Trust in Action:

Applying Research Insights in a Changing Philanthropic Landscape

Today's webinar is brought to you by the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy and made possible by generous support from Vanguard Charitable's Philanthropic Impact Fund.

Foundation for Philanthropy AFP

Vanguard Charitable

Today’s conversation

WITH

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SPECIAL GUEST

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AGENDA

01 Trust in the nonprofit sector

02 Trust in organizations

03 Trust in fundraising relationships

04 Implications for practice

Microsoft 365 Copilot AI assisted in converting the presenters' ideas and interpretations into the designed slides. The final presentation reflect the presenters' experiences and overall conceptualization and synthesis of the research and its implications.

TRUST IN ACTION

Philanthropy is growing—although the system is under strain

Several forces are moving at once—and fundraisers are absorbing the pressure.



From your perspective, what is happening with trust in the philanthropic environment?

Choose the response that comes closest to your view.

- A Trust is generally declining
- B Trust is becoming more uneven
- C Trust is fairly stable
- D It depends on the institution or organization
- E I'm not sure

Respond in the poll—or put the letter closest to your view in the chat.

TRUST IN ACTION

Trust in the Nonprofit Sector

The big picture

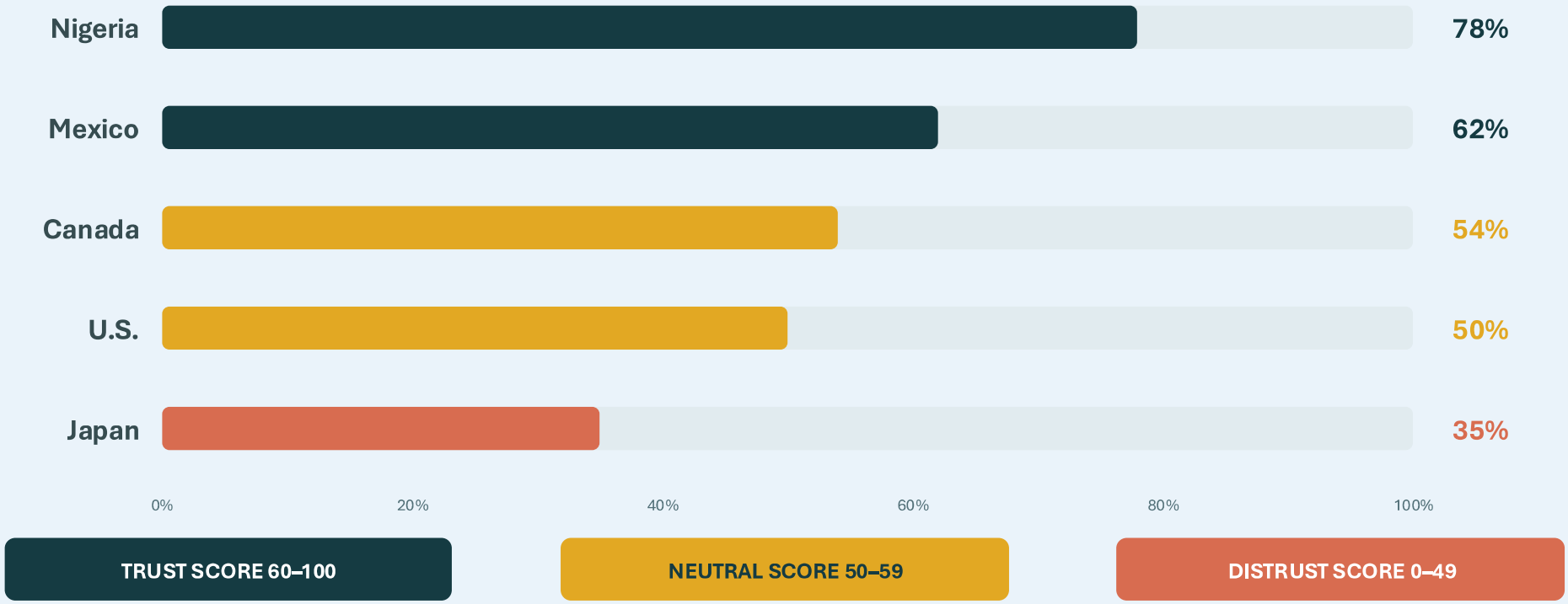


Trust in NGOs is not one global story

EDELMAN
2026 Trust Barometer

Survey question: "How much do you trust NGOs to do what is right?"

Percent selecting the top four points on a 9-point scale



Highest and lowest markets are shown; Mexico, Canada, and the U.S. are retained for regional comparison.

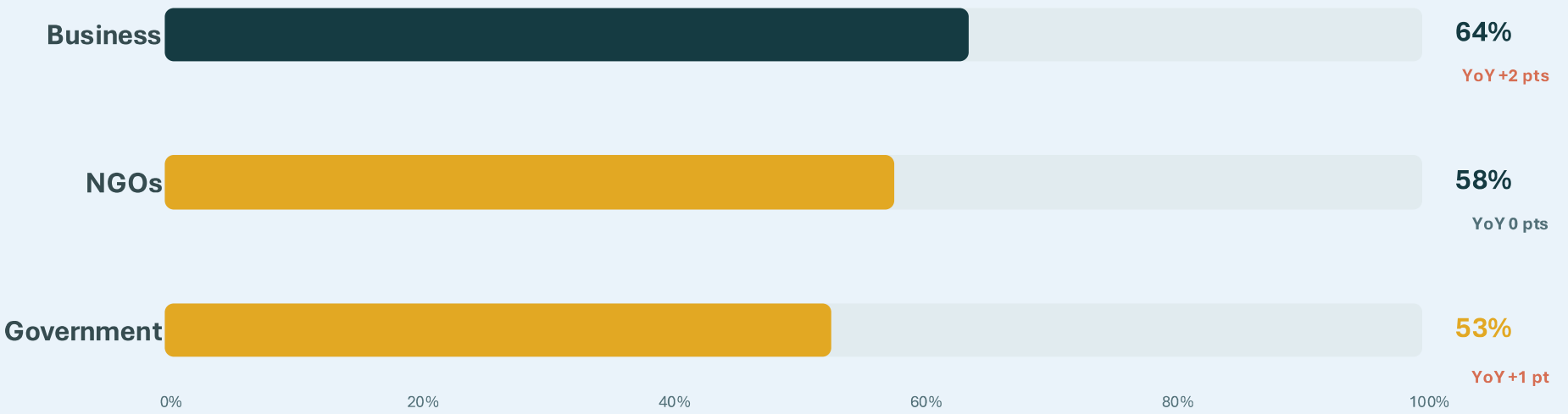
TRUST IN ACTION

Trust in Comparison

EDELMAN
2026 Trust Barometer

Survey question: "How much do you trust each institution to do what is right?"

Percent selecting the top four points on a 9-point scale



TRUST SCORE 60–100

NEUTRAL SCORE 50–59

DISTRUST SCORE 0–49

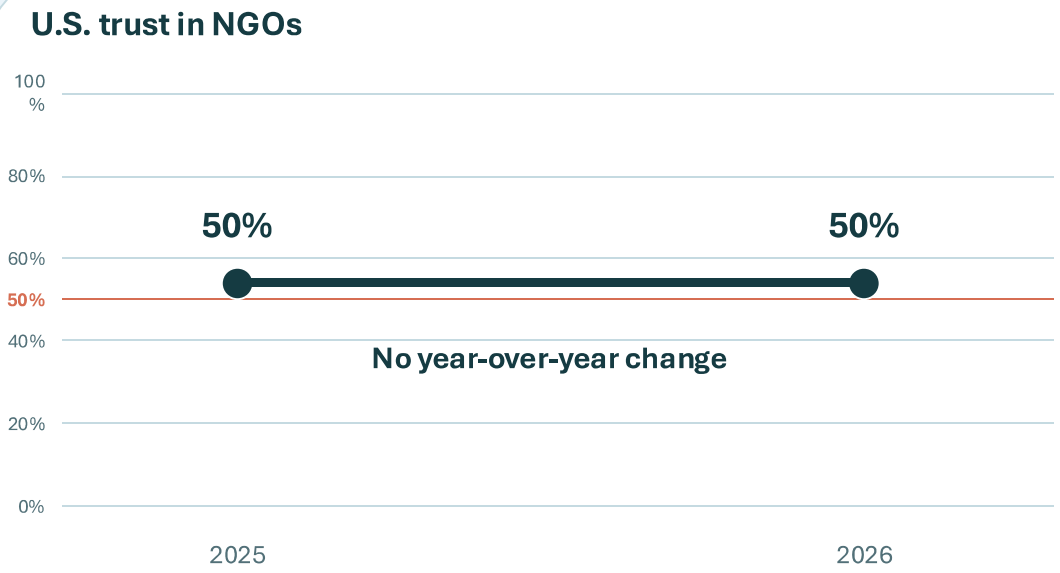
TRUST IN ACTION

U.S. trust in NGOs is stable, but neutral

EDELMAN
2026 Trust Barometer

Survey question: "How much do you trust NGOs to do what is right?"

Percent selecting the top four points on a 9-point scale



WHAT 50 MEANS

NEUTRAL

Edelman classifies scores from 50–59 as neutral rather than trusted.

The U.S. result is stable, but it sits at the lowest edge of the neutral range.

TRUST IN ACTION

GENEROSITY COMMISSION

Is there a mistrust "doom loop"?

1. Giving or volunteering declines
2. Familiarity with nonprofits fades
3. **Trust weakens**
4. Engagement declines further

Less engagement can restart the cycle.



TRUST IN ACTION

Perhaps more **engagement** could lead to more trust

IU LILLY FAMILY SCHOOL
INDEPENDENT SECTOR
2026

Visibility and participation move trust in opposite directions.

FAMILIARITY GAP

≈90%

of people who used nonprofit services did not initially identify themselves as users.

visibility + participation →

ENGAGEMENT EFFECT

60%

of people who engaged directly with a nonprofit said the interaction increased their trust.

Together, the studies suggest a reversible loop: invisibility weakens familiarity; meaningful interaction can strengthen trust.

Think of an organization you trust.

What has that organization done to earn your trust?

Share one action, experience, or quality in the chat. A short phrase is enough.

TRUST IN ACTION

Trust in Organizations

Research findings and
donor perspectives



TRUST IN ACTION

Nonprofit leaders say donor trust is **harder to earn**

MOMENTIVE
2026 Nonprofit Trends

9 in 10

executives say donor trust is harder to earn today than it was three years ago

A PRIORITY AMONG THE OPTIONS PRESENTED

Building trust with donors and the community ranked first among the priorities included in the survey for the next 12 months.

The published report does not show every possible priority or provide the full questionnaire.

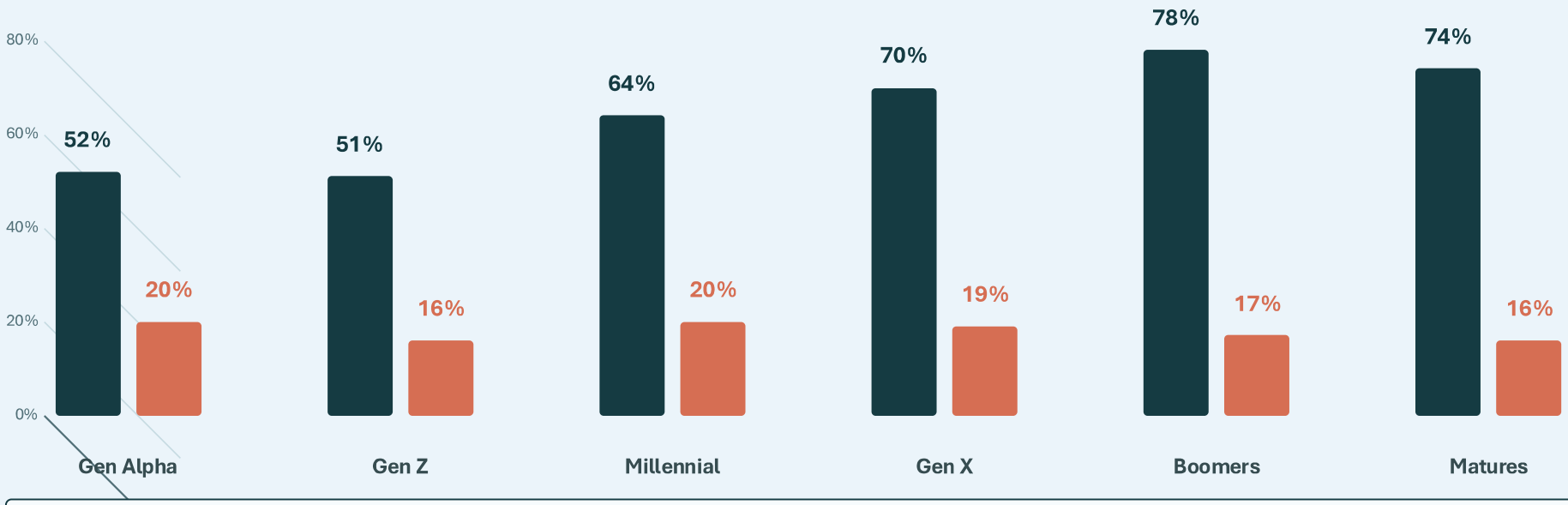
WHO PARTICIPATED	**500 U.S. nonprofit professionals**	Manager level or above • Organizations with $500K+ annual revenue • Online survey, May 2026

TRUST IN ACTION

A gap in trust and giving, with variation by generation

GIVE.ORG
Donor Trust Report 2026

Older participants place greater importance on trusting a charity before donating, while reported high trust remains low across generations.



The gap is widest among Boomers: 78% say trust is essential before giving, while 17% report high trust.

WHO PARTICIPATED

More than 1,500 U.S. adults

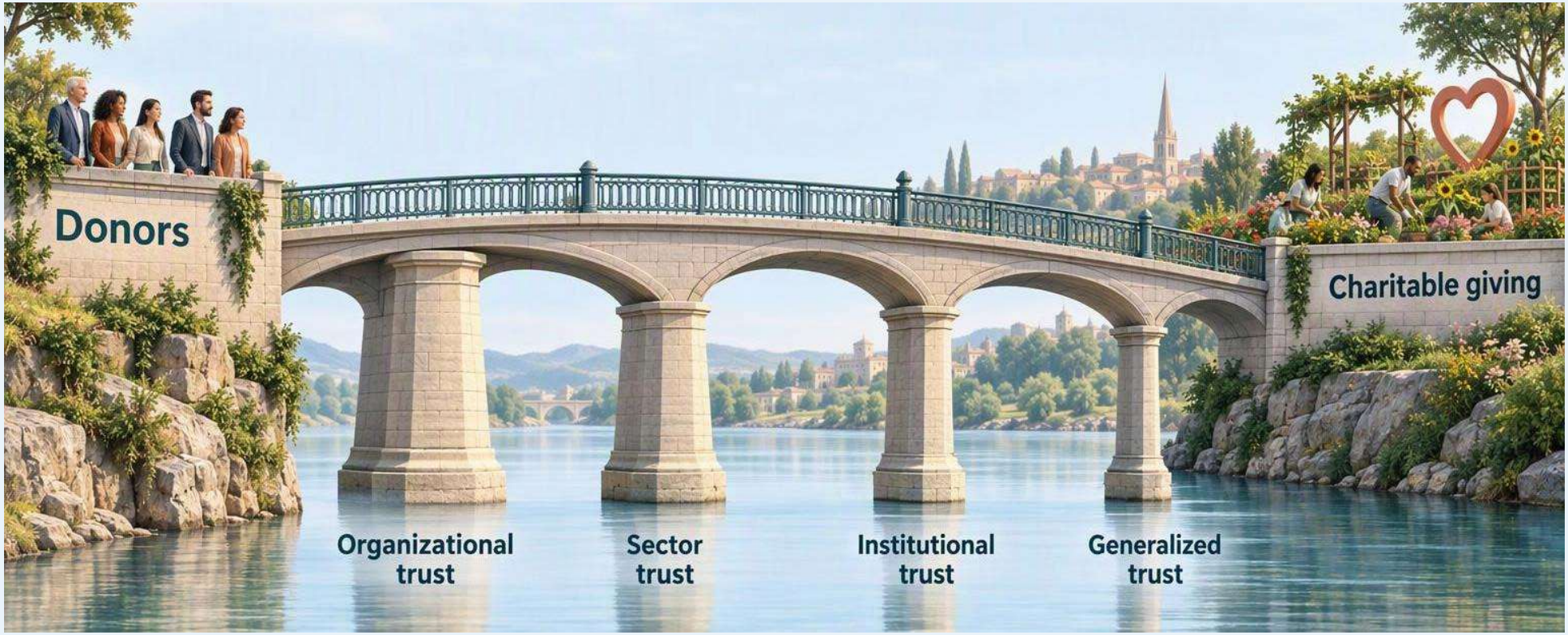
Electronic survey commissioned by BBB Give.org in December 2025

CHAPMAN ET AL.

2021

Trust is the bridge to giving

But some parts of the bridge matter more



What do donors mean when they say "I trust this organization"?



TRUST IN ACTION

Fundraisers largely trust leadership, but information gaps remain

AFP FOUNDATION

Fundraiser survey • 2026

Percent who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement about their organization and its leaders

STRONGER AREAS

90% Leaders make ethical decisions about financial resources

89% Donated funds are used in ways aligned with mission

87% The organization tells the truth in donor conversations

RELATIVELY LOWER AREAS

76% Leadership provides accurate financial information to fundraisers

73% Leadership is transparent when financial challenges arise

Trust is broadly positive, but fundraisers report less confidence in the information they receive during financial pressure.

157 fundraisers • 75% had 10+ years of experience • Findings are not representative of AFP membership or the profession overall

TRUST IN ACTION

Trust in the fundraising relationship

What donors expect from the people who represent organizations



TRUST IN ACTION

Fundraisers begin donor relationships with **substantial trust**

AFP FOUNDATION
Fundraiser survey • 2026

Percent who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement about donors and donor relationships

98%
Most donors engage with the organization in good faith

98%
Most donors genuinely care about mission and impact

90%
Donor interactions involve mutual trust and respect

TRUST STILL REQUIRES JUDGMENT

66% say most donors view fundraisers as partners—not transactional agents

34% say some donors create ethical tensions for fundraising staff

157 fundraisers • 75% had 10+ years of experience • Findings are not representative of AFP membership or the profession overall

TRUST IN ACTION

What donors value in fundraising relationships

SHAKER
2023

Six characteristics identified in donor perspectives

1 **Technical virtuoso**
Navigates the intricacies of gift raising and giving with ease

2 **Even-handed representative**
Balances donor and institutional interests fairly

3 **Dedicated collaborator**
Facilitates gift creation with patience

4 **Altruistic supporter**
Shows genuine care for donors as whole people

5 **Sociable communicator**
Communicates with positivity and emotional intelligence

6 **Honorable citizen**
Demonstrates high ethical standards in work and life

The characteristics work together and are not "ranked.".

TRUST IN ACTION

What donors appreciated in **fundraiser relationships**

AFP FOUNDATION
Donor convening • 2026

In the convening discussion, donors described trust through the qualities they noticed in their interactions with fundraisers.

Listening	Fundraisers who listened carefully and paid attention to what mattered to the donor.
Honesty	Candor about the organization, including challenges, uncertainty, and what was not working.
Respect for the donor	Being treated as a whole person—not simply as a source of funds.
Clarity about fit	Straightforward conversations when donor interests and organizational mission did not align.
Follow-through	Trust formed over time through routine interactions and doing what was promised.

These are qualitative observations from the convening—not representative survey findings.

TRUST IN ACTION

Implications for practice

Turning evidence into choices we can make



TEMPEL + BERGERON

2022

> Trust is the foundation on which philanthropy is developed and sustained.

TRUST IN ACTION

Trust aligns across levels—but **not through one universal strategy**

The response should reflect the donor, the organizational context, and the level of influence.

SECTOR

Fundraisers and individual organizations cannot directly change every sector condition. Their own trustworthy practices may still create broader ripple effects.

ORGANIZATION

Organizations—and individual fundraisers within them—may be in different places in how they perceive trust and what they see happening internally.

FUNDRAISER + DONOR

Different donors may have different trust needs and concerns—including differences by generation and between major donors and everyday donors.

Connect the levels. Tailor the response.

Diagnose whose trust is at issue, what is happening inside the organization, and where influence is realistically possible.

TRUST IN ACTION

Keep the work in **perspective**

Donor decisions are shaped by a world fundraisers do not control.



Release what you cannot control.

Own the quality of the relationship.

Trust grows through the choices fundraisers make every day.

TRUST IN ACTION

Engagement could be a key strategy

1. Visibility
2. Participation
3. Familiarity
4. Trust
5. Deeper engagement

More ways to participate create more opportunities to build trust.

TRUST IN ACTION

Keep trust in perspective

KONRATH + HANDY
The Conversation • 2017

Trust is one part of why donors give—not the whole decision.

T

TRUST

Believe the gift will make a difference

A

ALTRUISM

Help others in need

S

SOCIAL

Relationships and social ties matter

T

TAXES

Financial incentives may matter

E

EGOISM

Personal benefits can also play a part

TASTE FOR CHARITY

1 COMMON BARRIER

Financial constraints

People may feel they cannot afford to give.

The acronym order helps name the framework; it is not the study's rank order of importance.

TRUST IN ACTION

Pause to notice who—and what—we may be missing

Three questions can widen the field of view.

?

WHO IS MISSING?

Are everyday donors visible in our engagement strategy—not just in annual totals?

?

WHERE ARE WE LOOKING?

Are we watching the places where trust already forms: programs, services, volunteering, and community networks?

?

WHO NEEDS TO BE IN THE ROOM?

Which colleagues—program, communications, finance, leadership, and frontline staff—see gaps fundraisers cannot see alone?

Widen the lens before you narrow the plan.

TRUST IN ACTION

Operational excellence turns internal discipline into trust

TRUST THAT HOLDS UNDER PRESSURE

People can see sound decisions, understand the rationale, and rely on the organization.

Ethical stewardship

Align resources with mission and make the rationale for financial choices visible.

Preparedness

Set risk, reserve, and transparency practices before a crisis tests them.

Information integrity

Share accurate, candid financial information—especially when pressure rises.

Clear explanation

Connect infrastructure and acquisition costs to long-term impact in plain language.

Operational excellence makes trust visible before it is tested.

Synthesis of AFP Foundation for Philanthropy donor convening and fundraiser survey, 2026

TRUST IN ACTION

BACHMANN ET AL.
2015

When trust is damaged, repair requires different tactics

Bachmann and colleagues identify six mechanisms that can help restore organizational and institutional trust.

1 Sense-making

Understand and explain what happened

2 Relational repair

Acknowledge harm and restore the relationship

3 Rules & controls

Change formal safeguards and expectations

4 Ethical culture

Strengthen norms, leadership, and everyday conduct

5 Transparency

Share relevant information and enable accountability

6 Trust transference

Draw on credible third parties and affiliations

The framework's central point: no single mechanism is enough; trust repair typically requires a combination of approaches.

Looking across everything we've discussed,

where is there an opportunity to strengthen trust in your work?

Identify one practice, interaction, or organizational approach you want to examine more closely.

Share it in the chat—or simply write it down for yourself.

TRUST IN ACTION

From Evidence to Action

SEP 2024

Issue identified

Research Council report flags donor psychology and trust as a key sector issue.

SPRING 2025

Fundraisers' voice

AFP Catalyst confirms trust challenges and the need for practical resources.

FEB 2026

Donors' voice

Trust & Generosity convening validates urgency and delivers recommendations.

SUMMER 2026

Pilot + evidence

Omaha pilot begins; member survey and landscape analysis deepen learning.

JUL 2026

Board commitment

Board reaffirms Trust & Generosity as the Foundation's strategic focus.

AUG 2026

Catalytic funding

$100K grant from Vanguard Charitable's Philanthropic Impact Fund supports AFP Catalyst 2027 and trust programming.

How the Trust & Generosity initiative moved from issue identification into partnership and framework development

TRUST IN ACTION

Continue the conversation. **Put trust into practice.**

Join us at AFP ICON for an education session that moves from insight to action.

EDUCATION SESSION

“Building and Rebuilding Trust: What Organizational Decisions Signal to Donors”



Resources and References

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Continue the conversation.

Q&A