these uncertain and rapidly changing times:

**Trust Brokering:** the ability to counter insularity by actively facilitating trust across difference.

In our last paper: *Leading Through Uncertainty* [↗](#) we highlighted Trust Brokering as one of 7 key capabilities for leaders. In this paper we take a deeper look at the report that prompted that principle and introduce practical steps to help you navigate this landscape.

We've also included insights from a former CEO and Chairman of a global insurance company, Mark Cloutier, drawn from our Deep C Dive podcast interview with him in July 2026. With over four decades of experience leading global financial services firms to transform and perform under pressure, Mark is uniquely placed to comment on why trust matters for performance.



## Big picture – what’s driving this trust issue?

Edelman describes this “retreat into insularity” as driven by three distinct forces:

- 1 Polarisation** (a belief that the country is divided, and that those divisions are entrenched)
- 2 Grievance** (resentment toward systems perceived as unfair or rigged)
- 3 Insularity** (reluctance to trust those who differ from us)

According to Edelman, this retreat has been accelerated by multiple factors combining to create a perfect storm: **misinformation, cost of living, economic displacement, discrimination, and geopolitical tensions.**

Aside from the strategic imperatives this macro environment brings, there are clear implications for leadership. Employees are experiencing change, uncertainty and societal shifts both within and outside the workplace.

**Trust, in this climate, is increasingly more fragile and more local.** People make judgements about who to follow based on whether they trust the source rather than on institutional authority or formal credentials alone. That’s been true for some time. What the report highlights as a new distinct trend is that **we trust those closest to us the most.** And closeness is not just about physical proximity - friends, neighbours, colleagues. It includes the people we feel close to online: influencers, communities and social networks.



## The fragmentation of shared reality

One real driver of insularity is that **we increasingly consume information within our own ideological bubbles** which become ever more self-reinforcing as the algorithms do their thing. Edelman reports that only 39% of respondents get information from sources with a different political leaning at least weekly, and this has declined year-on-year for almost every country.

For leaders, if people are restricted to trusting information from ever-decreasing social bubbles, and may not share the same starting assumptions, sources, or interpretations, **strong communication goes far beyond what traditionally counts as good** communication. You can be clear, consistent and concise. But whether you are correct in everyone's eyes is determined by an increasingly fragmented and blurry information landscape, further complicated by the rise of AI.

For organisations undergoing change, this has direct consequences. Change requires shared understanding, willingness to experiment, and trust in the messengers. When 'shared reality' weakens, engagement with messages varies depending on personal trust. **In an insular environment, this poses challenges for anyone who needs to bring people with them through change.**

What is needed is more signal and less noise: a move from broadcast to dialogue. Acknowledging real concerns, engaging with challenge and listening well is far more likely to build trust and commitment.

*How do we best get people to embrace change? By treating them with respect and helping them understand the journey you're about to take them on.*

*Mark Cloutier*



## Insularity: the 'performance tax'

The Trust Barometer highlights the operational and performance cost of this retreat into insularity. For example:

**34% would put in less effort for a leader with different political beliefs, and 42% would rather move teams than report to a manager with different values.**

This risk to performance may show up as:

- **Difficulty creating alignment or buy-in**
- **Lower engagement**
- **Greater cynicism and resistance toward strategy and change**
- **Siloes and lack of collaboration**
- **Increased risk of attrition as people seek leaders they feel are more closely aligned with their values**

## The good news: employers are the most trusted institution (but the expectation is high)

Even in a low-trust world, we trust our co-workers as much as our friends and neighbours and our CEO far more than journalists or the government. Yes, we know that's a low bar, but it does mean 'My CEO' is the most trusted leader of all surveyed. This level of influence brings high expectations: **75% believe their employer has an obligation to help bridge divides and facilitate trust.** **58%** think employers are doing a good job at this so, while there's still work to do, employers perform better than most other institutions on this measure.

**This obligation requires courage. In a context where societal trust is strained, organisations and leaders can become steady anchors.** But many fear becoming lightning rods. Increasing global levels of conflict, social division and unrest have created ethical and reputational quandaries for leaders and organisations. **How to address events taking place in the wider world without alienating stakeholders, including employees?** Is it better to remain silent on contentious topics? How to lead organisations where employees may not only inhabit different reality bubbles but also find themselves increasingly polarised?



## In practice: Trust Brokering

'Trust Brokering' is how Edelman describe a set of practices and behaviours that counter insularity by facilitating trust across difference.

The report describes this capability as one of **surfacing common interests** among insulated parties and translating their needs, goals and realities in ways that **build understanding and bridge difference**.

Their research found that, among those willing to trust someone different, the top reasons include: "they have an open mind and don't try to change me" (**49%**), "they are transparent about how they differ from me" (**46%**), and "they helped me in the past" (**24%**).

That is a blueprint for leadership. Leaders who broker trust:

- Listen well, without judgement, and reflect what they hear accurately
- Translate realities across diverse teams, demographics and experiences
- Recognise disagreement and seek to bridge difference, finding common goals and values
- Build personal trust through fairness, respect, and practical support for their teams



*Compassionate management isn't soft management. It's management that helps people understand the difficult decisions and difficult choices you have to make as part of a business. Mark Cloutier*



There are some practical recommended actions for leaders from Edelman's research (based on direct survey participant feedback):

- 1 Promote a shared identity and culture (82%)**
- 2 Build teams requiring people with different values to work together (81%)**
- 3 Provide training for people to have constructive dialogue amid conflict (80%)**

Also worth noting are responses that speak to challenges leaders have had to navigate recently: return to the office and responding to societal unrest or division.

**74% of global respondents said one way for businesses to facilitate trust is to bring employees into the workplace** to interact with people different to them. Could our desire to respond to increasing needs for flexibility have had unintended consequences? This is not a case for blanket return to the office mandates (which may themselves damage trust in diverse workforces), but it does suggest that creating meaningful ways to work together in person matters more than ever.

**Nearly a third of respondents said a business could earn their trust by responding to a highly divisive social issue by supporting the position closest to its values** (vs only **13%** who wanted organisations to take no public position at all). And **74%** believe CEOs should constructively engage with groups who criticise or distrust the company. This calls into question the traditional response of maintaining neutrality or silence on contentious topics. Employees want leaders to engage constructively and believe they have an obligation to help resolve these challenges among their employees.



## 7 Seas practical C-suite actions – A framework for leaders across culture, change, capability, and communication

### 1 Culture: make shared identity and common purpose threads that connect

If insularity drives people toward “my circle,” organisational cultures should create communities of trust among employees and stakeholders. A shared identity and purpose cannot simply be words on a website. They must be observed in day-to-day actions, what is rewarded and recognised, and organisational priorities. Leaders should work to:

- Have a clear, consistent, authentic organisational mission or purpose, beyond simply growth or shareholder returns. That shared mission creates collective identity and focus

*If you want to get the best out of the organisation, you have to get the best out of the people in the organisation. It starts with creating an environment where people understand the mission and can align with the mission. Mark Cloutier*

- Create true and authentic organisational values and behaviours. What matters to us as an organisation, why and what does that look like lived every day? Leaders must walk that talk and be willing to receive feedback when they don't
- Be open about how decisions are made in consultation with those values – including when tensions arise (because they will)

*The values - and the notion of living the values - should be alive every day. When something occurs that may appear to be inconsistent with those values, don't let it pass. Explain why it had to be. Mark Cloutier*

- Tie goals, objectives and strategies back to organisational purpose regularly – show people the collective ‘why’

This shared identity and purpose shouldn't be at the expense of local or individual identities, or indeed diversity, but should provide a clear collective focus that bridges difference.





## Collaboration: design for unity

*No one individual is bigger than the business. And everybody in the business needs to know that. Mark Cloutier*

Insularity grows in homogenous teams and siloed systems. Organisations can unintentionally create ecosystems that pit teams or functions against one another. Executive teams can become hotbeds of rivalry or insecurities. Organisational terminology can create divisions or perpetuate inequalities between teams, roles or functions. Leaders can counter it by:

- Actively bringing diverse groups together to work on interdependent goals and projects. Often organisations avoid this when a risk of friction exists, but done well it can create familiarity, understanding and better conditions for trust
- Taking time to build trust and connection in teams where success depends on interdependence – including (especially) the C-Suite
- Dialling down mechanisms and language that promote internal competition – look out for ‘them and us’ language, or comparison
- Communicating shared goals that require collaboration, not parallel delivery, and tying functional goals back to clear organisational purpose
- Sharing stories of successful collective endeavour, where diverse strengths combined to deliver results



### 3 Leadership development: Trust brokering as a core skill

Building trust brokering as a core leadership capability is as critical as enabling leaders to think around corners or respond with agility in these dynamic and uncertain times.

Think about:

- Equipping leaders and teams to have constructive dialogue during conflict. This goes beyond typical performance feedback frameworks, but if managers already struggle to have hard conversations, then brokering trust becomes especially hard
- Creating a shared understanding among leaders of what trust is: what it looks like, why it matters and how to cultivate and protect it
- Encouraging self-reflection and personal accountability - to acknowledge missteps, rebuild relationships and listen with humility

*It's okay as a leader to make a mistake. The key is to acknowledge the mistake and then work together to clean up the impact. Mark Cloutier*

- Reinforcing why psychological safety matters, and how to foster it in teams

### 4 Communications: stop broadcasting; start translating

When employees arrive with different sources, beliefs and interpretations of the wider world, leaders should:

- Openly acknowledge the things people are worried about (name the elephants)
- Use trusted messengers (line managers) and equip them with the tools (and training if needed) to communicate well
- Treat change communication as a continual dialogue, not a top-down broadcast
- Be explicit about downsides or issues, not just benefits. Credibility comes from realism
- Build employee voice into everyday work - not just an annual survey

*Credibility hinges on credible answers. And 'I know everything' is not a credible answer. Mark Cloutier*



## Conclusion: trust as an organisational capability

Edelman's 2026 Barometer signals a shift leaders cannot ignore: insularity is rising, shared reality is fragile, and workplace performance is exposed to values-based fractures. The response is to rethink organisational trust. Beyond reputation or aspirational values. Creating, brokering and maintaining trust is now a core obligation of every leader, and needs to be baked into the fabric of every organisation.

The question for leaders is no longer "Do we have trust?" It is:

**Are we building the conditions for trust to thrive - across teams, across differences, and through change?**



# How 7 Seas help you build and broker trust

## Leadership Team Coaching

Supporting new and established leadership teams to strengthen trust within the team, and broker trust across the organisation.

## Collaboration Across Cultures

Developing the awareness and behaviours diverse teams need to collaborate effectively across geographies and cultures.

## Leadership and Organisational Communication

Reviewing leadership and organisational communication to identify opportunities to build greater trust.

Providing strategic advice and practical support to create communication strategies, frameworks, and approaches.

## Culture Consulting

Reviewing organisational culture to identify where trust can be strengthened, protected, and embedded.

Creating and embedding organisational values and behaviours.

Developing culture strategies to create alignment, trust, and performance.

## The 7 Seas "Culture Compass"

A focused one-day facilitated session to explore your most pressing culture challenges, clarify priorities and agree practical actions.



## About us

We work where the stakes are high: leadership alignment, culture, internal communication, employee experience, and transformational change.

Our work helps leaders build trust and accountability, improve communication, and create the conditions for strategy to land.

We combine expertise in culture, change, communications and leadership with a practical, creative approach that engages people and delivers impact.

Our clients span complex, diverse organisations and globally recognised brands in sectors including financial services, healthcare, automotive and energy.

We work in long standing partnerships with our clients built on foundations of mutual trust. It's then that the magic happens.

We swim against the tide. We'll challenge your thinking, leaving a positive indelible mark on your people, and your business.

We present and podcast (It's called '**The Deep C Dive**'). We write and publish on culture, we chair conferences and sit on industry judging panels.

We win awards with our clients for the impact we've made on their organisation. We have proven results for the change we make on an organisation and the people who work there.

We'd love to do this for you. Please **get in touch** to hear what we're doing for organisations like yours and ways we can help make your place a better place to be.

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