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What's trust got to do with it? How trust helps foster a culture of compliance

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In 1995, three economists designed an experiment to study trust.[1] While the nuances and controls of the experiment are complex, it was, in short, an investment scenario: a sender and a receiver had a pot of money that would only increase if they sent it back and forth. Both had the choice of how much or how little money to send—or if they would send any money at all.

Now called The Trust Game, this study has become one of the landmark investigations into how trust functions in human behavior. The scientists found that reciprocity plays a considerable role: if the sender risked much by sending lots of money to the recipient—thereby increasing the shared pot of money—the receiver typically did the same. But when the sender didn't risk much—thus keeping the pool of money smaller—the receiver typically didn't risk much either.

As compliance professionals, we know that people's behavior and organizational culture function much like our sender and receiver. People tend to act in ways that increase their reward while mimicking the cultural norms around them, including levels of trust in leaders, their teams, and their organizational structures.

By assessing and increasing our organizations' trust levels, we can help to create a culture of compliance.

Trust: The foundation of compliance

Trust is a five-letter word that does a lot of heavy lifting. Defining trust—and what trust means to your organization—is the necessary first step to examine any organization's culture.

Trust, by its very definition, is active: like the sender and receiver in The Trust Game, we have to have confidence in something or be in a relationship with a person, a group of people, or an organization to trust. Psychologists, sociologists, and economists have all studied various features of trust. They have come up with three core aspects that make a person or an organization trustworthy: benevolence, ability, and integrity.[2]

To broaden this idea, we can assess trust levels in corporate culture by asking: Does this organization value treating its people, customers, and business partners well? Does this organization deliver on its promises? Does this organization and its leaders act with integrity?

So how does trust influence compliance? In an oft-cited *Harvard Business Review* article, Paul Zak details his decades-long neuroscience research in studying people as they work. He found trust translates to people being happier, healthier, and more secure at work.

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For example, compared with people at low-trust organizations, people at high-trust organizations reported 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, and 40% less burnout.[3]

As compliance professionals, we know there are many reasons why people act unethically. Very often, though, they stem from the same things that make people unhappy at work: sales pressure, job dissatisfaction, disengagement, burnout, and/or a disconnection from the organization's mission, vision, or goals.

We can already see the correlations. If people are happy at work, they're likely in or building toward a supportive, inclusive, and productive organizational culture. In short, they are in a culture they trust, which is more likely to already be working toward a culture of compliance.

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