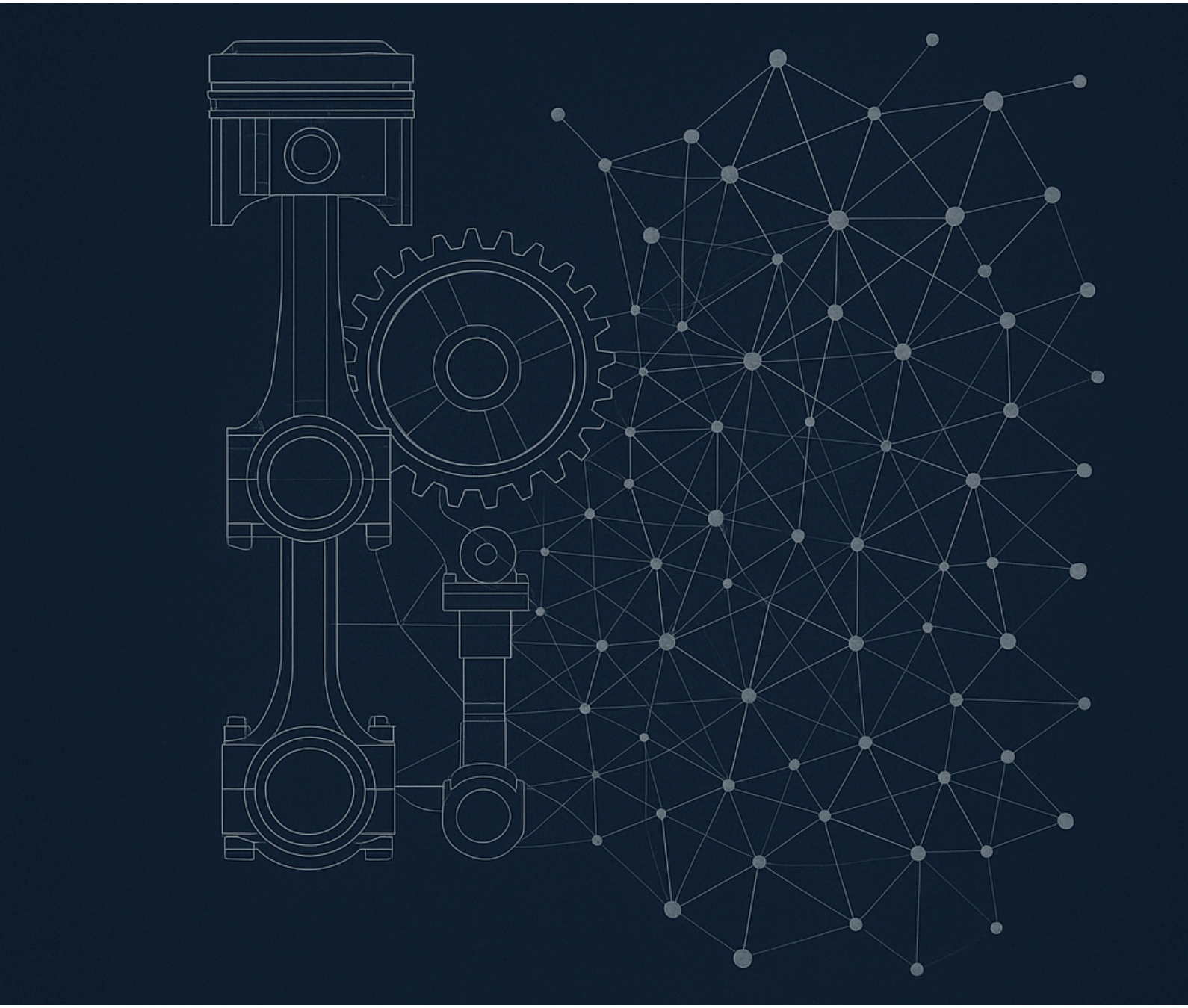
The Trust Equation

How to Build, Measure, and Scale Collaboration That Lasts



Executive Summary

Trust is not a 'soft' value. It is the essential infrastructure that enables innovation to function—not just in theory, but in practice.

In an era marked by complexity, interdependence, and accelerating change, trust has become a foundational infrastructure for systems-level collaboration(1). Yet while trust is often cited as a prerequisite for successful partnerships, its construction and maintenance remain poorly understood - and frequently undervalued in the design of collaborative processes.

As highlighted in the recent WHO report *"Implementing the global framework on well-being at country level,"*

> "One of the keys to delivering the potential of digital tools and technologies in well-being societies is trust. Without trust from citizens, staff and between stakeholders, investment in digital infrastructures will often be slow, expensive and add to frustration and burnout."

This is not just a health sector issue. In every domain where innovation is needed—healthcare, education, sustainability, governance—**trust is what allows people to collaborate across institutional and disciplinary boundaries, share knowledge, and take risks together.** It enables the invisible social contracts that make partnerships work even when incentives are not perfectly aligned.

Viewing trust as a "soft" concept is not only misleading—it is counterproductive. Trust determines the pace at which innovation spreads, the scale it can achieve, and whether it ultimately improves lives. Without trust, even the most promising ideas struggle to take root. With trust, we create the conditions for experimentation, co-creation, and sustained impact.

If we are serious about transforming our societies, we must treat trust as a core operational principle—not a side effect of good intentions. Building ecosystems of trust is a prerequisite for innovation that works.

This paper presents a practical introduction and a framework for operationalizing trust in multi-stakeholder networks, offering insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, funders, and facilitators working across sectors.

This paper was co-developed by **Lars Münter** and **Adam Skali** through an iterative process of dialogue and joint exploration, reflecting their shared commitment to advancing understanding of **trust dynamics** in the context of collaborative research and transformative projects. It offers a **practical introduction** and a **framework for operationalizing trust** in multi-stakeholder networks, providing actionable insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, funders, and facilitators working across sectors

Trust is not a binary state—it is a dynamic process shaped by feedback loops, interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and shared purpose. To enable collaborative problem-solving at scale, stakeholders must move beyond the rhetoric of partnership and adopt structures that make trust both visible and measurable. This begins by applying a

Theory of Change model tailored to trust-building. Trust must be treated as a strategic capacity, with defined phases of growth, data collection points, and indicators of readiness.

Relational mapping tools such as Joint Action offer a way to visualize the intensity and frequency of interactions across nodes—identifying gaps in engagement, asymmetries in participation, and opportunities for structural redesign. Yet **measurement alone is not enough**. True progress requires embedding trust into process design, meeting formats, decision-making rules, and feedback channels. Participation must be equitable, dissenting voices actively surfaced, and interpersonal dynamics intentionally facilitated.

The framework recognizes **contextual variation in trust ecosystems**. What works in high-trust societies like Denmark—where informal agreements and flat hierarchies are functional—may not translate directly to other regions. There, interpersonal trust may outweigh institutional credibility, requiring different entry points and sequencing for engagement. Trust is relational before it is procedural.

The analysis also stresses the importance of **embracing perceived irrelevance**. Curiosity, cognitive diversity, and informal interaction fuel the trust-building process. Encouraging people to explore domains outside their immediate responsibilities strengthens adaptability and uncovers latent alignment. Trust grows not only through shared goals but through shared humanity.

Finally, the report highlights the critical role of **time and strategic patience**. Systems change takes longer than project cycles allow. Premature evaluation, rigid KPIs, or misaligned performance metrics can derail trust before it stabilizes. Leaders must tolerate early uncertainty, protect the learning process, and differentiate between failure and premature judgment. When trust is allowed to emerge gradually—through co-creation, iterative experimentation, and emotional safety—it becomes the engine that propels long-term transformation and an essential building block to achieve wellbeing(7).

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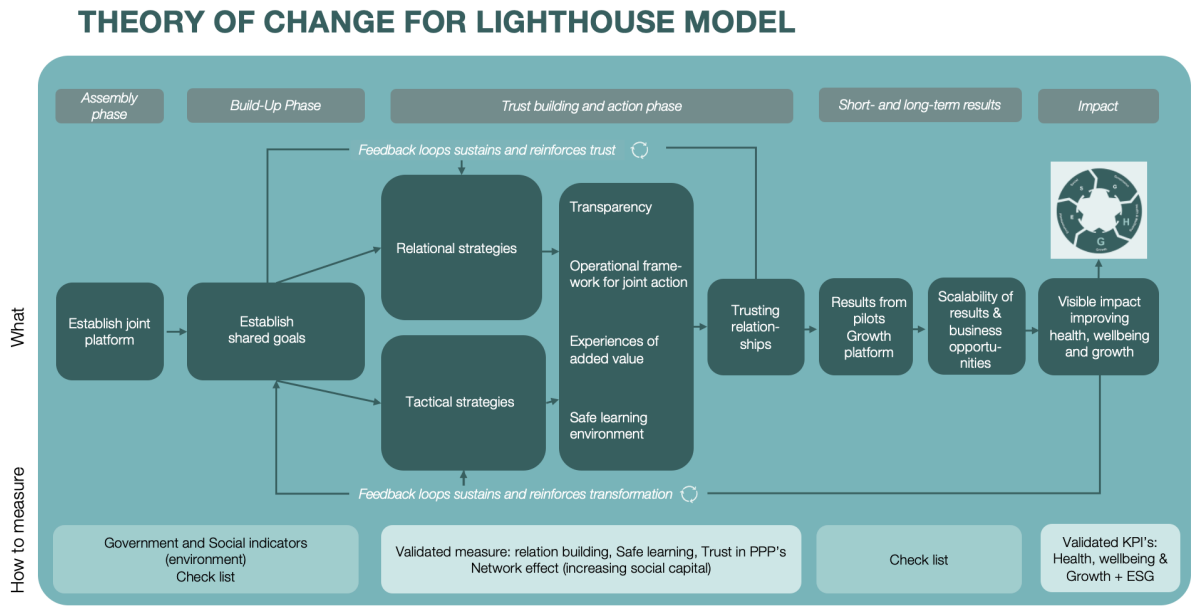
Building and Measuring Trust in Multi-Stakeholder Networks

A Practical Framework

In today's interconnected world, solving complex societal and systemic challenges increasingly requires collaboration across institutions, sectors, and geographies. Yet while the rhetoric of partnership is widely embraced, the operational reality of trust-building remains elusive. Trust is not merely a prerequisite for collaboration—it is a process that evolves through structured interaction, feedback, and learning. To effectively build multi-stakeholder networks, it is critical to move beyond ad hoc engagement and adopt frameworks that make trust both actionable and measurable.

One promising approach is to apply a *Theory of Change* model specifically focused on trust development. This involves asking a foundational question: how is trust actually achieved between actors operating in different organizational and cultural contexts?

By modeling the feedback loops—both positive and negative—that influence trust formation, it becomes possible to segment the process into concrete phases. Each phase offers distinct entry points for data collection, learning, and adaptation.



Danish Life Science Cluster, Lighthouse Model, Tour de Health 2024, Inspired by Metz et al; Building trusting relationships to support implementation: A proposed theoretical model, Hypothesis and Theory, 2022. *https://doi.org/10.3389/frhs.2022.894599*

Data gathering plays a vital role in understanding the evolving state of collaboration. This can be achieved through targeted surveys and relational mapping tools such as the *Joint Action* tool. This method enables visualization of interpersonal and inter-organizational networks, capturing the number, frequency, and intensity of interactions. It is especially effective in settings involving multiple organizations, where trust cannot be reduced to a single institutional relationship. Instead, partnerships consist of a set of individual nodes—key people within each organization—whose relationships drive outcomes.

This insight is critical when considering how institutions interact. Often, collaboration is facilitated through designated representatives or “ambassadors” who meet periodically to share updates or make joint decisions. If the relationships between these individuals lack depth or consistency, the probability of productive collaboration declines sharply. In other cases, some organizations adopt a multimodal strategy, distributing **relational responsibility** across a group—what might be considered a league of ambassadors. Both models are valid, and each institution may choose a different path depending on internal structure, strategic goals, or operational capacity.

However, if the aim is to encourage a high volume and diversity of ideas, rigid funnel structures should be avoided. These can stifle the open, reciprocal exchanges that foster creativity and build trust over time. Instead change and the leadership needed to guide it has to be seen as a dynamic process of repeated actions and learning (2), Leadership as a social process that is not inherently tied to a formal title or position, but rather emerges through interactions and shared experiences.

Tools such as *Joint Action (3)* can be instrumental in identifying structural barriers to communication. For example, they can uncover when information is not reaching key actors, when certain departments are disengaged, or when interaction intensity is insufficient to sustain collaborative momentum. Additional tools (for various stages of the collaboration) process can be found via the TACSI report (4)

This helps map existing relations in the process of meaning - where individuals collectively construct meaning and understanding of change initiatives through shared narratives and interactions. And enabling the ability for leaders and followers (not always in a employer-employee relation) to influence each other, and the relationship between them is crucial for effective change.

Some key elements of socially constructed change leadership

- Shared vision and values:
    - Developing a common understanding of the desired future state and the values that will guide the change process.
- Collaboration and participation
    - Encouraging diverse perspectives and actively involving stakeholders in the change process.
- Communication and dialogue:
    - Open and transparent communication that fosters understanding and buy-in for change.
- Contextual awareness:
    - Recognizing that change leadership is influenced by the specific context, including organizational culture and external factors.
- Trust and empowerment:
    - Building trust among team members and empowering individuals to contribute to the change.

This has clear implications for change Initiatives; prioritizing the development of strong relationships and effective communication channels to facilitate dialogue to lead to change.

Creating opportunities for individuals to participate in the change process, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment, and the need to use an adaptive learning culture of continuous learning and adaptation to navigate the complexities of change.

Practical application

Obviously more than a diagnostic tool, these insights from relational mapping serve to support decision-making. By analyzing patterns of engagement, organizations can identify strategies to enhance both the number and quality of interaction nodes. A practical method is to have one institution act as a host, inviting a small delegation from the other organization. This creates informal, low-pressure environments in which ideas can be exchanged organically. Visiting teams are then better positioned to ask relevant questions and later act as internal champions for collaboration.

It is also important to note that initiating collaboration through large-scale joint meetings can, if mistimed, increase friction rather than reduce it. Without preliminary trust-building, these meetings risk amplifying misalignment rather than resolving it. Mapping the evolution of trust—who interacts with whom, how frequently, and in what capacity—can help determine whether current strategies are moving the partnership in the right direction.

Trust for transformation

Reflected in **action learning** mentioned above is also, that transformation or change moves at the speed of trust. Trust hence is fundamental (5) to the need and ability to perform transformation or indeed move them from pilots to sustained use. In this context, **trust functions as an operational and social dynamic**—a living process that underpins collaboration .The trust embedded in organisations and institutions are related to this, but slightly different. To borrow a phrase from physics, one might call the former a kinetic and the latter a potential trust. The potential of trust can certainly also be measured, but might sometimes be less useful in the transformation / leadership process as the social dynamic is so important.

For organisational trust, the OECD Guidelines for Measuring Trust is an essential read (6) and a good start also to begin mapping both localised institutional trust, individual trust, and how best to use these insights for establishing and driving transformative partnerships.

Sometimes and in some places, this might entail building new trust enabling frameworks; certification systems, accreditations, peer-led performance tests - and indeed also introduction of a common understanding of new metrics to work as trust proxies and enablers, eg reduced friction, ideation rates, design vs implementation time, performance improvements etc.

Classical Foundations for Trust: Aristotelian Perspectives in Modern Contexts

While contemporary frameworks focus on process, measurement, and design, it is valuable to revisit foundational thinking on trust to deepen both practice and reflection. One enduring contribution comes from Aristotle, whose triadic model of persuasion - “ethos”, “pathos”, and “logos” - offers a moral and relational framework for trust-building that remains strikingly relevant **[7]**.

In Aristotle’s view, trust (“pistos”) is not transactional but grounded in character and shared understanding. Trust emerges when a person or institution exhibits:

- Ethos: credibility and moral integrity
- Pathos: emotional resonance and shared feeling
- Logos: reasoned logic and coherent argument

These dimensions function not as standalone traits, but as interdependent qualities that signal trustworthiness in human interaction. In the context of collaborative systems, they can serve as a practical guide for shaping trustworthy behavior, communication, and culture - whether in organizational leadership, participatory design, or digital engagement.

Ethos – Credibility through Character

Ethos pertains to perceived integrity, consistency, and moral clarity. In organizations, this means aligning internal behaviors with stated values—ensuring that what is promised is also practiced. Leadership credibility is built not just through expertise, but through transparency, accountability, and follow-through.

In social media environments, this translates into the cultivation of authentic identities, clearly stated community norms, and visible commitments to ethical engagement. Trust grows when people feel confident that others are acting with genuine intent, not strategic posturing.

Pathos – Emotional Connection and Shared Humanity

Pathos involves emotional resonance—speaking to values, experiences, and aspirations. In collaborative processes, this demands emotional literacy: the ability to acknowledge vulnerability, affirm diverse perspectives, and foster psychological safety. Facilitated storytelling, reflective exercises, and rituals of recognition are modern mechanisms for activating pathos.

On digital platforms, pathos might take the form of co-created narratives, lived-experience testimonies, or participatory content that fosters empathy and identification. Emotional credibility is often the bridge between skepticism and engagement.

Logos – Reasoning and Transparency of Thought

Logos refers to the clarity and logic of what is being proposed. Reasonable, well-structured arguments—especially when presented in accessible language—enable others to evaluate intentions and judge trustworthiness. In organizations, this means making decision-making processes visible, data comprehensible, and reasoning explicit.

Logos can also be seen in how performance metrics, strategic priorities, and stakeholder expectations are shared. In online environments, this might involve open-source algorithms, transparent content moderation, or participatory rule-setting. Logos allows trust to be earned through clarity, not assumed through authority.

Operational Implications for Trust-Building

Together, ethos, pathos, and logos offer more than philosophical insight—they provide a practical design framework for cultivating trust in complex systems. Their relevance becomes especially clear when applied to the operational realities of organizations, digital platforms, and collaborative networks **[8]**. The implications and cases of these dimensions in play throughout history are multiple, but in a contemporary setting, here are three domains:

Ethos in Practice: Cultivating Credibility Through Consistent Character

Ethos emerges when an institution or leader consistently embodies the values they claim to uphold. In organizational settings, this means establishing integrity not only in vision statements, but in day-to-day decisions, behaviors, and governance. Ethos is undermined when there is a gap between espoused values and lived practices—what some describe as the "credibility gap."

A trust-rich organization operationalizes ethos through:

- Transparent governance and leadership accountability
- Consistent follow-through on commitments
- Alignment between internal culture and external messaging
- Clarity in roles, boundaries, and ethical expectations

Case Example: Danish Diabetes Association's Community Council Model

Faced with declining engagement and criticism about top-down decision-making, the Danish Diabetes Association piloted a new *Community Council* model that devolved decision-making authority to regional members, many of whom live with diabetes. Rather than merely consulting them, the Council was given real budgetary power and influence over service design. This move signaled institutional trust in lived experience—and built reciprocal trust in return. By visibly aligning action with its

values of inclusion and co-determination, the Association restored credibility and saw a significant increase in volunteer participation and public trust.

Pathos in Practice: Building Emotional Resonance Through Shared Humanity

Pathos relates to the emotional and relational aspects of trust. It is not about sentimentality, but about recognizing the human stakes behind collaboration. When people feel seen, heard, and emotionally safe, they are more likely to take interpersonal risks—such as voicing dissent, offering untested ideas, or acknowledging uncertainty. In contrast, emotionally sterile or hierarchical environments suppress this kind of engagement.

Organizations that nurture pathos intentionally:

- Create spaces for storytelling, reflection, and shared experience
- Acknowledge emotional labor and lived experience
- Embed rituals that humanize collaboration (e.g., check-ins, gratitude rounds)
- Prioritize psychological safety in both design and facilitation

Case Example: NHS Co-Production Labs in Mental Health Services (UK)

In several regions, the National Health Service (NHS) launched co-production labs to redesign mental health services. Rather than centering professional expertise, the labs began with facilitated storytelling sessions—where service users, carers, and clinicians shared formative experiences, frustrations, and hopes.

These emotionally charged but respectfully held sessions reframed roles and built empathy across groups. Participants reported increased openness, greater willingness to share difficult truths, and deeper alignment in subsequent design phases. The lab's success was less about technical solutions and more about creating emotionally resonant, trust-rich spaces for dialogue.

Logos in Practice: Enabling Reasoned Trust Through Transparency and Shared Logic

Logos concerns the logical coherence of communication and the transparency of decision-making. People are more likely to trust institutions when they understand not just what is being done, but why—and how those decisions were reached. When logic is obscured or withheld, mistrust fills the vacuum. Logos requires leaders and systems to share their reasoning in a way that others can interrogate, learn from, or contribute to.

Organizations that operationalize logos do so by:

- Sharing the rationale behind key decisions and trade-offs
- Using accessible language and open data formats
- Creating participatory mechanisms for feedback and critique
- Treating questions and disagreement as signals of engagement, not disloyalty

Case Example: Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil

> In one of the earliest and most influential examples of participatory governance, the city of Porto Alegre created a structure for citizens to directly shape municipal budgeting. Residents could access detailed data on spending, propose priorities, and deliberate in neighborhood assemblies. While the process had imperfections, it created a logic of trust based on transparency and mutual explanation.
>
> Trust in city government rose notably among previously disillusioned citizens - not because every demand was met, but because decisions were intelligible and open to influence. Logos, in this case, was not just about reason - it was about the "reasoning together" that underpins democratic trust.

Trust by Design: Synthesizing Classical Insight and Contemporary Strategy

These three classical dimensions - ethos, pathos, and logos - are not abstract ideals. They offer a design orientation for building trust-rich systems:

- Ethos asks us: *Do our actions align with our stated values?*
- Pathos asks: *Do people feel safe, heard, and emotionally engaged?*
- Logos asks: *Is our reasoning clear, coherent, and open to others?*

By translating Aristotle's insight into design criteria **[9]**, organizations can develop environments in which trust is not assumed but continually earned. Whether in health systems, innovation labs, digital platforms, or local governance, trust grows where credibility, care, and clarity intersect.

In essence, Aristotle reminds us that trust is not merely a result of compliance or efficiency - it is a virtue, continually enacted. In any system where trust is needed, these classical principles can help illuminate modern pathways for action. Trust becomes possible when people know who you are, feel that you care, and understand why you act. The more these dimensions are made explicit and integrated into collaborative practice, the more durable and transformative trust becomes.

Embedding Aristotelian Trust Principles in Multistakeholder Frameworks

In multistakeholder ecosystems—where actors from different sectors, institutions, cultures, and levels of influence converge—the need for trust is both heightened and complicated. No single organization holds all the authority, knowledge, or legitimacy. Instead, collaboration relies on navigating difference: of purpose, power, language, and rhythm. In this context, the Aristotelian dimensions of trust—ethos, pathos, and logos—offer not only moral guidance but "structural design tools" for managing complexity and sustaining engagement.

Unlike bilateral partnerships, multistakeholder initiatives require trust to be built “across the system”, not just between individuals. Trust must be distributed and resilient, capable of withstanding asymmetries in resource control, epistemic power, or institutional mandate. Embedding ethos, pathos, and logos into governance structures, facilitation processes, and shared norms makes this more feasible.

Ethos: Distributed Credibility and Role Clarity

In multistakeholder environments, different actors bring different forms of credibility. For example, NGOs may hold narrative legitimacy, while public agencies have legal authority, and community members bring lived experience. Recognizing and “honoring these diverse forms of ethos” - rather than privileging one - creates the basis for mutual respect.

Possible applications in practice:

- Make the basis of each actor’s legitimacy explicit (e.g., mandate, knowledge, presence, experience)
- Design role charters that define contributions without overformalizing power
- Rotate leadership or hosting responsibilities to prevent institutional dominance
- Create agreements that allow credibility to be demonstrated through action, not just reputation

Pathos: Emotional Safety and Trust Across Difference

Multistakeholder settings can be emotionally fraught—marked by historic tensions, unmet expectations, or identity-based exclusion. Without emotional safety, actors may engage minimally or defensively. Cultivating “collective pathos” means creating spaces where empathy, acknowledgment, and relational repair are deliberately facilitated.

Possible applications in practice:

- Begin collaborations with relational groundwork: storytelling, shared meals, reflection circles
- Appoint trust facilitators to surface unspoken tensions and mediate difficult emotions
- Use rituals or regular practices (e.g., check-ins, gratitude rounds) to humanize engagement
- Protect informal, unstructured time in agendas to allow authentic connection

Logos: Transparent Process and Shared Meaning-Making

Disagreements in multistakeholder work are inevitable—but they become destructive when the “reasoning behind decisions is opaque”. Logos in this context means making logic “visible” and “negotiable”: opening up both the technical rationale and the values behind each action.

Possible applications in practice:

- Use visual methods (e.g., decision trees, theory of change diagrams) to clarify logic pathways
- Make space for diverse ways of knowing—quantitative data, narrative, tacit knowledge
- Document and revisit agreements to surface when assumptions shift
- Ensure that decision-making criteria are co-developed and open to challenge

Building Systems-Level Trust Through Virtue-Based Design

Ultimately, multistakeholder collaboration is a test of a system's "ethical architecture". Ethos, pathos, and logos are not merely attributes of individuals—they can be embedded in how agendas are set, how dissent is handled, and how knowledge is valued. When trust becomes systemic—when credibility, care, and clarity are encoded into the design itself—collaboration gains resilience.

For multistakeholder frameworks to succeed over time, they must move beyond mere procedural inclusion toward "relational equity and epistemic humility". The Aristotelian lens reinforces that trust cannot be demanded through hierarchy, nor engineered through process alone. It must be "earned through credible action, sustained through emotional resonance, and legitimized through shared reasoning".

Operationalizing Trust in Collaborative Processes

From Measurement to Design

While data-driven tools and relational mapping provide foundational insights into multi-stakeholder collaboration, building and maintaining trust also requires attention to less tangible, but equally critical, dynamics. **Measurement alone will be insufficient**; trust must be actively cultivated through process design, behavioral norms, and intentional facilitation.

Beyond survey-based tools, trust can be assessed by analyzing participation patterns. For instance, tracking attendance at meetings can reveal systemic imbalances—such as the repeated absence of a specific stakeholder group. If certain perspectives are missing consistently, this signals not only a participation gap but also a potential equity issue.

Equity

Equity in participation is the foundation of collaborative processes. It addresses who is present, who is empowered to contribute, and whose voices ultimately shape outcomes. Achieving equity requires careful attention to inclusion criteria and the mechanisms by which stakeholders are invited:

- Are participants selected through structured stakeholder mapping, formal partnerships, or personal networks?
- Which implicit biases or systemic barriers might be influencing who is included—or excluded?
- Are marginalized or less visible stakeholders represented, and if not, why?
- Equity is about the composition of the table—ensuring the right people are in the room with the opportunity to be heard.

Balance

Balance focuses on how interactions unfold once stakeholders are present. Even when the right people are at the table, influence can remain uneven if certain voices dominate or others remain silent. Balance ensures that participation is distributed fairly, and that dissenting or minority perspectives are actively surfaced rather than suppressed. Achieving balance requires thoughtful process design, facilitation, and feedback mechanisms that prompt reflection:

- How confident are we that no critical perspectives are being sidelined?
- Do all participants feel psychologically safe to express disagreement or challenge assumptions?
- Are decision-making processes transparent and inclusive, or do informal dynamics tilt influence toward a few?
- What mechanisms of rotation, moderation, or structured dialogue are in place to prevent imbalance over time?

Equity ensures the right people are present, while balance ensures all voices are genuinely heard and considered. Both are necessary for trust to emerge and for multi-stakeholder collaboration to lead to sustainable, systemic transformation.

Trust cultures
Trust also manifests differently across cultural and institutional contexts. In Scandinavia, for example, where institutional trust is traditionally high—across government, police, and other authorities—collaboration can proceed with minimal formality. Repeated interactions, not contracts, are often sufficient to establish confidence. However, this context does not apply to other regions, trust may vary significantly by institution: communities may trust businesses but not politicians, or vice versa. Understanding local trust ecosystems is essential when designing engagement strategies.

For some, it may be natural to bring all stakeholders to the same table as equals. In other contexts, this approach may provoke tension or skepticism. In some regions, individuals can have a high trust in their counterparts directly, even if institutional trust is low. Eg in Mediterranean countries, trust might rely on the credibility of a known individual more than the institution they represent. Recognizing the strength of interpersonal relationships—and building on them deliberately—can serve as a foundation for broader collaboration.

The design of participatory formats must reflect the local realities of trust, power dynamics, and communication norms. That said, the principles underpinning effective collaboration—transparency, inclusion, shared ownership—remain universally relevant.

Readiness assessment test

To facilitate this, it can be valuable to conduct a *trust and readiness mapping* exercise. This can take the form of a partner readiness assessment, capturing stakeholders' past experiences with collaboration, their current expectations, and any lingering grievances. If trust is fragile, initiating collaboration through a simple, co-created project can serve as a safe testing ground. Stakeholders should be encouraged to define goals jointly, rather than having objectives imposed from the outside. This approach generates early wins and strengthens relational confidence.

By starting with a small, co-created project, stakeholders **can participate without fear of major failure**, making engagement feel safe. Jointly defining goals **can increase motivation and alignment** by ensuring that all voices are valued. Small initiatives **can deliver tangible results quickly**, offering visible proof that collaboration may work. These outcomes **can build confidence**, allow partners to observe reliability and reciprocity in practice, and create a positive feedback loop where success encourages deeper engagement. In systems transformation, **trust can grow through concrete action**, and early wins are often the first signals that partnership is feasible and worth pursuing.

Cultural and emotional safety also play a critical role. Initiating discussions on failure in small, trust-building groups (two or three participants) can be powerful. Storytelling—about professional setbacks, personal milestones, or even something as simple as a childhood memory—can reduce psychological distance and create empathy. These informal rituals

prime participants for authentic engagement and can be monitored as part of a deliberate strategy to surface marginalized voices.

The facilitator's role becomes central

The **facilitator's role becomes central** in any collaborative transformation effort. Effective facilitation is not just about managing meetings—it is about **shaping the conditions for trust to emerge and sustain**. Facilitators ensure that group dynamics remain inclusive, cycles of interaction are balanced, and no participant feels overlooked or marginalized. They help **translate complex, multi-stakeholder interactions into constructive dialogue**, maintaining momentum while safeguarding equity and balance.

Trust-building exercises should be embedded alongside structured academic or technical methods, creating a space where **rigor and human connection** reinforce each other. Silent or hesitant contributors must be **proactively invited to participate**, ensuring that influence is not concentrated among the most confident or powerful voices. By curating psychological safety, surfacing diverse perspectives, and guiding constructive conflict, **facilitators can transform potential mistrust into relational capital**. In this sense, the facilitator is the **catalyst** that turns intention into collaboration and collaboration into impact

A phased approach to collaboration reinforces trust. First, allow participants to co-set objectives and jointly deliver results, no matter how small. Then, monitor interaction styles: do participants build on each other's ideas, or do they primarily focus on identifying flaws? A predominance of criticism may indicate insufficient trust, suggesting the need to revisit earlier phases of relationship-building.

Network analysis tools can provide indirect but valuable indicators. For example, as the number of interpersonal relationships increases, so does the volume of referrals and knowledge exchange. While such tools do not offer absolute answers, they offer directional insights that can guide interventions.

Leading organizations are increasingly formalizing these approaches. At Novo Nordisk, project outcomes are categorized based on whether they met expectations, failed, or exceeded them. Especially valuable are those that went beyond expectations—often driven by relational dynamics rather than formal mandates. These projects typically originated from an individual's initiative and succeeded when others voluntarily contributed outside their formal roles. In these contexts, relationship strategy extended beyond conventional networking—incorporating creative and participatory methods such as *LEGO® Serious Play*, group singing, or collaborative design tasks.

Such creative approaches serve as indicators of trust and willingness to engage. When leaders act more as facilitators than authorities, and when stakeholders engage with unfamiliar methods that stimulate creativity and sensory perception, they reveal not just openness but deeper alignment with the collaboration's intent.

Intent, in fact, must be transparent and easy to understand. If participants cannot intuit the intention behind a process, they may resist or withdraw. **Trust requires clarity**—not only about goals but about the spirit in which engagement is offered. Not all participants will be familiar or comfortable with participatory formats, so expectations must be managed and support systems provided.

Participation metrics offer another layer of insight. It is crucial to track who responds to invitations, who regularly attends, and what reasons are given for non-attendance. Disengagement can serve as an early indicator of a lack of perceived value, psychological safety, or insufficient opportunity to contribute. These patterns are important signals of whether trust is growing or eroding.

Finally, the structure of engagement must reflect the intent to build trust. Meetings must not be one-directional. If participants attend sessions only to listen without being invited to speak, they may conclude that their presence is symbolic rather than substantive. Such imbalances contribute to frustration and erode the collaborative culture.

NGOs as Trust Brokers and System Connectors

In many governance and health systems, NGOs play a unique intermediary role that goes beyond service delivery—they function as **trust brokers** between actors who may not otherwise engage productively. This includes translating community concerns into policy-relevant language, bridging cultural or epistemic gaps between institutions and marginalized populations, and mediating between funders and field actors. Especially in transnational or multi-stakeholder settings, NGOs hold relational capital that formal institutions often lack: lived presence, contextual knowledge, and emotional credibility. Their embeddedness allows them to make the intangible—such as community trust, local legitimacy, or narrative framing—actionable and visible at decision-making levels.

However, this role as connector also exposes NGOs to heightened risks when trust is fragile or under attack. Scandals within one organization can quickly undermine trust across the entire sector. Therefore, trust-building in NGOs must be treated not only as an internal challenge of governance and ethics, but as a systemic asset in fragile or polarized ecosystems. Trust in NGOs can erode through operational failures, perceived lack of neutrality, or external politicization of their actions - this seems to currently be the case for the EU4Health programme decision to remove the EU operational grants for NGOs. By investing in transparency, multi-level accountability, and mutual ownership of decisions with communities and partners, NGOs can reinforce their legitimacy and resilience as **anchors of trust** in increasingly fragmented systems.

Embracing Irrelevance

Fostering Trust and Collaboration Through Curiosity and Shared Humanity

Trust is not a static outcome—it is a process shaped by interaction, shared experiences, and openness to the unfamiliar. In multi-stakeholder collaboration, it is often assumed that structured meetings, clear mandates, and mutual alignment are sufficient to build trust. However, such approaches can fall short if they do not create space for human connection, genuine curiosity, and the exploration of ideas that may initially appear "irrelevant." In complex systems, relevance is not always immediate, and trust often grows at the boundaries of conventional thinking.

A critical element of designing trust-driven ecosystems is recognizing the **value of irrelevance**. When participants are expected to engage only in activities directly tied to their formal responsibilities, curiosity is constrained. This narrowing of attention limits exposure to new ideas, weakens cross-sector insight, and reduces the chance of discovering unexpected synergies. To cultivate adaptive and resilient actors, it is essential to reserve space for **encounters with the unfamiliar**—opportunities where individuals engage with people, disciplines, and concepts they know little about.

Such experiences fuel **cognitive diversity** and expand professional networks. They help people develop new mental models that are essential for navigating the complexity of modern ecosystems—where no single framework or field holds all the answers. Individuals are shaped not only by their formal roles but also by their passions, values, and intrinsic motivations. Understanding what energizes them beyond their job titles opens new channels for collaboration and trust. It allows stakeholders to connect not only as professionals but as human beings.

Building trust in this way reduces interpersonal friction and encourages the sharing of ideas that may be unpolished or uncertain. These early-stage ideas often contain the seeds of true innovation. People are more likely to offer bold, unconventional contributions when they feel seen, respected, and supported. Trust emerges not from hierarchy or obligation, but from **shared purpose and mutual recognition**.

T**rust cannot be commanded into existence**. Formal processes, regulations, and oversight mechanisms may be necessary, but they often signal the absence of trust rather than its presence. They serve as guardrails when relational confidence is missing. For instance, governance frameworks around emerging technologies are essential, but when they are designed primarily to limit rather than enable collaboration, they may reflect an underlying culture of mistrust. A more constructive approach involves **engagement, co-experimentation, and mutual learning**—creating the conditions in which trust can emerge organically.

The same principle applies to leadership. If we want individuals—whether team members, partners, or citizens—to trust institutions, then institutions must first demonstrate trust in them. This can begin with **small, low-risk acts of delegated authority**. When people are trusted, even if they occasionally fall short, they are more likely to reciprocate with

accountability and openness. Continuous surveillance, by contrast, fosters concealment and fear.

A practical example lies in the way we **structure collaborative experiments**. If a team is given a pool of capital and asked to propose ideas, but later sees all proposals dismissed in favor of a top-down decision, the result is disengagement. Participants learn that their input is symbolic, not meaningful. Alternatively, giving teams real autonomy—with the expectation of delivering a shared result—can foster **ownership, learning, and trust**.

This raises a broader and essential question: **How do we measure trust? And how do we activate it as a strategic capability?** One way to frame trust is as the **engine of collaboration**. In this metaphor, leadership may serve as the driver, and funding as the wheels—but without a functioning engine, the system cannot move. A high-performing team requires an internal engine composed of shared knowledge, strong relationships, and collective readiness. Some roles must focus not on external speed or direction, but on maintaining the integrity and power of the internal engine—what might be called **trust engineers**.

These individuals or teams do not control outcomes directly. Instead, they focus on strengthening interpersonal dynamics, enabling reflection, and supporting continuous capacity-building. Their contribution is to ensure that once a system reaches **critical mass in trust**, collaboration becomes self-sustaining. Conversations evolve from compliance to commitment. Teams stop checking boxes and start sharing insight.

To support this, organizations must create environments where **curiosity is protected**. Mechanisms that allow people to explore new ideas, attend interdisciplinary events, or engage in seemingly unrelated conversations are not distractions—they are **investments in adaptive capacity**. These interactions deepen emotional intelligence, broaden interpretive perspectives, and foster the empathy needed to work across differences. They also reveal unexpected common ground—shared interests or personal stories that form the foundation for collaboration.

In practice, trust grows when individuals discover a **shared passion, experience, or value**. When people begin to see themselves as part of the same "tribe," interpersonal barriers dissolve. These human bonds make it more likely that individuals will **take collaborative risks**, offer untested ideas, and support each other’s development.

This is especially vital when engaging with uncertainty or innovation. Ideas in their early stages are fragile—marked by ambiguity and low probability of success, but often high potential value. In a **low-trust environment**, such ideas remain hidden. People will only share them when they believe their contribution will be met with interest, not judgment. Trust, therefore, is not just a social value—it is a **precondition for innovation**

Trust Recovery, Rebuilding, and Reconciliation

While much of this paper focuses on building trust, the ability to **repair and rebuild trust** after it has been broken is equally essential—especially in long-term collaborations where conflict, failure, or disillusionment are inevitable. Trust breaches may stem from perceived exclusion, ethical lapses, misaligned incentives, or breakdowns in communication. These

ruptures often carry emotional and symbolic weight, affecting not only the relationship between individuals or institutions, but the perceived integrity of the collaboration itself. It is not enough to simply “move on.” Trust recovery requires intentional processes for acknowledgement, reflection, and re-alignment of values.

Practical strategies for rebuilding trust include structured dialogue, public acknowledgment of harm, facilitated reconciliation sessions, and in some cases, the creation of “fresh start” spaces where collaboration can be re-imagined without punitive overhang. In networked or peer-based systems, restorative approaches such as trust circles or third-party mediation may help surface unresolved tensions and generate forward momentum.

The key principle is that **trust repair is relational work**, not just procedural correction. When addressed openly and collectively, breaches can become opportunities to deepen understanding and redesign more equitable and durable partnerships. Trust systems that include space for fallibility and recovery are ultimately more resilient than those that depend on perfection or denial.

Trust Takes Time

Cultivating the Conditions for Long-Term Collaboration

In systems change and multi-stakeholder collaboration, **time is one of the most underappreciated resources**. Trust, a foundational element of any meaningful collaboration, cannot be rushed. It evolves through cycles of interaction, observation, feedback, and reflection. Yet, in many initiatives, results are expected before foundational relationships have had the opportunity to take root. This misalignment between expectations and relational readiness not only creates frustration—it actively undermines the very conditions necessary for systemic progress.

A simple metaphor illustrates this tension well: stakeholders are often asked to **plant carrots and then questioned about the harvest two weeks later**. Without respecting the natural rhythms of growth, emergence, and consolidation, the fruits of collaboration fail to materialize. Regardless of the strength of the strategy, the size of the budget, or the urgency of the mission, trust cannot be engineered on demand. It must be nurtured deliberately and over time.

Understanding this leads to a crucial insight: **patience is not passivity—it is strategy**. Strategic patience involves creating an environment in which people feel safe to explore, question, and take risks. It requires designing for psychological safety, promoting experimentation, and treating failure as data—not as evidence of incompetence. When these conditions are in place, trust becomes the engine that enables collaboration to move from inertia to momentum.

In contrast, **punitive or coercive approaches may generate short-term compliance but never build long-term trust**. People may comply to avoid punishment, but this is not the same as ownership. Durable collaboration stems from shared belief in the process, a sense of value within it, and the time and space to contribute meaningfully. Respecting the developmental pace of relationships is therefore not optional—it is essential to building systems that can adapt, endure, and thrive.

This principle—that trust and collaboration take time and cannot be rushed—also applies to how we use **data and performance metrics** when managing collaborative initiatives. As these initiatives evolve, it becomes increasingly important not only to track *what has been done*, but to ask deeper questions: **Where are we now? Where are we trying to go? And what information will actually help us get there?**

In many projects, performance metrics are used primarily for **accountability**—to report progress to funders or stakeholders. But in more complex, multi-stakeholder efforts, **metrics must also function as tools for learning**. They should help teams reflect on whether their efforts are having the intended impact, where there are signs of tension or delay, and what new capabilities may be needed to move forward more effectively.

For example, instead of only tracking how many meetings took place or how much money was spent, more meaningful data might include whether collaboration between partners is improving, whether new ideas are emerging, or whether certain voices are being consistently left out. When metrics are framed this way—as learning tools rather than just compliance

checks—they can offer early insights into what is working, what needs adjustment, and how to adapt before problems become systemic

However, **even the best metrics cannot substitute for contextual judgment**. There must be individuals or teams with the ability to sense when the conditions are right for action—and when they are not. Strategic patience, in this sense, includes knowing when to pause, when to pivot, and when a delay is not a failure but an invitation to recalibrate. When outcomes fall short, the key question should not be “Who is to blame?” but rather “Were the enabling conditions in place?”

Treating failure as a signal for infighting only entrenches distrust. But when failure is reframed as part of a **shared learning journey**, it becomes a vital catalyst for growth. Especially in systems where participants are attempting things they have never done before, **trial and error is not a peripheral activity—it is the method**. Only through repeated attempts, reflection, and revision do people begin to construct the processes and partnerships that allow collaboration to scale.

This is where leadership and facilitation take on heightened significance. Leaders must create the conditions for uncertainty to be held—not controlled. They must model openness to learning, support adaptive responses to failure, and resist premature judgment. Facilitators, meanwhile, play a central role in enabling **collective sense-making**—helping groups identify what is working, what is not, and how to iterate together. For any of this to succeed, **resilience must be designed into the system itself**—not just technical resilience, but relational and emotional resilience.

These insights are increasingly echoed in emerging practice literature. For example, research on network-building for systems change highlights that **trust-building is non-linear, context-sensitive, and dependent on lived experience and ongoing reflection**. Long-term success is not primarily a function of structure or governance—it is a function of **culture, timing, and sustained commitment**. In short, systems that endure are not built on speed and scale alone. They are grounded in trust, and trust takes time.

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