



# How to Rebuild Trust

**Question Storming to Create a Platform for  
Thinking Differently and Taking New Actions**

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“Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principle that holds all relationships.”

– Stephen R. Covey, author and educator

## The Trust Deficit

We have witnessed the erosion of trust in leadership across a cross-section of society in many countries. The impact of the pandemic, the increasing awareness of racial and social injustice around the globe—all have created a trust deficit. Left unaddressed, the current climate of distrust will erode global solidarity and diminish our chance to achieve a more collaborative, equitable world.

Rebuilding trust will be key to all of us feeling safer and healthier as we create a more livable, sustainable future. As the foundation to reimagine our future, the Question Storming approach may help.

By asking tough questions—the ones that expose our biases, our fears, the ones that bring our beliefs to the surface—only then will we hear and formulate the right questions that unlock solutions no one else has discovered.

**In 2020 our world was upended.** Indeed, the convergence of crises—the global pandemic, political divisiveness, vexing income inequality, social and racial injustice and the climate crisis—affected everyone’s daily life and especially our ability to trust.

We saw across every communications platform a level of misinformation, uncertainty and a rising level of distrust—of media, of political leaders, of each other and even of ourselves.

Witnessing this “trust deficit” compelled us to explore the foundations for a trusting society, and to delve more deeply into the issue. Can we rebuild trust? Can we learn to see the world through “the lens of others?”

We seized on the power of online video and launched a unique

process called Question Storming—to engage over 200 people around the globe, from all walks of life, diverse cultures and many political perspectives. Our invitation was simple...help us Question Storm this difficult topic, “How Can We Rebuild Trust in a Broken World?”

This report summarizes empirical evidence from those interactions. (A sample of some of the most thought-provoking questions are mapped on pages 6 and 7.) Our aim is to share insights and provide guidance on how to stop talking around the topic of rebuilding trust and to recommend decisive actions that create trustworthiness.

# Introduction

Much has been written about trust, as the foundation for how we live and work together. And as we move forward in an increasingly uncertain world, we are all more aware of a **trust deficit**, an overarching lack of trust among people, across societies, and between nations.

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While COVID-19 transformed people's lives in unprecedented ways, the changes caused us to slow down, to reflect on what matters most. In parallel, our communications, whether personal or professional, moved us to online platforms that enabled easy, international connections.

Over nine months in 2020, Lawrence and Sandra saw the

opportunity to gain a global perspective, inviting a diverse audience to listen and Question Storm: **“How can we rebuild trust in a broken world?”**

In over 20 sessions, we engaged over 200 people from over 30 countries. Our intention was to gather people from diverse ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, occupations, income, education, and experiences.

## The Unique Question Storming Challenge

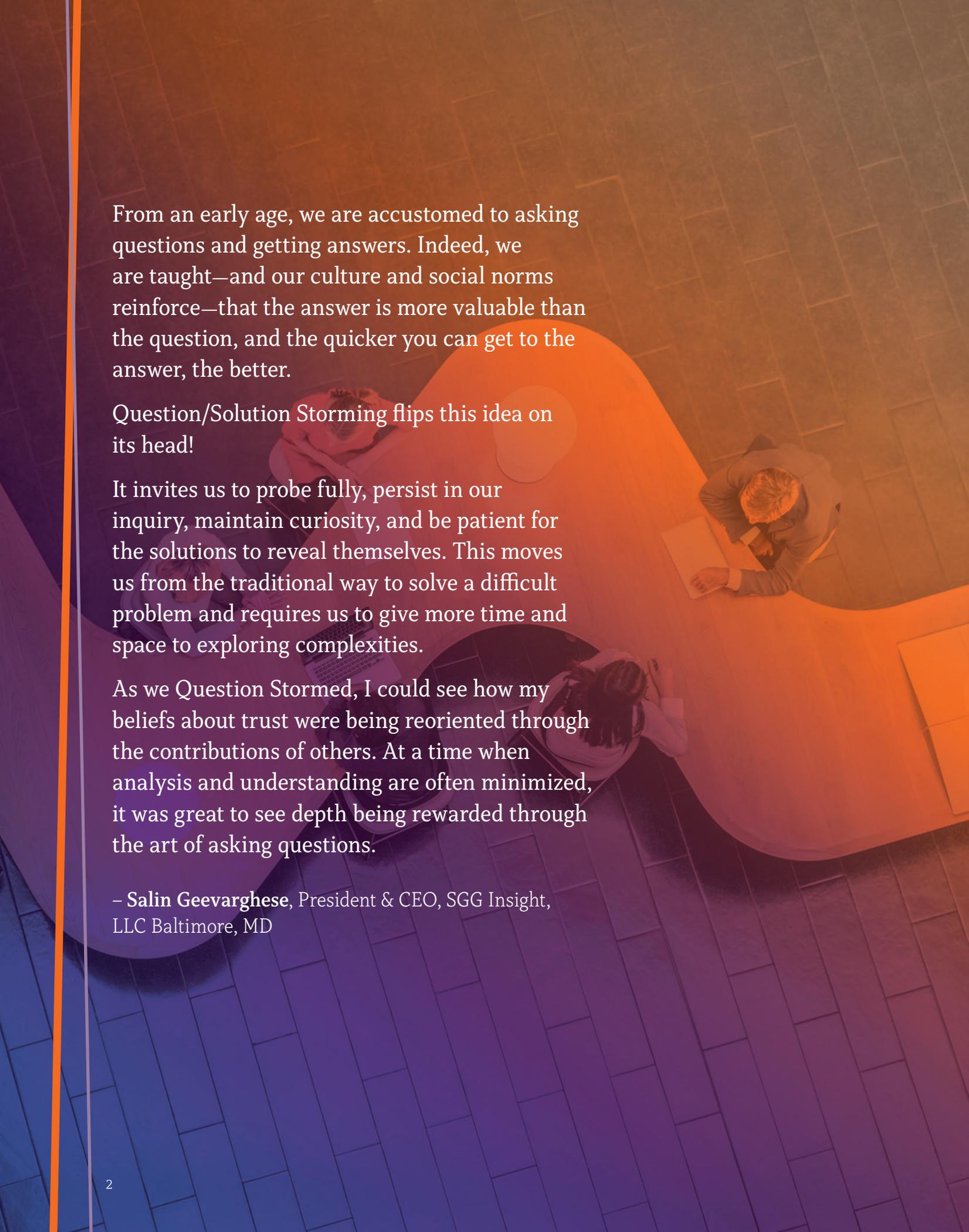
Driving our effort was the critical idea that: “To change the world, we must ask questions that disrupt the world.”

And unlike other problem-solving discussions, in Question Storming, participants are **ONLY** allowed to ask questions...and keep asking them, to “peel the onion” to truly listen to the questions of others and to discover new perspectives.

The following pages describe the Question Storming process in more detail. We have included a sample of the questions collected, reflecting the complexity of this topic. We

also offer recommendations for rebuilding trust and invite you to become a “Trust Ambassador.” Throughout the document, we highlight quotes from participants who found Question Storming to be a valuable and useful tool to solving some of our world's most intransigent problems.

We hope you will find the work provocative, inspiring and motivating. Rebuilding trust will require that each of us find the courage to take steps to change our attitudes and behaviors.



From an early age, we are accustomed to asking questions and getting answers. Indeed, we are taught—and our culture and social norms reinforce—that the answer is more valuable than the question, and the quicker you can get to the answer, the better.

Question/Solution Storming flips this idea on its head!

It invites us to probe fully, persist in our inquiry, maintain curiosity, and be patient for the solutions to reveal themselves. This moves us from the traditional way to solve a difficult problem and requires us to give more time and space to exploring complexities.

As we Question Stormed, I could see how my beliefs about trust were being reoriented through the contributions of others. At a time when analysis and understanding are often minimized, it was great to see depth being rewarded through the art of asking questions.

– **Salin Geevarghese**, President & CEO, SGG Insight, LLC Baltimore, MD

# The Foundation for our Question Storming Approach

The genesis for our research stems back to 2019, when Dr. Lawrence Jones and Sandra Baer collaborated on a project to “*Rethink, Reimagine, Global Urbanization and to Ask the Hard Questions for Urban Stakeholders.*”

[\[link to paper\]](#)

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The paper set in motion a new realization that reimagining our future urban life would require a different, non-traditional approach to solving difficult problems.

As we discovered, asking difficult questions, and continuing to ask them, is rarely done. We are taught to identify a problem and provide an answer, without taking time to understand the core issue.

We had observed that decisions to invest in technologies or adopt new programs are often made too quickly. Adopting the newest innovation, rushing to solutions too fast, often misses the opportunity to think bigger, to look more deeply at a problem and all its interdependencies—these actions often lack thoughtfulness, creativity and an authentic understanding of the complexity of the problem.

Inertia, and a willingness to follow a traditional path—to do things “the way they have always been done” gets in the way of truly exploring a question and truly listening to different points of view.

Our intention was to take a different path—to listen to and engage the full ecosystem of people in a community—ultimately seeing a broader, more expansive picture of the challenge.

Through this process, we arrived at a set of “**catalytic questions**” that drove us to surprising and revelatory insights, which we called **Solution Storming**. Solution Storming led every participant to realize the value of continued questioning, the value of hearing different perspectives they had never thought of before. This closing part of our session did not offer easy solutions; rather it sparked new thinking, a new appreciation for their collective curiosity.



As almost every aspect of our world is changing rapidly, erosion of trust—in our institutions, our information sources and even between us as individuals—is accelerating.

Question/Solution Storming provides a new way to probe complex challenges and explore differing viewpoints. I hope leaders use this tool to engage teams and stakeholders in finding consensus built on mutual respect and trust.

– **Andrew Snowwhite**,  
CEO, Snowwhite Strategies,  
Washington, DC

# Our Guiding Principles

H.L. Mencken, American journalist and essayist, said it best, “For every complex problem, there is an answer that is simple, clear and wrong.”

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Based on countless conversations with people from every walk of life—from government leaders to corporate executives to climate advocates to entrepreneurs and organizers to activists and innovators—among all demographics, we believe there is an urgent need for a new paradigm for decision making. The traditional approaches to problem solving we created in years past do not serve our needs today.

We are confident that the time for transformation is now. Can we create new collaborations to ensure that we hear “all the voices?” Can we use new technology tools to expand our global reach, to communicate more effectively? Can we reimagine new solutions for some of the

world’s most intransigent problems? We believe the answer is “yes.”

As we learned over nine months in 2020, every participant in our Question/Solution Storming sessions remarked about the “fresh perspective” they had gained, how the process had “opened their minds and hearts” to a new understanding. Their collective reactions moved us to expand Question Storming as a means to get to the heart of other difficult problems facing humanity.

But first and foremost, we are convinced that our ability to trust one another is at the heart of every action. The ideas of empathy, kindness, compassion, appreciation, tolerance, responsibility and accountability are all linked to acknowledging and respecting other opinions.

Our guiding principles required us to seek a balance across societal frameworks. No matter the country or culture, no matter the individual status, the responsibility to “model trustworthiness” is our chance to be a part of the solution that honors the commitment to rebuild trust.

# The Question Storming Process

Question Storming is a simple, direct approach to “drill down” through a multitude of questions to provoke new thinking and, ideally, discover and uncover new ideas for promising solutions – regardless of whether a given problem is old or new.

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To set the stage, we first define the issue and formulate the challenge, purposely starting with a “big, difficult” question.

The goal is to examine the question from a multitude of angles—to “see” it through the lens of others who bring different perspectives. Ultimately, by taking participants through a collective journey to probe deeply, Question Storming inspires everyone to **think differently** and to “let go” of their traditional or habitual approaches to problem solving.

At the start of each session, we also emphasize the importance of

not being in a hurry, encouraging participants to take time to think and allow each question to inform the next.

Clearly, challenges such as the future of urban living or rebuilding trust are too complex for 20 people to solve in 90 minutes.

For each Question Storming session, we invite a group of diverse individuals, sufficiently large to include different perspectives but small enough to remain intimate (10 to 15 people), to join an online chat that will last for about 90 minutes.

As we take time to reflect on the Question Storming session, we all begin to perceive the real benefit of our work—**Solution Storming**. Each person shares their insights, how the process challenged their “normal” way of problem solving, their realization of what is possible or what might work in a different setting. We never ask for specific answers—we are looking for an appreciation of new possibilities.

Together, Question and Solution Storming—especially when carried out many times with

Just two rules guide the interaction during Question Storming. We ask people to be ready to:

→ **ONLY ASK QUESTIONS**

This is the core principle of Question Storming. It challenges us to think about what we don’t know—or what we would like to learn—as opposed to falling into the habit of expressing our knowledge, expertise, experiences or opinions. It also levels the playing field among participants as there are no experts, only seekers.

→ **LISTEN INTENTLY**

We believe active listening triggers new ideas while also making connections across ideas that may not initially seem related. A commitment to listen intently makes people more receptive to ideas put forth by others. Importantly, it also fosters trust among Question Storming participants.

diverse participants—will reveal an astounding array of insights into what it will take to meet the challenges of our time.

Across 20 sessions, we collected thousands of questions about trust and how to rebuild it. Here, a sampling of some, organised by themes.

### **What relationships involve trust?**

What are the synergies between trust and faith? • Trust and religion? • Trust and nature? • Trust and animals? • Trust and loyalty? • Trust and happiness? • Trust and gender? • Trust and ethnicity? • Trust and forgiveness?

### **Who or what can we trust?**

Can we trust countries, governments, institutions and companies? • Can we trust their technologies, policies and processes? • Can we trust individuals and groups? • Can we trust family, friends, neighbors, and each other? • Can we trust people with whom we disagree? • Can we trust ourselves?

### **What is the relationship between trust and technology?**

Can we trust machines? • Can we trust social media? • Can we trust mainstream media? • Does our attention to media and the news control us, or diminish or enhance our ability to trust?

### **What is trust?**

How do we define trust? • What are the essential elements of trust? • How do respect, empathy, compassion, legitimacy, confidence, believability, credibility come into play? • Are there different levels or degrees of trust? • How do we measure them?

### **Where can we learn about trust?**

What can we learn from nature about trust? • Can we trust science? • What can we learn from art, music or our cultural heritage about the value of trust?

### **Why do we trust?**

Why should we care about trust? • Why should we trust? • How does trusting others benefit us? • Are we "safer" if we do not trust others? • Are we vulnerable if we do trust others?

### **How do we learn to trust?**

How are we taught to trust? • How does trust change over time? • With experiences? • With age? • Is trust learned or taught? • Does our upbringing affect our ability to trust? • What other life experiences affect our ability to trust? • Can children teach us about the need for trust?

### **How do we perceive trust?**

Do we use all our senses to understand trust? • Do we trust intellectually, emotionally and physically? • If you are trusting, how does it make you feel? • How does our body language convey trust? • How does “the way I see the world” affect my ability to trust?

### **Is trust needed to rebuild a broken world?**

Does a lack of knowledge affect our ability to trust? • Is the world broken or wounded? • Is the world broken in certain places? • Can we create a universal structure where it is safe to be trusting?

### **How is trust established?**

How is trust earned? • How do we know if trust exists? • Are we too quick, too slow to trust? • How is it broken?

### **How do we experience trust and mistrust?**

Have you seen trust destroyed? • Have you seen it rebuilt? • Do you understand why that trust was broken or how it was repaired? • What does it take to trust a stranger?

### **What is the role of communications in trust?**

Are there hidden agendas that communicate trust or mistrust? • Is trust a cultural phenomenon? • Is trust different in different cultures? • Are there shared definitions of trust around the world? • Does credibility come into play?

### **How do we trust again?**

Why do we mistrust others? • Once trust is broken, can it be repaired? • What are the steps to rebuilding trust? • Can you trust someone you don't like? • Can you trust someone who is different from you?

### **Are there models from other times or places that can demonstrate trust?**

What can history teach us about trust? • Are there examples of collaborations or coalitions that advocate for trust?

### **Are there new insights, ideally, new actions to take, new coalitions to form that will help us all rebuild trust?**

Are there programs from the past or currently in use that can help to rebuild trust? • Can we appreciate how our sense of urgency to regain trust is in direct competition with the complexity of the question?

# Insights about Rebuilding Trust

Trust matters—today, more than ever. Together, we believe we can work toward a more trusting world and without a foundation of trust, we will fail to solve the global challenges we face.

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The Question Storming sessions carried out in 2020 were a strong and timely reminder of how trust is related to so many aspects of life. Additionally, the diverse demographics confirmed two key points:

1. “Trust” is a universal idea in every language. In every part of the world, there is an understanding of the importance of trust.
2. However, differences in each culture mean that people define trust differently. We learned that our belief structures, language, education, past experiences, religion and a myriad of other factors affect our decisions to trust.

As we Solution Stormed, participants offered specific insights from their engagement:

- We need to consider who should take **ownership** to rebuild trust. There is an expectation that leaders—government, political, business, civic, academic, etc.—all have a responsibility to model trusting behavior and actions. They must use the power of their voices and choices to expand and reshape a trusting society. **For example, consider the comments from political leaders after the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the US Capitol—did their words and actions build trust or create divisiveness? Can you work harder to seek the truth in all communications?**
- As individuals become more aware of and involved in social and political issues, we need to acknowledge the individual responsibility to **model trustworthiness. For example, can you name a person that you respect because of their verbal stand on an issue important to you and their actions to support it?**

- In all cases, at the core of this ownership is **individual responsibility and accountability.** Our actions—particularly to engage in conversations with those who think differently and to truly listen—will be the vehicle to create civility and foster respect for different opinions and ideas. **For example, have you reached out to someone whom you believe disagrees with your opinions about elections, voting rights, climate crisis, the death penalty, etc.? Can you allow yourself to be open-minded and truly listen to his or her opinion?**
- We must **seize the time to question our beliefs as we live.** As our brains and our hearts form and solidify—right here, right now—is the critical time to re-imagine, re-think and re-design. **For example, do you take time to listen to other opinions, do you talk to your children or young people to inquire about their needs, concerns and ideas?**
- To rebuild trust, we must **be receptive** to expressions (actions that demonstrate) of trustworthiness, while at the same

time acknowledging (or even calling out) moments in which we distrust others and seek the reasons why.

**For example, do you take time to assess the trustworthiness of your information? Are you fixed in your beliefs, or can you make efforts to see the different sides of an argument?**

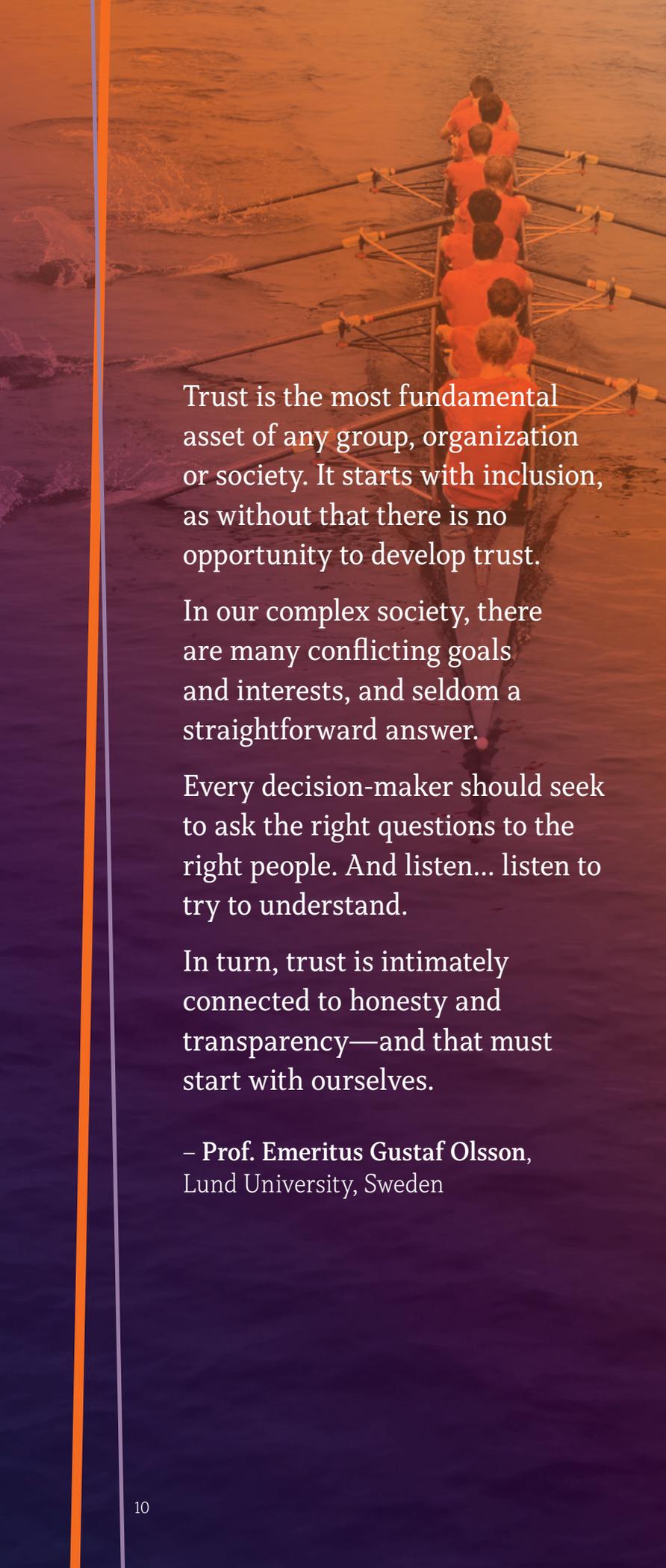
- As we probe difficult questions, each of us must **make a commitment**—and be willing to be a part of the solution that honors the collective commitment to rebuild trust. **For example, can you acknowledge that your ideas may be wrong? Are you willing to continually question your sources, your “silos” of interest, your circle of like-minded colleagues? Can you challenge yourself to “think differently?”**

Question/Solution Storming is a remarkable approach to listening and discovering the complexities of an important and difficult question.

In our session of 12 people from diverse cultures, countries and experiences, we were asked to introduce ourselves only by name, location and passion—no other background.

That put everyone on a level playing field and opened up a wide-ranging and non-intimidating exchange that gave us real insight into different perspectives and possible solutions.

– Peter Allison, Director, County Business Shows Ltd, Gloucestershire, UK



# Actions to Take Now

Trust is the most fundamental asset of any group, organization or society. It starts with inclusion, as without that there is no opportunity to develop trust.

In our complex society, there are many conflicting goals and interests, and seldom a straightforward answer.

Every decision-maker should seek to ask the right questions to the right people. And listen... listen to try to understand.

In turn, trust is intimately connected to honesty and transparency—and that must start with ourselves.

– Prof. Emeritus Gustaf Olsson,  
Lund University, Sweden

Listening closely to participants in our 2020 Question Storming sessions also revealed some of the “causes” of distrust and the need for “authentic and sometimes difficult actions” to build trust anew. In turn, we offer recommendations and invite you to test their usefulness in your life and work. We believe the investment will deliver valuable and substantial returns.

## 1

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### **Acknowledge the role of fear.**

Understand that our lack of trust in society—and, indeed, our lack of trustworthiness—is often based in fear. Fear from feeling blame, fear from lack of control or lack of transparency: all feelings of fear or uncertainty conspire to diminish our ability to trust one another.

## 2

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### **Use questions to overcome fear and uncertainty.**

When a “trust deficit” arises, encourage continued questioning about the negative forces that gave it room to grow.

Other examples include corruption, greed, lack of honesty and integrity, lack of respect for others, prejudices, biases and *ad hominem* attacks of character or motive.

### 3

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#### **Find ways to measure and monitor trust.**

The emotional and social aspects of trust are powerful. Applying proven mechanisms to gauge the level of trust between parties can help guide work to improve and measure progress. We can learn to respect the data and build from it.

### 4

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#### **Take time to think carefully about how to do a job—how to work together.**

The pandemic has created a seismic change in how we do business and live our lives. It is important to appreciate the level of transformation and what it means for how to do a job or how to work together.

### 5

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#### **Embrace your power as an individual to leverage influence to build trust.**

Our lives are forever changed, and now it is up to each of us to act.

### 6

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#### **Start with small steps.**

Thinking broadly about trust can be overwhelming. Taking concrete action, even in small steps, to gain the trust of a colleague with whom you disagree or someone beyond “your circle” may help you gain a better understanding of what it takes to be trusted.

### 7

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#### **Avoid gravitating to “information silos” and expand “your circle.”**

Trusting people who share our views is easy. But interacting only with such people reinforces existing beliefs and diminishes our willingness to consider different perspectives. To build trust in society, we need to build trust among people with differing views.

### 8

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#### **Try to let go of extreme ideas and deeply entrenched opinions.**

Building trust sometimes requires that we put aside the certainty that our ideas are correct and infallible. In parallel, resist the tendency to be certain that the words and ideas of others are wrong without engaging in open discussion.

### 9

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#### **Remember that trust cannot be built on promises alone.**

An authentic, verifiable pledge is always followed by action: an unfulfilled promise undermines trust.

### 10

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#### **Form new coalitions and new collaborations of diverse people who are ready to question.**

Actively seek new approaches to problem solving. Do not wait for “someone else” to take the lead; take charge and be responsible for the change you want to see.

### 11

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#### **Be prepared to make sacrifices.**

Consider what is at stake in a world without trust and be ready to give up some things for what you care most about. Building trust requires trade-offs, a willingness to step away from safer, easier choices and, sometimes, to put our current lack of trust “on hold” to build more trusting relationships in the future.

# Become a Trust Ambassador

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To really change something, you must build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

– **Buckminster Fuller**, American inventor

Because we believe that trust is the glue of civil society—indeed, that it is the foundational principle for all relationships—we urge you to join us in rebuilding it across every aspect of your work and life. By becoming a Trust Ambassador, you can lay foundational stones in your own spheres of influence. If we build enough small platforms, eventually, we will all be standing on solid foundations.

To become a Trust Ambassador, we encourage you to take the following steps.

- Participate in Question Storming session to explore difficult questions about trust.
- Host—with your family, in your community, at your work—a Question Storming session and share the results.
- Commit to core principles of Question Storming. In all interactions,
  - Ask a lot of questions and listen intently.
  - Acknowledge your biases and be open to views different from your own.

- Pledge not to make judgments or offer solutions too quickly.
- Collaborate to think creatively about new ways to solve problems.
- Become a model of trustworthiness. Commit to making promises authentic by following up with action.

Your decision to become a Trust Ambassador can inspire others around you to be more aware of the importance of trust and take steps to foster it.

We are available to work with you to guide your Question Storming initiatives, and welcome your ideas and insights. Whatever your background—public, private, non-profit, individual—as you discover solutions, we can help you design and implement new directions toward rebuilding trust.

## Author profiles

In December 2019, Ms. Sandra Baer and Dr. Lawrence E. Jones authored Rethinking, [Reimagining, Redesigning Global Urbanization: The Hard Questions for Urban Stakeholders](#). They subsequently developed the concept of “**Question Storming**” as a means to get to the heart of the world’s most intransigent problems, advocating that “to change the world, we must ask questions that disrupt the world.”



### Sandra Baer

Sandra Baer, CEO, [Personal Cities](#), is a champion of creative collaborations between the public and private sectors. She leads **Personal Cities**, a smart city company focused on city identity and placemaking, social inclusion and equity, climate actions and the acceleration of digital technology investments to support innovators and entrepreneurs.

Ms. Baer has advised cities in the US, Europe, India and the Middle East. She has served on the board of professional and civic organizations and has held strategic leadership roles with Cityzenith, Citibeats, Urban Leap, ATT, Speechworks, Discovery Chanel, Nextel/Sprint, Smart Cities Council, Ridge Global, CIVIQ Smartscapes and Bloomberg Government.

Ms. Baer is currently the Brand Ambassador for [SmartCitiesWorld](#) and a Special Advisor to [Saving the City: Remaking the American Metropolis](#). She serves on the Global Advisory Board of [Leading Cities](#) and on the Advisory Committee of [Smart City Expo, USA](#).

A respected speaker and moderator, Ms. Baer has spoken at smart city conferences worldwide. She holds BA and MBA degrees and a Global Advanced Management Certification from Georgetown University. She has lived and worked across Europe, and currently resides in Washington, DC.



### Dr. Lawrence E. Jones

Dr. Lawrence E. Jones is an award-winning thought leader, practitioner, author, keynote speaker, and patentholder with more than 25 years of experience in the energy industry. He joined the [Edison Electric Institute](#) (EEl) in September 2015 as Vice President, International Programs. Under his leadership, EEl has today more than 65 electric companies with operations in 90 countries. He is passionate about polymathic questioning to catalyze change, and advocates using system approaches to solutions for the energy-water transition and other global challenges. Dr. Jones is affiliated with several organizations and serves on the boards or advisory councils of the [World Resources Institute](#) and the [US Millennium Challenge Corporation](#). He is Honorary Industry Fellow at [Monash Energy Institute](#), Monash University (Australia); a Senior Associate (non-Resident) with the [Energy Security and Climate Change Program](#) at the **Center for Strategic International Studies**; Senior Fellow at [Boston University Institute for Sustainable Energy](#); and Co-Chair of the Global Pillar of the [Dentons Smart Cities & Connected Communities Initiative and Think Tank](#). He is also co-founder of the [Center for Sustainable Development in Africa](#). Born in Liberia, received his MSc, Licentiate, and PhD in electrical engineering from the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden.



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We do indeed live in a world of broken trust. When those who control the socio-cultural, economic, and technological fabric of our world display behaviour unworthy of our trust, what do we do? When political leaders and Big Business CEOs act without empathy, responsibility, and integrity, whom do we turn to? What impressed me most as a participant in the Question Storming was, firstly, the processes used to disrupt habitual ways of thinking and thus enable new thinking and, secondly, the practical approach of enlisting Trust Ambassadors. Lots of people bemoan the breakdown of trust in our world, but not many have the courage and higher purpose to try to rebuild trust.

– Jennifer Gidley, Professor, UTS (Sydney, Australia) and author of [The Future: A Very Short Introduction](#)

Our commitment to understand how to Rebuild Trust was based on our plan to Question Storm diverse participants from a global sample of countries. All told, we engaged with more than 200 participants from almost 30 countries (see below). Most relevant to our experiential learning was the finding that there are universal beliefs associated with trustworthiness; yet each culture, each person perceives trust with a different nuance. Indeed, it confirmed our premise that our collective ability to rebuild trust is complex and difficult...yet certainly a most worthy pursuit.

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