



The Critical Role of **TRUST** in Regional Sustainable Development

***Editor's Note:** The following is an abbreviated version of the author's original paper, written in 2008–2009 as part of a Regional Action Project for the Ford Foundation Fellowship for Regional Sustainable Development. To read the original in its entirety, visit www.acce.org/regionaltrust.*

WHY TRUST? When it comes to making progress in long-term regional development, trust has not always been properly weighted. Chamber leaders overlook this fact at great risk. Regions that are innovative, grow fast, and benefit people across income and race do so because there is a high level of trust among leaders and citizens.



By **Judith S. Prince**

There is ample evidence that trust is not only the foundation of innovation and entrepreneurship, as Thomas Friedman points out in his best-selling book *The World is Flat*, but that, as noted author Eric Uslaner confirms, globalization and economic growth virtually *depend upon* trust. Studies show that economies in which people trust one another grow faster

than ones in which there's a high level of suspicion.

Trust doesn't just develop on its own. A great chamber needs to foster trusting relationships in order to create and maintain an innovative regional economy. Warren Bennis, one of the nation's foremost authorities on leadership, states, "Without trust, I don't think you can have a great group or great organization or lead a great nation state."

UPSTATE SOUTH CAROLINA: A REGIONALISM WORK-IN-PROGRESS

My own experience in the Upstate South Carolina region bears out the importance of trust. Upstate South Carolina is a 10-county region with 1.3 million people, rich in economic opportunities, community assets and history. Located at the center of the Piedmont Atlantic megaregion, the Upstate is expected to reach a population of 1.6 million within the next 25 years.

Despite significant cooperative ventures, such as Upstate cities lobbying for Interstate 85, collaborating on a new airport, and attracting the first BMW factory outside of Germany, the inability of Upstate counties to outgrow their rivalries has previously been an obstacle to the development of the region.

In 2005, 350 citizens from ten Upstate counties participated in a conference, Upstate Together: Grow by Choice or Chance. With 38 percent of participants identifying turf-consciousness/parochialism/comfort with the *status quo* as obstacles to successful

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regional cooperation, it made sense that an overwhelming majority thought that an umbrella organization would be needed to move toward regional cooperation. As a result, "Upstate Together" was created, with at least two regional champions from each of the 10 Upstate counties forming a board of directors.

Recognizing that a primary barrier to progress in the Upstate is a lack of trust among leaders, I chose to examine the role of trust in regional cooperation as a participant in ACCE's 2008-2009 Ford Foundation Fellowship for Regional Sustainable Development. The program's focus on research, presentations from regional experts, and "real world" examples of successful regional projects across the country was exactly what I needed.

In April 2009, Upstate Together and the Urban Land Institute (ULI) jointly partnered to engage citizens from the 10 Upstate counties in "Upstate Reality Check." A diverse group of leaders explored guiding principles, values and growth, and found that we agreed on much more than we ever thought

we would. The consensus on regional principles and potential solutions from 500 community participants gathered at the Upstate Reality Check has become a foundation for the development of trust.

LESSONS ON BUILDING TRUST

Chambers involved in regional development should look at trust from multiple perspectives: trust among stakeholders, trust in the regional development process, and trust in regional leadership. How can chambers build trust in all these areas to support regional development?

Select a strong/dynamic leader. In the case of Envision Utah, considered by many to be the gold standard in regional cooperation because of its success in building regional trust, a key variable was the presence of a strong leader. Robert Grow, the founding chair of this visioning effort, sought out a variety of viewpoints and skillfully used data collected by the organization that resulted in citizens making well-informed "good decisions." He was seen as a strong, trusted leader in the visioning process.

Successful regional leaders are seen as "walking their talk," as Warren Bennis put it. Leaders of successful regional efforts are perceived as reliable, consistent, possessed of integrity and above all, authentic. These traits enable them to successfully lead volunteers and create a feeling of safety on the part of their followers. Even more, they create a sense of involvement, of participation on the part of others that translates into an atmosphere of trust.

Give it time. Trust is cultivated step by step, particularly if one is talking about regional trust. When a chamber approaches a potential new partner, either through a lack of familiarity or past adversarial relations, both sides need to get to know each other and understand the common ground they may share. Trust may take years to develop, so leaders need to be patient.

Clear and frequent communication underlies trust in regional development, just as it does in everyday life. It's sometimes easier to communicate at the beginning of an outreach or enterprise as people who've not known one another or worked together join in a common undertaking. It's **sustaining** the communication over time that's difficult. Communication must be plentiful and steady for regionalism.

Be as inclusive as possible. The foundation of regional work is the development of new relationships between diverse stakeholders. "It is sometimes easiest to listen to the loudest or most powerful," says Sally Campbell of Envision Central Texas, a regional initiative similar to Envision Utah. She continues, "But efforts must be made to hear all groups and to solicit the thinking of all groups. Invite all to choose whether or not to participate in the process. Make sure all know they are invited." ♦

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Shared values, shared guiding principles and common goals for the future help prevent the narrowness that so often shows itself when individuals step across their city or county line.



In Central Florida, *myregion.org* is creating a collective regional vision by breaking down barriers and encouraging unprecedented cooperation among community leaders. According to **Shelley Lauten, president**, “No table is set at *myregion.org* that does not include both the public and private sector because of their unique contributions.” “Who is **not** here that should be here?” is the first question that should be asked.

Transparency in all regional development processes is a key ingredient to building trust. Transparency means everything must be up front; everything must be made public. All regional experts agree that transparency involves listening and doing what you say you will do.

Alan Matheson, executive director of Envision Utah, finds it valuable to show the public how their input is driving the regional visioning process by literally and figuratively drawing lines demonstrating how what was heard in public in the last round of discussions is reflected in current steps.

Both Envision Utah and Envision Central Texas used data to help citizens understand what was at stake and what was possible. Envision Utah held 135 public meetings and collected 17,500 responses to scenario-development questionnaires, as well as conducted telephone interviews and planning workshops, ultimately involving 1,200 participants. This was no backroom deal. With both groups, the foremost return on investment was the trust that their transparent methodology engendered.

Developing shared understandings and expectations facilitates trust in regional planning. Converging interests, shared values, shared guiding principles and common goals for the future help prevent the narrowness that so often shows itself when individuals step across their city or county line. Questions such as, “What do you want out of life for yourself and

your children?” create opportunities for areas of agreement and win-win situations.

POTENTIAL HURDLES

Chambers can serve as natural conveners of regional stakeholders, but they need to serve as honest brokers. Everyone at the table needs to dispense with their *preconceived vision*. Neither Envision Utah nor Envision Central Texas fell into that trap. Participants were expected to “check their agenda” at the door.

Lauten of *myregion.org* argues that if there is the perception that the regional organization is trying to move the region in one direction, that becomes an impediment to trust. By advocating for regional solutions, not regional projects, *myregion.org* is viewed as a safe place to build consensus among leaders.

Accepting early rejection, based on a history of antagonism, is another pitfall. It’s essential for leaders to keep coming back, to keep advocating the change strategy for which they seek others’ support.

Suzanne Cartwright, formerly of ULI, understands that a lifetime of disenfranchisement on many issues makes it difficult to trust. Citizens coming from “silos” and those with “blinders” must be able to answer affirmatively the questions, “Will I be heard? Will my views matter?”

The *fragility of trust* must be considered as well. Trust can be destroyed in an instant. As trust is voluntarily given, the difficulties of rebuilding trust after betrayal are significant. Thus, chambers need to understand how to build and sustain trust.

CONCLUSION

Trust is a critical issue for sustainable regional development as regions are built on collaboration and cooperation. When chambers contribute to and encourage high levels of trust in their regions, all stakeholders are more willing to assume greater risks and work harder.

As for Upstate South Carolina, a new regional organization called Ten at the Top selected as one of its objectives, “*Building trust among leaders and residents across the ten counties of the Upstate.*” Ten at the Top just launched an initiative to create a Shared Upstate Vision. We’re up to the task of building a sustainable Upstate region! ☐

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