

Reimagining Government Webinar Series

Record of group chat from Webinar One, 1 April 2022:

"What will it take to rebuild trust in government?"

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Background

In the first instalment of the 2022 Reimagining Government series, the Centre for Public Impact (CPI) and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) hosted an interactive webinar exploring trust in government.

Trust is the foundation for the legitimacy of public institutions, and for a functioning democratic system. For public policies that depend on compliance from citizens, trust is a critical enabler.

With the backdrop of the pandemic, impending climate disaster, racial injustice and other key issues - many are losing trust in government. In the webinar, held 1 April 2022, we discussed the journey of rebuilding trust, and the need to listen and respond to those experiencing complex challenges, in a way which dismantles inequitable power dynamics, builds lasting relationships, and enables community-driven change.

The panel was facilitated by Simon Kent, Deputy CEO, Thought Leadership, ANZSOG, and included Naja Nelson, Associate, CPI, and Marcus Stewart, Co-Chair, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. Aroadme Vromen, Deputy Dean, Research, ANZSOG, also presented her reflections at the end of the webinar.

The audience contributions to this conversation were captured over the course of the webinar in the chat room. Participants also voted in a Zoom poll, discussing how much they trust the government to do what is right, and how much they trust people they know personally or professionally in government. They also provided reflections on a case study provided by Naja, on the [Earned Legitimacy Learning Cohort](#)'s work in the city of Detroit.

We have captured the comments and questions shared by audience members below. We've done very light-touch editing to ensure we reflect people's views and contributions authentically.

Observations

The current state of politics can negatively impact people's trust in government

- Public servants mostly do the right thing - things getting complicated with the political process
- Political parties at present seem to be focused on their own needs, instead of what is required for the community.
- I think that public servants generally want to do what is right and give good advice, but the politics and self-interest of government too often gets in the way of this
- There is an issue with politicians interfering for their own ends.
- The limitation of trust is due to politics rather than public interest being the driver of government action/inaction.
- I trust government moderately because I work within government, so I know how hard everyone works and how much they care. But politics is the main reason why bad decisions get made, in my opinion.
- Right before an election is when we see trust at its lowest level.
- I think many in the public sector try to do their best. They're often constrained by the political process.
- Sometimes, people I work with will bend the process for political expediency.
- I think the majority of people I know and associate with are ethical and want to do the right thing. As mentioned earlier politics gets in the way.
- Public servants are different from politicians... People work in the public service to serve the community.
- Trust in government has decreased as a result of highly politicised behaviours over the past decade.
- There is a huge difference between the Victorian Public Service and politicians in government.
- I think that public servants generally want to do what is right and give good advice, but the politics and self-interest of government too often gets in the way of this.
- The separation of Ministers and Government has become less clear, so Government actions are increasingly political.

There are deep structural reasons why people are unable to trust in government

- There are many in government with good intentions, but the culture, frameworks and hierarchy don't support a genuine collaborative way of working.
- Government's track record isn't great; and I work in government and I see how decisions are made.
- Individuals can do their best but culture, institutions, politics and many other things limit the extent of their influence - we can have conflicting motivations/policy goals.
- There's often a lack of funding to deliver on services effectively.

- There's a lack of transparency in government.
- There's diminishing capability and funding in government.
- I know a lot of very good people in government, their good work is spoiled by the few who are not.
- I trust public servants largely to do the right thing but the right choice is not always made by government
- Few public servants have the authority to make decisions, arguably even at the higher levels.
- Most people in government are well motivated. The structures and processes tend to undermine that.
- There are many great individuals but they are constrained by the rules of the day.
- I see a growing trend in executive public servants of self interest rather than commitment to public interest.
- It's hard to influence government from the inside - so even if you have trustworthy public servants - structural issues get in the way.
- One bad banana spoils the bunch.
- There are a number of collective/system level considerations involving trade-offs and compromises that often result in less than optimal outcomes.
- Years of gutting the public sector means staff are constantly firefighting, so even with the best intent, the way that decisions are made and implemented means that positive outcomes are incredibly hard to achieve.
- There are different levels of trust across different levels of government - local, state, and federal. Structural impediments might be the reason for this.
- There are often barriers internally within government to have honest conversations with the community.

The journey of building trust is a complex, ongoing process

- Trust is a process not an outcome - this keeps it an 'active' engagement instead of 'we're done, we did that'.
- It's important to make the distinction between trust as a process rather than an outcome. It is always contingent for the citizen, and provisional for those in positions of power.
- Trust needs to be conceptualised as a two way street. It's not just about us trusting government. At least as important is the government's trust of its citizens.
- Some sectors of government would be looking to build relationships, and others would be looking to build trust, but fundamentally it all revolves around the relationship between government and citizens.
- We must centre practices in integrity and accountability.
- Public servants should try to do the right thing within external constraints.
- I don't trust government to manage relationships with their people. Our lack of empathy in relationships means we often don't do the right thing in the right way - we need to centre on relationships.

- Our social media team created a lot of trust simply by having a sense of humour to deal with recurrent issues.

Complete trust in government might not be the end goal

- I differentiate between trusting our system of government and trusting THE government. I trust the system more than I trust a set of elected officials. I think that is actually healthy.
- We don't have to trust government to work effectively with government.
- When it comes to trusting THE government, citizens need a healthy dose of scepticism. They also need to be wary of that tipping into cynicism and tuning out entirely.
- Cynicism can be a natural response to previous Governmental failures. Government need to demonstrate they can be trusted by delivering.

Case study reflections - what would you do if you were a city trying to build trust with citizens (particularly communities with disabilities)?

- I would look for early wins, to help build trust.
- Take criticism on the chin. And be really transparent about what you will and won't have the capacity to achieve through the office.
- Need to partner and engage with peak bodies but also engage with people, taking in lived experience.
- Talk to the residents. Set up mechanisms to engage with residents and co-design the organisation and approach.
- I would get disabled sector involved.
- Ensure lived experience was integrated within its design and operation. Bring them into the fold.
- Talk to stakeholders - understand their POV.
- I'd try and understand more about why people weren't in support.
- Talk to the disability sector - what do they want and need?
- Co-design approach.
- Spend time with the communities just listening.
- User-centred design approach.
- Understand the friction points for services currently and where they can be improved.
- Look to have initiatives led by people with disabilities.
- Definitely bring in human-centred design approaches... Bolster community engagement and bring in public advocates.
- Need to ensure that there are people with disabilities working in the team.
- Manage expectations - the community's and your own.
- I really like the straight talk about power. In Australia, we tend to shy away from recognising that power and its absence is an important factor.
- There's so much strength in leaning into vulnerability.

Other observations

- Trust arrives on a donkey and leaves on horseback; slow to gain, easy to lose.
- Levels of trust must be embedded in context to have any meaning. "Do you trust government?" is not a useful/constructive question. "Do you trust the current government to provide you with the health infrastructure/ support to meet your health needs?" can be the start of a constructive discussion.
- My life has been relatively (dare I say) privileged and the government has not done anything to make my life hard - so I have no real issue with what they are doing to my life. So we must not confuse trust in government doing what is right for us, with what is right for everyone / the community / those that need help and support the most.
- I come from an industry association perspective where we spend a lot of time working with government, seeking trust, building trust etc in areas such as business regulation, environmental regulation etc. However, some may not be comfortable with industry (so some industry sectors) working to build "trust" or productive relationships with government as there is the risk of regulatory capture or decisions which aren't in the public interest.

Questions

- Is trust a government issue, or a question of peoples' connections with large organisations? How can you have a relationship with an organisation apart from through people?
- Do election cycles support or destroy trust relationships?
- Trust declines during elections, but what would happen to trust without elections? A catch-22?
- How have public servants in Victoria had to learn to cope with a shift in the substructure of power in the State, which underpins their own institutional authority?

And finally, some resources posted by our audience

- [CPI's microsite](#) hosts curated materials on the topic, and links to join our Community of Practice - with interactive sessions, conversations and networking opportunities.
- Join our [Reimagining Government Community of Practice](#) to access interactive sessions, conversations and networking opportunities.
- CPI's [Earned Legitimacy Learning Cohort](#) saw four cities and counties take action to address past harms and rebuild legitimacy with marginalised communities. [The Impact Report](#) details how over 10-weeks, governments worked to dismantle inequitable power dynamics and enable community-driven change.