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ADVISORY

POINTS OF VIEW

Trust, transparency and the weight of words

The words trust and transparency are used constantly, but treating them as interchangeable hides the real work organisations need to do.

Trust and transparency are two of the most used words in public administration and organisational leadership.

We talk about trusted advisers, trusted institutions, trusted artificial intelligence and trusted digital identity. Governments speak about rebuilding public trust. Boards ask whether they can trust the information in front of them. Organisations want customers to trust them, staff to trust leadership and regulators to trust their governance.

Transparency appears almost as often. Leaders promise greater transparency. Regulators require it. Boards expect it. Citizens increasingly demand it.

Both words are everywhere, yet the more often I hear them, the less certain I am that we all mean the same thing when we use them.

That matters because language shapes how we understand a problem. The words we choose influence what we notice, what we question and what we decide to do next. When someone says, “We need to build trust”, what are they actually asking for? When they say, “We need to be more transparent”, what do they expect to become clearer?

While contributing to a recent submission to the Commonwealth’s consultation on verifiable credentials, I found myself questioning the language we were using. We repeatedly qualified phrases such as technical trust, operational trust and trusted participation, because the word trust on its own never seemed quite precise enough to describe what we meant. Transparency was something different. It was about helping people understand what information would be shared, why it was sufficient and what record would remain.

The more I questioned the language, the less convinced I became that trust was a single concept.

Think about a bank. Its customers do not simply need to trust the institution in some broad sense. They need to believe their money will still be there tomorrow, transactions will happen as expected and mistakes will be fixed. Much of what we call trust in that relationship is really a combination of reliability, security and accountability.

A board does not simply ask management to be more trustworthy. It asks for clearer reporting, better visibility of risk, stronger evidence and confidence that important issues are being surfaced early enough to act.

When people say they do not trust artificial intelligence, they may mean they do not understand how a decision was made, what information was used, whether the outcome can be challenged or who remains responsible when the technology gets it wrong. Those are questions of explainability, governance and accountability. Calling the issue a lack of trust may be accurate at one level, but it is not yet specific enough to help.

The same is true in ordinary relationships. Someone can be completely honest but always late, while another person can be highly capable and dependable but poor at explaining what they are doing. We instinctively understand that honesty, competence, reliability and communication are separate qualities, even though they all influence whether we are prepared to rely on someone.

Organisations are often less precise. We combine those qualities and call the result trust. There is nothing wrong with that, because trust remains a useful word. The problem starts when it becomes so broad that it hides the work underneath it. Once trust becomes the answer to every question, it becomes harder to see what actually needs to improve.

The more I questioned the language, the less convinced I became that any one of these words was enough on its own. Trust felt too broad, while transparency captured something important without explaining the whole picture. Confidence described how we felt more than why we felt it, and reliability told us whether something could be depended upon without necessarily saying whether it was understandable, fair or legitimate. Together, they seemed to describe something bigger than any one of them could explain alone.

That led me to a different question. Rather than asking which word was right, what if we asked what all of these words were trying to help us decide?

Every transaction asks someone else to carry some uncertainty.

A customer buying a product is deciding whether it will perform as promised. An employee accepting a role is making assumptions about the organisation, the leader and the future of the work. A board approving a significant investment is weighing the quality of the information in front of it against a future that can never be fully known. A regulator deciding whether to intervene is making a judgement about whether an organisation understands and is managing its obligations. A citizen using a digital government service is deciding whether they understand enough about how their information will be used to proceed with confidence.

Every transaction also involves a trade-off. We accept some uncertainty because we believe what we receive is worth what we are being asked to give up.

Social media gives us connection, reach and convenience, but asks for our attention, our data and some control over how we are understood. Artificial intelligence gives us speed, scale and access to capability, but can ask us to surrender visibility of how an answer was formed, confidence about where the information came from or some part of our own judgement. Even the news asks us to rely on choices made by reporters, editors, owners, sources and increasingly algorithms that we may never see.

Those exchanges are not automatically unreasonable. Most useful things involve some compromise, and few decisions are made without cost. The important question is whether we understand the exchange well enough to decide whether it is acceptable.

That is where transparency matters.

Transparency does not remove uncertainty and it does not make every trade-off fair. What it can do is make the exchange easier to understand. It can help us see what we are receiving, what we are giving up, what remains unknown, who benefits and what control we still retain.

Those working in assurance and compliance often have to think about transparency differently. In that world, transparency has a practical boundary defined by what must be disclosed, evidenced and demonstrated. That boundary matters because organisations need to understand what is required and be able to show that they have met it.

But meeting a transparency requirement is not always the same as being genuinely transparent.

An organisation can provide everything the rules require and still leave the other person unsure about what is really happening, what the consequences are or what trade-off they are being asked to accept. Compliance transparency asks whether the required information has been disclosed. Genuine transparency asks whether the other person understands enough to make a reasonable judgement.

That does not mean disclosing everything. Privacy, security, commercial confidence and the rights of others all place sensible limits on openness. Genuine transparency is not limitless disclosure. It is making the exchange clear enough that the person carrying the uncertainty can understand what they are being asked to accept.

Seen this way, trust and transparency are closely connected, but they are not the same thing.

Trust is a judgement.

Transparency is one of the conditions that helps us make that judgement.

Perhaps trust is the point at which someone understands enough about the exchange to decide that the uncertainty and trade-offs are reasonable. It is not the absence of uncertainty, nor is it blind confidence. It is a willingness to proceed despite what remains unknown.

There are limits to this, of course, because transparency can only reveal what is known.

That brings me to another phrase I have been questioning lately: “You don’t know what you don’t know.”

It can be a useful reminder that we do not have the full picture and that confidence can be misplaced. But it can also become a way of stopping the conversation, allowing us to accept uncertainty without asking whether more could reasonably be discovered.

An organisation cannot be transparent about something it has not seen, understood or been willing to question. That is why curiosity, independent assurance, different perspectives, testing, feedback and good governance matter. They help bring more of the unknown into view while there is still time to do something about it.

The task is not to know everything. That is impossible. It is to know enough to make a sound decision, to be honest about the limits of that knowledge and to keep searching for the unknowns that could materially change the judgement.

Some uncertainty will always remain. Markets change, technology moves, people behave unpredictably and decisions often have to be made before the future is clear. Other uncertainty exists only because a process is poorly explained, information has been withheld, evidence cannot be produced or responsibility has never been made clear.

Perhaps stronger organisations are those that leave the least unnecessary uncertainty for everyone else. They are clear about what they know, honest about what they do not know and curious about what they may not yet have seen. They do not pretend that every exchange is free of cost, nor do they ask customers, staff, citizens, boards, partners or communities to accept trade-offs they have not been given a fair chance to understand.

This may also explain why so many transformation efforts deliver less than expected. A service can become digital while the customer still does not know what happens next. A dashboard can become more sophisticated while the board still cannot see the real position. A credential can become technically trustworthy while the organisation receiving it still does not know whether it can confidently act on it.

The technology works and the process may appear complete, but the uncertainty remains because the exchange has not become easier to understand.

This is not an argument against technology, transformation, social media, artificial intelligence or the news. It is an argument for being clearer about the exchanges they create, the uncertainty they ask others to carry and the trade-offs they require.

None of this diminishes the importance of trust or transparency. The point is not to replace either word with something new. It is to be more deliberate about what each one is describing and whether we are asking it to carry more meaning than it comfortably can.

Perhaps the better habit is to question the language before accepting the conclusion.

What uncertainty remains in the exchange, and who is being asked to carry it? What are they giving up in return, and have we made that clear enough for them to decide whether it is worth it?

For public institutions, that may be the more useful question. Citizens do not expect governments to eliminate uncertainty. They do expect decisions to be understandable, evidence to be available and important trade-offs to be visible. Trust is rarely created by asking for it. More often, it emerges when transparency gives people enough understanding to make an informed judgement.

Trust may not be something organisations build directly. It may be what becomes possible when people understand enough about the uncertainty they are carrying, the trade-offs they are making and the limits of what is known.

Transparency does not create certainty, but it gives people a fairer basis on which to decide whether that trust is warranted.