

Trust but Verify

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Trust is a tricky thing.

It can take years to build and can be destroyed in an instant.

Trust between people who are in a close relationship with each other tends to be stronger than the trust we might place in a stranger, for instance.

This is part of why we have the sort of government we do in the United States.

We elect people from our own communities to represent us at all levels – from school board and town council to county offices, the state legislature, and then Congress and the US President.

With each step from local to national, our representatives tend to be less and less familiar to us. Certainly, each person has their own circle of friends and colleagues, but the larger the number of people they represent, the smaller the percentage is of those who actually know the person.

This is why people can feel empowered to shout at their congressional delegates in a way that they would never use when addressing their local county commissioner or member of the town council. Proximity and relationships matter.

Familiarity matters.

“I know this person. You can trust them.”

That phrase, said by someone close to us, can encourage us to trust someone we are not quite so familiar with. That is why political campaigns spend so much time knocking on doors and working at the local level – because you are more likely to believe your neighbor whose kids played little league with yours, than you are to believe a shiny flyer you get in the mail or left on the doorknob of your home.

Trust on the international stage is not what it once was.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, US President John F. Kennedy told the world that the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the world believed him, even before the US produced photographs that identified the missile sites.

The word of the US President was trusted internationally, and so global powers looked harshly upon Nikita Khrushchev, and subtle pressure was brought to bear that prompted the Soviets to withdraw their missiles from Cuba.

That was a time in world history when the word of a president of the United States was trusted on the world stage.

I would dare say that today, the word of this US president is not trusted within shouting distance of the White House in Washington, DC. I tend to believe that the President's word is not believed within the White House either.

During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan had a similar kind of standoff with Michael Gorbachev. Both nations had been building and stockpiling nuclear weapons to the point where either could have blown the entire planet to smithereens if they chose to do so. Much time and energy was spent developing a treaty that would limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

But how would the US make sure that the Soviets were keeping to their side of the bargain? How could the Soviets trust what the US leaders promised to do?

Well, spying technology had advanced since the 1960s era when U2 planes took grainy black and white photographs from many thousands of feet in the air. Now there were satellites that could monitor things happening on the ground. We had some up in space, as did the Soviets.

The level of trust each superpower had for the proclamations of the other were all but non-existent. Public exposure of deception did not hold the same threat to individual political power that it once had. After the 1970s, with Nixon and Watergate and the Vietnam War broadcast into America's living rooms each evening, the public was much less inclined to believe the things their government told them. We were even MORE skeptical of proclamations made by Soviet-aligned nations.

We did not trust each other.

We can argue another time whether we ever should trust each other or even our own governments to be truthful, but for today, we will only consider the level of distrust between the two superpowers engaged in the Cold War.

So what were we to do with promises made by the USSR to freeze their production and placement of nuclear weapons? What were they to do with the promises of the US?

We did not trust each other.

Well, this is where Ronald Reagan used the phrase, "trust, but verify."

He argued that the US should enter into an agreement on nuclear arms limits with the Soviets with a certain level of trust that the USSR was acting in good faith, just as they must assume that the US was acting in good faith, BUT ...

But, both nations agreed to a certain level of transparency with each other.

Both nations were aware that they were spying on each other. Both nations understood that we were taking satellite images of each other's resources. Both nations understood that the other must be allowed a certain degree of freedom to engage in that spying behavior so that they both could verify the truth of the other's assertions in the treaty.

Neither the Soviets nor the US would lead delegations of intelligence officers from the other side on tours through government facilities, where they would point to a large room and say "this is where we keep the bombs."

They agreed to permit the other's satellites to observe activity and operations around areas where we knew the other was making or establishing bombing ... stuff. Silos, bunkers, all that stuff.

So that's what we did. We let them peek at our stuff (from a safe distance) and they let us check on their stuff. Any effort to interfere with the satellites of the other was verboten.

Ok. Trust, but verify.

If anything looked hinky, it could be brought to the international stage and exposed, so that the world would exert pressure on the violator of the agreement to comply once again.

We trust what is familiar. We trust things that we feel like were created with our input.

Verification is how we get to a place of trust. We must find a way to see what we need to in order to trust.

We trust things we understand. We trust things that are familiar. We trust things that we work with, like tools, or materials, or science. A mechanic trusts her tools. A potter trusts the clay they mold. A physicist trusts the laws of nature as they apply to motion and mass.

When Simone Biles steps onto the balance beam, she does so trusting in its strength, dimensions, and other characteristics. She knows it will support her. She knows where it is in relation to her body.

And yet, even as spectacular an athlete as Biles is, that trust is anchored in her ability to verify that the beam is where it is supposed to be.

Look at this picture.

Biles is upside down, in mid-air, and undoubtedly in motion. Her capacity to seemingly defy gravity is amazing.



And yet, she has her eyes on the beam. She knows where it is.

Trust, sure. But know where your feet are going to land.

Trust, but verify that you are where you are supposed to be in this moment.

We are about to kick off our annual pledge drive. This is how the congregation is able to plan for the coming year – by securing people’s pledges of support. This person pledges to give \$400 in fiscal year 2025-26. That person pledges to give \$8,000. This family can give \$100, this other one can give \$2,000.

And the congregation must trust its leadership to manage the money wisely and for the benefit of the congregation and its values.

That’s why there are budgets that are thought out, examined, projected, and planned. So that members of the congregation are better able to trust that their pledges will not be wasted. Budgets and institutional transparency are how folks can verify that their trust is well-placed.

The Board each year develops a budget based on past expenses, projected cost adjustments, and an anticipation of how much people will be able to pledge.

They trust that folks will pledge enough to make for a balanced budget.

The congregation will trust that the Board will develop a budget that is realistic and responsible.

We don’t think of this process as having the same energy as Reagan’s “trust but verify,” motto, but that is what we are doing. We trust, and then each of us – the membership and the leadership – both follow through on their promises, thus providing the verification that allows trust to grow and flourish.

After the service, we will talk about this year’s pledge drive. I invite you to engage in this discussion with an open heart and mind, and I invite you to trust in your leaders to do the things you ask of them. You know them. You love them. They are your friends and family of spirit, if not always of blood.

Life is like whatever move it is that Simone Biles is doing in this picture. It can feel up in the air and spinny and disorienting. But if we keep our eyes on the beam, we are able to know where our feet will come down, and that we will land safely on a solid surface.

Trust, verify. And then expand that trust.

Let's do what we can today and each day to build trust through our relationships with each other.

Amen.