

The Future of Trust in Government Workshop

Facilitation Guide

AUDIENCE	EXPERTS, CIVIC GROUPS, COLLEGE CLASSROOMS, ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS
- PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT GOVERNMENT	
GROUP SIZE	WORKS WITH 4-20 PARTICIPANTS (CAN BE ADAPTED FOR SOLO REFLECTION)
DURATION	2-4 HOURS (SHORTEN BY SKIPPING OPTIONAL EXERCISES)

1. Welcome & Framing

TIME 10 MINUTES

PURPOSE SET THE TONE, EXPLAIN WHY TRUST IN GOVERNMENT MATTERS, AND WHAT THE GROUP WILL ACCOMPLISH.

FACILITATOR SAYS

American trust in government is at historic lows. But trust in government isn't one big thing—it plays out differently in how we hire, buy, collect data, deliver services, discover information, and any other interaction with government. Today we'll explore what we believe trust looks like in specific areas, what happens if it breaks or improves, and how it might be rebuilt.

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS STARTING WITH A SHARED UNDERSTANDING BUILDS ENERGY FOR THE CONVERSATION AHEAD.

INSTRUCTIONS

Depending on the audience, facilitators might ask participants to introduce themselves with:

- Their own views about trust in government
- What they think drives trust (or distrust), or,
- Why they think trust in government matters.

Alternatively, facilitators can share readings ahead of time on trust in government and ask for questions and reactions.

2. Warm-Up: Trust & Government Timeline

TIME 15 MINUTES

PURPOSE CONNECT HISTORY AND LIVED EXPERIENCE TO PATTERNS OF TRUST.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Individually or in pairs, list significant government events from the past 75 years (laws, crises, innovations).
Watergate may be an obvious place to start, or the Apollo program
- For each, note how it shaped public trust—did it strengthen or weaken it?
- Map all examples on a shared timeline (online or in the room)
- Either ask all participants to share 1 of their own examples or one they see that is notable to them

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS LOOKING BACK HELPS US SEE HOW EVENTS SHAPE TRUST OVER TIME AND SPARKS THINKING FOR THE FUTURE.

3. Choose Your “Trust in Government” Focus Area

TIME 10 MINUTES

PURPOSE NARROW THE CONVERSATION FOR MORE DEPTH AND ACTIONABLE IDEAS.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Choose one topic: You can pick any key function or activity in federal government - anything where interaction with the public, or public understanding, is relevant. The key is that participants should have a basic familiarity with it--and care about it. Suggestions might be workforce, data, procurement, small business loans, science R&D, weather data and analysis, consumer protection, and much more. If you have multiple groups, each can pick a separate topic, but should select only one.
- Pick a trust research question about your topic. A good way to get started are these examples:
 - What might be the impact if [key audience]’s trust in [focus area] significantly changes?
 - What might be the impact if American’s trust in [key focus area] is significantly divided along [partisan? Regional? Educational?] lines?
- But you can also get narrower. For example, if the area you are interested in is federal data, you might select a research question about the Census.

WHY WE’RE DOING THIS “TRUST IN GOVERNMENT” IS TOO BROAD TO ANALYZE PRODUCTIVELY.

4. Best & Worst-Case Scenarios

TIME 20 MINUTES

PURPOSE UNDERSTAND WHAT'S AT STAKE BY IMAGINING EXTREMES.

INSTRUCTIONS

- For your focus area, describe a realistic worst-case scenario in the next 5 years if trust breaks down, capturing key characteristics on sticky notes.
- Describe a best-case scenario if trust improves, capturing key characteristics on sticky notes.
- If time allows, you might also spend time on somewhat worse and somewhat better scenarios.

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS EXPLORING EXTREMES CLARIFIES RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND WHAT MATTERS MOST.

5. Impact Mapping (Optional if time is short)

TIME 20 MINUTES

PURPOSE THINK THROUGH RIPPLE EFFECTS OF CHANGES IN TRUST.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Pick one of the attributes you identified in your worst case scenario. Discuss: what are the direct consequences of that attribute? Identify at least 2!
- For each first order consequence - go a level deeper! Ask, and then what? Creating a list of second order impacts. If you have time and inspiration, keep going for third order.
- You can map visually as concentric circles or branching notes.
- If time allows, do the same exercise with an attribute of your more positive scenario.

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS SEEING KNOCK-ON EFFECTS REVEALS HIDDEN RISKS AND LEVERAGE POINTS FOR ACTION.

6. Signals & Indicators

TIME 20 MINUTES

PURPOSE IDENTIFY EARLY WARNING SIGNS OR TRENDS THAT SHOW YOU'RE MOVING CLOSER TO THE SCENARIOS YOU'RE SHAPING. THERE WILL BE NO BRIGHT LINE OF TRUST BREAKING OR TRUST EXPANDING, AND IT WILL HAVE MANY CONTEXTS.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Look at your worst-case scenario—what signals might warn you it's coming closer?
- Think expansively: events, statistics, policies, media coverage, public sentiment. Don't worry about whether these are technically measurable - just what whether you'd want to know them.
- Pick the 3 most important with dot voting.
- Repeat with your best case scenario.

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS SPOTTING SIGNALS EARLY LETS YOU ACT OR PREPARE BEFORE A CRISIS--OR RECOGNIZE THAT POSITIVE CHANGE IS HAPPENING!

7. Trust Building: Restoring or Rebuilding Actions

TIME 30 MINUTES

PURPOSE DEVELOP PRACTICAL ACTIONS TO PROTECT OR RESTORE TRUST.

INSTRUCTIONS

- If you think the worst-case scenario (or somewhat worse) is **likely** in 5–10 years:
 - Imagine you're there—what actions could *rebuild* trust for key stakeholders?
- If you think it's **less likely**:
 - What actions now could *prevent* trust from breaking?
- Alternatively, if you want to take a positive framing: if you think the best case scenario may be possible in the next 5-10 years, but only with concerted action:
 - What actions now could make it more likely?

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS TURNING INSIGHTS INTO ACTIONS MAKES THE DISCUSSION IMPACTFUL AND FUTURE-FOCUSED.

8. Wrap-Up & Next Steps

TIME 10 MINUTES

PURPOSE CONSOLIDATE INSIGHTS AND BUILD MOMENTUM.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Each group shares top takeaways.
- Facilitator highlights themes, overlaps, and unique ideas.
- Based on the final exercise, encourage participants to identify one step they could take after the workshop.

WHY WE'RE DOING THIS CLOSING WITH CLEAR INSIGHTS AND COMMITMENTS KEEPS THE WORK ALIVE BEYOND THE SESSION.

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