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The Gaping Chasm: Rebuilding Trust and Confidence

So business doesn't trust government, government doesn't trust the media, the media doesn't trust either, and the public has a general distrust of all three. It wasn't always this way. Or was it?

A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll in October reported that just 23 percent of Americans say they trust government to "do the right thing" all or most of the time, the lowest since 1997.

Nearly two-thirds of the public trust corporations less than they did a year ago, according to the 10th Edelman Trust Barometer. The lack of trust is focused on the top, as only 17 percent said they trust information coming from a company's CEO.

And according to a recent Pew Research Center poll, 63 percent believe the information they get from the news media is wrong. This is hardly a surprise given the increasingly blurred lines between news, entertainment and commentary.

Bruised Psyche

"The American psyche has suffered serious bruises over the past 10 years – from the technology bubble and 9/11 to the housing bubble, financial meltdown and a long series of corporate scandals," said David Gergen during the annual Critical Issues Forum presented recently by the Council of Public Relations Firms (CPRF) in New York. "But this is not entirely unhealthy or new," added Gergen, who is professor of public service and director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, editor at large for U.S. News & World Report, and senior political analyst for CNN.

New it's not. Robert Reich, former secretary of labor and currently a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, claims the "pendulum of public trust has swung back and forth between business and government for more than a century. Confi-

dence in one drops, leading the other to take prominence – until prominence leads to excesses that erode confidence and push the pendulum back."

Enter the media. The departures of Walter Cronkite, Ted Koppel and others were the "passing of objective journalism," said Gergen. "There is a growing viciousness of what's on the blogosphere that is seeping into our political culture and the cable world." A case in point is the media coverage of Lou Dobbs' resignation from CNN, which was often brutally sarcastic in its predictions about the former anchor's next gig.

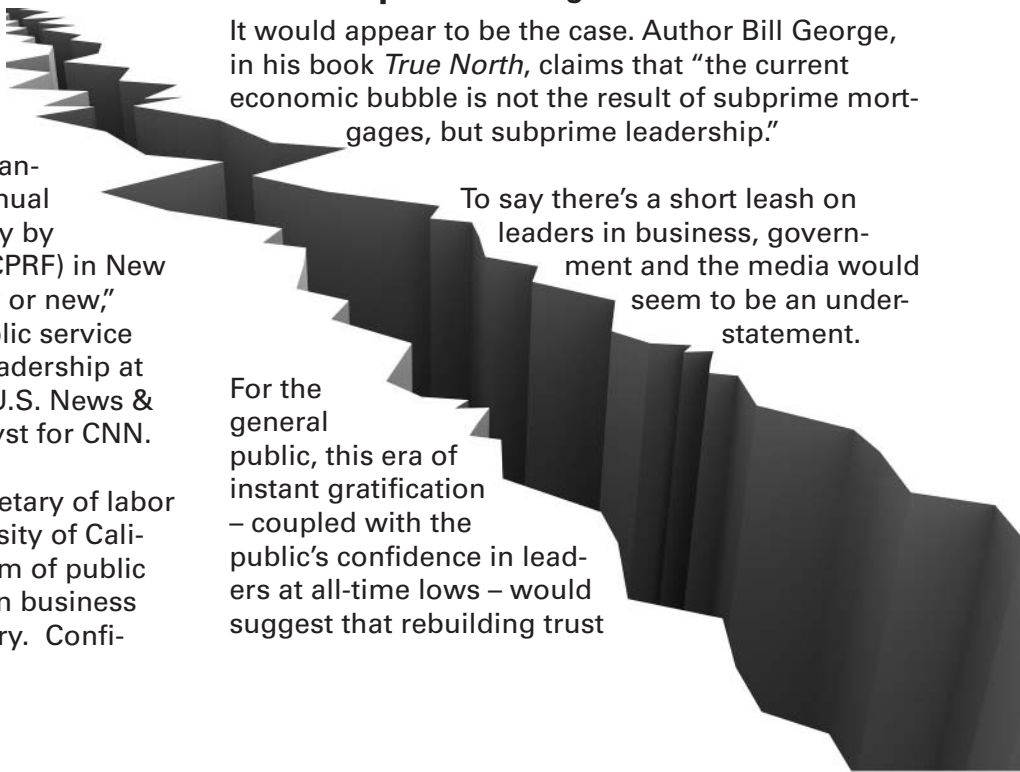
And at least one journalist agrees with Gergen. Also speaking at the CPRF forum, Susie Gharib, anchor and senior advisor for PBS's Nightly Business Report, believes "objectivity is gone." "The media has become biased, reporters and anchors alike," said Gharib. "Each news organization is reporting in the context of its own policies and beliefs."

Leadership the Missing Link?

It would appear to be the case. Author Bill George, in his book *True North*, claims that "the current economic bubble is not the result of subprime mortgages, but subprime leadership."

To say there's a short leash on leaders in business, government and the media would seem to be an understatement.

For the general public, this era of instant gratification – coupled with the public's confidence in leaders at all-time lows – would suggest that rebuilding trust



will require exceptional leadership, perhaps the caliber of which we haven't seen since Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II.

In her post on Chief Executive.net (Sept./Oct. 2009), Jennifer Pellet reports on a roundtable discussion of business leaders where rebuilding trust was the focus. Paraphrasing Paul Winum, managing director of RHR International, Pellet writes "at the root of the problem is a disconnect between centuries-old leadership principles and the context in which today's leaders have been forced to operate. Quoting Winum, "when you think about the tremendously short-term focus and all of the different constituencies and stakeholders that care about what the CEO is doing, it's no wonder that maintaining trust is such a critical ongoing challenge."

Get Real

Getting back to communicating candidly would be a great place to start. Len Schlesinger, president of Babson College and moderator of the CPRF forum, says it's critical to re-establish confidence with actions and it starts with "getting back to communicating substantive trust and confidence." In a press release from the CPRF with highlights of the event, Schlesinger summarized the discussions calling for bold leadership based on values, authenticity and straight talk; for organizations to re-engage with stakeholders at the virtual, physical and mental levels; for words linked with actions because "spin doesn't work anymore;" and for a need to repair the dis-connect between Wall Street and Main Street values.

Others agreed. "Get real, talk to your people, your customers, your employees in plain English," said Gharib. "Be authentic, get rid of the buzz words, be open, honest and talk."

Beth Comstock, senior vice president and chief marketing officer for GE and Gharib's fellow panelist, emphasized there is an opportunity now more than ever to communicate your message with deeds, to understand stakeholders and even redefine stakeholders. "It's about engagement with the customer and their influencers."

On behalf of corporate communicators, Comstock also asked the media for their help. "Give us context," Comstock urged. "There are a lot of good stories not being told. Help us help you tell the stories in a meaningful way."

Gergen suggested the need for partnerships between business and government, better quality communications from corporate America, a sense of commitment to society and learning how to manage up as well as down. Paraphrasing author Max De Pree, Gergen said the most important thing a leader can do is to help people understand reality.


Simple Values

While many look to business schools as breeding grounds for leadership, a better starting point is at home, according to Berkshire Hathaway Chairman Warren Buffett.

Speaking on CNBC before an audience of Columbia Business School students, Buffett said, "I think most of us get our values from what we see around us before we get to business school. I think that it's important to emphasize them, but I think that if I had a choice of having great education on ethics early on in the home or as a course in a school later on, I would choose the home."

The difference between reality and perception may have become a gaping chasm for some executives sequestered in corporate

chambers. Earning back trust and restoring confidence will take time, but will be impossible without first gaining a full grasp of the world as most people know it.

From their seats at the C-suite table, professional communicators have a good opportunity to serve as a "reality check" by urging leaders to speak and act based on the simple values first learned back at the childhood kitchen table. 

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