Trust: the cement that holds the world together is eroding … so how can we best address global challenges? Richard Plenty Ph.D. & Terri Morrissey MBA. ICAP Florence 25 July 2026

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Richard Plenty Ph.D. & Terri Morrissey MBA
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www.linkedin.com/in/richardplenty
www.linkedin.com/in/terrimorrissey

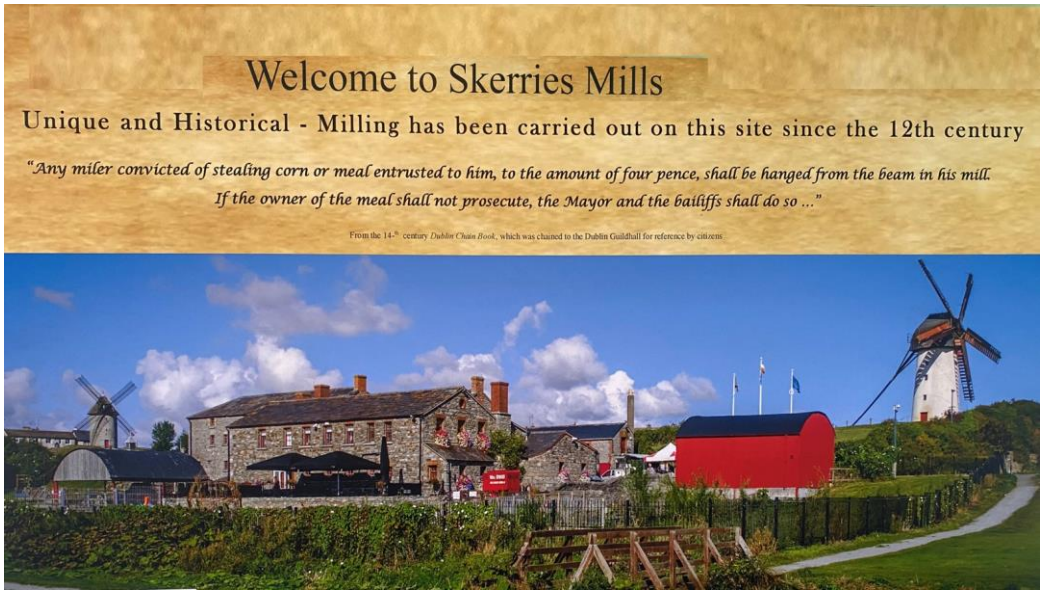
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Does trust matter when we work with others?

Trust is not always a precondition for achieving results when working with others. Historically fear has often been the default option.

In this example from Terri's home town of Skerries in Ireland, threats and coercive power were used by the authorities as a way of getting their employees to conform to their obligations. Stealing corn to the value of four pence was a hanging offence.



This approach has its limitations - and not only because it can lead to a shortage of skilled millers. A fear-based paradigm doesn't work when we need to get results that can only be effected through co-operation and collaboration with others and we can't use force or coercion to get them to do what we want.

In these situations, trust is essential. It makes a difference to how well we work together, the quality of our relationships and the quality of outcomes.

Trust in the international context

Trust is very important when working internationally. It's only too easy when working across cultures for misunderstandings to occur as different perspectives collide. The context is always evolving, and many of the issues are complex and take a long time to address.

So the international community has developed frameworks to help nations work together.

Procedures and rules have been designed to make trust easier and support cooperation. Institutions such as the United Nations have provided a sense of hope that we can work together for the common good.

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These frameworks have served well but are becoming outdated. Institutions such as the UN date back to the 1940s and were based on the power dynamics of that era. Since then there have been massive changes in geopolitics, immense technological change, and a rise in the number of complex global issues which defy a quick fix.

It's amazing that the old order has lasted so long. Perhaps that's because the collective moral outrage and concerns about nuclear proliferation that followed the end of World War 2 led to a long period where there were many shared assumptions about what was 'the right thing to do' and 'the right way of doing it'.

That era has long since gone. Unfortunately we now seem to be at peak 'outrage exhaustion' and have - for the moment - lost our capacity to agree on very much at all.

That doesn't make it easy when it comes to working together to get things done. When people are not prepared to compromise, listen to others, or simply follow the rules - the overall approach has its limitations. International institutions can become talking shops with little or no accountability.

Further, the system isn't always seen as fair. When some nations take the view that their future development and survival is best achieved by "going it alone", looking after their own immediate interests rather than the long- term global good – then then it's not surprising that less powerful countries, minorities and disadvantaged groups sometimes feel their they are being exploited for others' gain or that their views are not being taken seriously

As a consequence implementation is only too often disappointing and there can be frustration with the slow pace of change. Years of experience of international cooperation are in danger of being lost.

Revamping the system

So the approach needs revamping. Improving the capability to bring about change and get results is vital. Any new approach will need to be properly supported and seen as adding value

Rebuilding institutions and frameworks will take time. Trust has been shattered and people are wondering how on earth existing institutions can function given current levels of conflict, and in a world where hard power seems to be much more important than dialogue. It could take many years, even decades, to rebuild the whole system - and things may get worse before they get better.

It's vital that we find a way to move things forward. The problems we have in common, climate change being just one example. will continue to exist and must be addressed somehow. And we haven't much time to waste.

There are some principles that we believe are largely self-evident:

- We can't rely solely on existing institutions and frameworks to move things forward, but we should build on them where we can.

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- We should aim to improve implementation, taking into account the concerns people have about change – for example the cost of living, essential services, having a good job and their own health, wellbeing and quality of life. We need to start where people are at, not just drive things through. That's an area where psychology has something to offer.

- We should develop an approach that better supports communities, organisations, and other networks. These are often better positioned to take action than international governmental bodies. They have the power to get things done in their own areas. And they have more impact than individuals can ever have on their own.

We will need to keep people on board through changing and uncertain times

We live in a world where the environment is constantly evolving. This makes detailed planning and therefore 'keeping commitments' difficult.

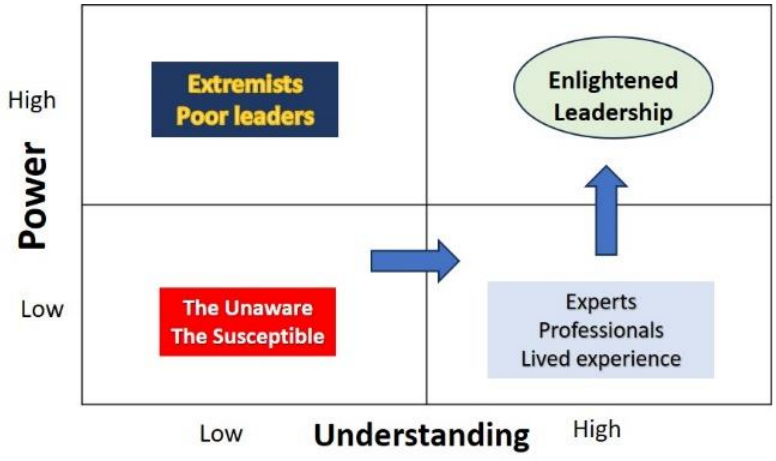
We need to have the flexibility to adjust our path as circumstances change. It can be an enormous challenge to keep people on board and retain their trust in this situation.

The way we do things becomes very important. If we genuinely feel we have a common purpose and commitment with those we are working with - and have a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves - we are more likely to put up with the inevitable frustrations of an uncertain world.

We will need understanding as well as power

We live in a polarized and very diverse world where developing shared understanding is critical to build the trust needed for successful implementation. Yet too often decisions and actions are taken with little knowledge or understanding of the consequences.

Let's take a look at this simple 4-box matrix with power on one dimension and understanding on the other, showing how we think the focus needs to change.



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Populism has grown in importance. Extremists and leaders with charisma, but with shallow understanding and little patience, have a magnetic effect on those who feel the impact of global challenges on themselves, yearn for simple, fast solutions, but have a limited understanding of what's involved. We have called them the unaware and the susceptible.

It's a pattern that can be seen through history in periods such as the Dark Ages. We need to find ways of raising the quality of understanding where this is lacking. Education is a big part of this, but it's also important that people understand the benefits of change for them personally and whether they are being given the full story by those they trust.

At the same time, many experts, professionals, and people with relevant lived experiences find it hard to get their voices heard and end up feeling helpless. The challenge is to bring them more into the picture. This is not a simple task.

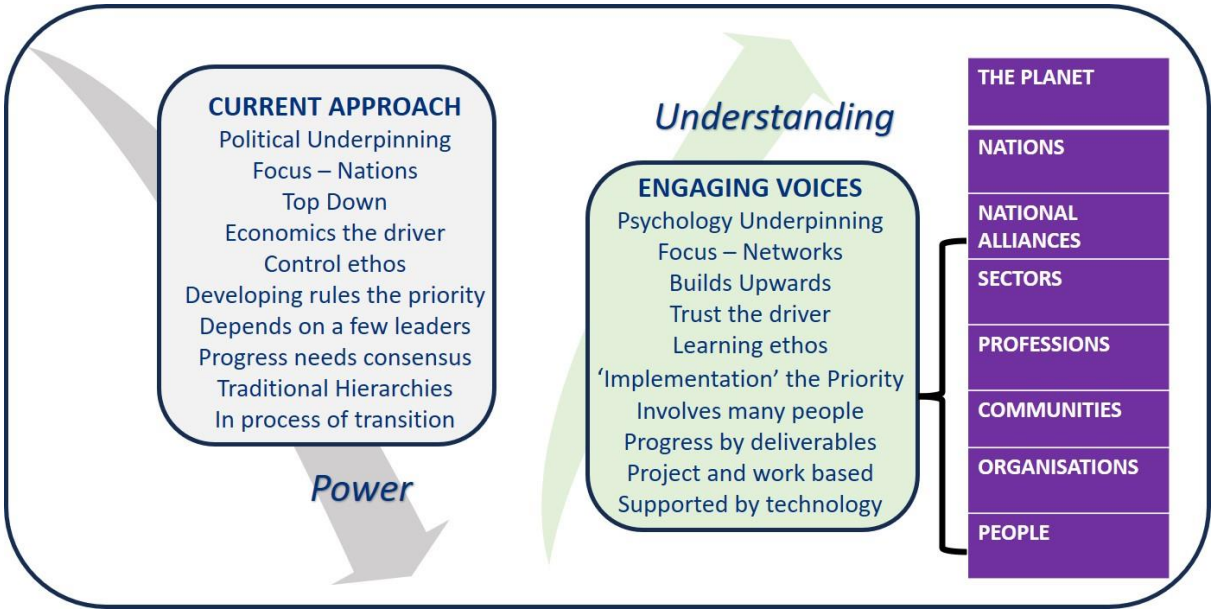
Communicating to general audiences is not something that comes naturally to many experts and technical people. Getting a message across needs an understanding of the wider context, not just one's own discipline, and an ability to make complex matters simple. It's a skill many professionals have to learn. Practice makes perfect!

On the other hand, there seems to be a growing recognition in the academic world of the need to take more seriously the perspectives of those with lived experience and involve them in co-creating solutions. How best to do this remains a challenge.

In summary, we need to find ways of raising the quality of understanding where it's possible and empowering those who know what they are talking about. This has the potential to create an environment where a more enlightened leadership approach can hold sway.

A more inclusive approach

A more inclusive approach would add value, particularly during a period when the world order is in transition



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- The current approach is power oriented, focused on national interests, with a political underpinning and driven by economics. Success depends on the support of a few leaders. Developing rules and guidelines is a priority and there is an underlying ethos of control.

- In comparison, a more inclusive approach, which we call 'Engaging Voices', would emphasise understanding. It would involve many people, not just a few leaders; be driven by trust; and be underpinned by psychology rather than politics.

A more inclusive approach would meet people where they are, taking into account their lived experience, understanding better their perspectives on key challenges, and give them the opportunity to develop their own actions. Change and implementation would be the priorities, supported by an ethos of delivery and learning.

'Engaging Voices' would be focused on networks - people, organisations, communities, professions and sectors – encouraging them to find ways of practically addressing shared challenges around global issues.

Networks can be formal or informal. Each network would include a number of units which develop action for themselves. The approach 'builds upwards' as good practice and success is shared with others and picked up by policy makers and a connected wider system.

The quality of coordination at the network level is critical for success. A balance needs to be struck between supporting, developing and empowering 'units''; providing enough structure for deliverables to be aligned; and connecting the network to the outside world.

Of course, this kind of approach isn't new. There are already many examples of community initiatives which follow the same pattern. And on an international level, mayors of the C40 global city network work collaboratively across borders on ambitious targeted climate action to cut emissions, deliver cleaner air, healthier streets and create new jobs

But the opportunity now exists with remote working and AI input to involve many more people in this kind of endeavour, a wider range of networks, and a broader set of topics. A more coordinated approach, that provides social proof from across the globe of progress around global challenges would provide a solid evidence base for international collaboration.

Psychology could play a key part in this - bringing people together, understanding change dynamics, providing evidence based support for implementation, sharing best practice and ensuring that well-being is a key objective.

We could possibly even play some kind of role in coordination. At the moment Psychology's contribution to global challenges is patchy. It would be great if an approach like this could move us more centre stage.

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Building relationships and trust

An important benefit of working together on shared challenges is that it builds relationship and trust Even where people have quite different experiences, perspectives and values, working successfully together on difficult problems can create a wonderful spirit

We have seen how this can work for ourselves in the Global Psychology Alliance, which we have worked with since 2019. It's a good example of a global professional network which has embraced many aspects of an 'engaging voices' approach.

We facilitated three conferences over that period which brought people together from all over the world. Each of the conferences successfully put together roadmaps for the next couple of years in a democratic and inclusive way. The global reach was impressive, the quality of relationships good, and the spirit of the group outstanding.

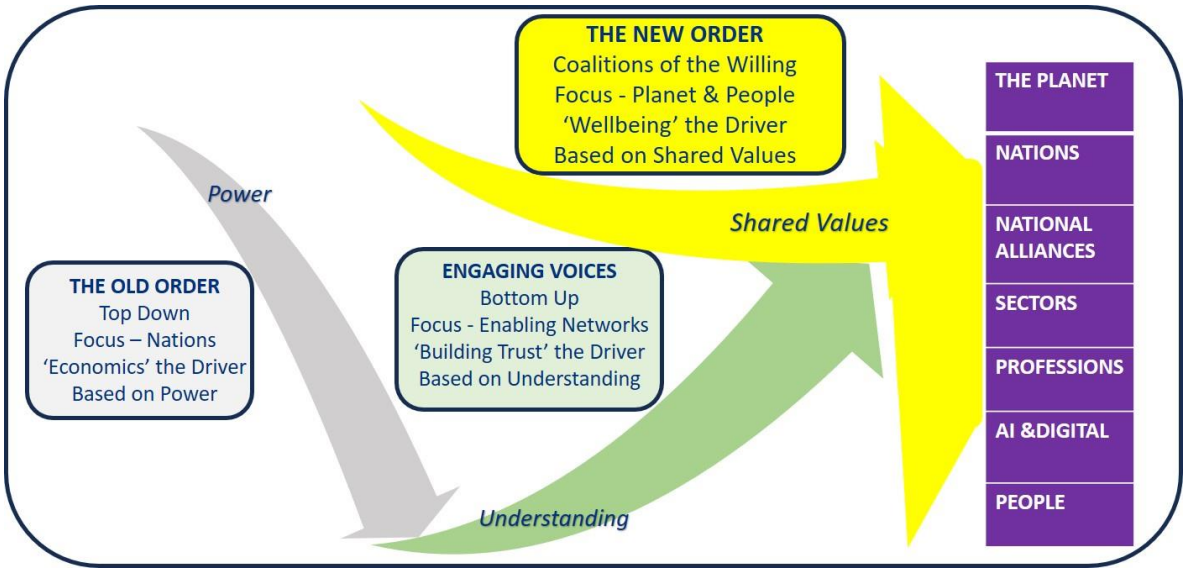




Working Groups at GPA Conference in Jamaica, March 2025. The GPA is a coalition of over 80 national, regional, and international psychological organisations & academic institutions dedicated to addressing global challenges by applying psychological science to enhance human well-being.

A new order

A more inclusive approach could support a longer-term evolution to a new order.



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if we can show that working together can be more motivating, enjoyable and successful that unilateral action or resorting to force, that would provide an excellent platform for supporting the far-reaching changes at the international level that would be helpful in accelerating action.

'Engaging Voices' could be a vital transitional mechanism to bridge the gap between the old order and an emerging new one, where top down and 'bottom upwards approaches come together in a well-integrated manner.

A New Order would allow nations to play a more effective role than at present. Because of the connections forged by the 'Engaging Voices' phase, they would have more connection with what is happening in the real world, a better evidence base for policy development, and a more educated and informed audience

Ultimately there remains a case for all countries to work together for the sake of the wellbeing of both people and planet. At the moment that seems some way off.

But the Santa Marta conference formed after COP30 by 'a coalition of the willing'- countries who were interested in producing plans for the phase out of fossil fuels - may be a hopeful sign of things to come.

All we need is trust! So ….

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Do have we the courage to trust?

Trust can be rebuilt, but it needs to start from the bottom up, one brick at a time.

It can be done but will need vision and courage.

The 'courage brick' from Nelson Mandela's house in Soweto reminds us that while this is not easy, it has been done before.





Presented 25 July at ICAP Florence at an invited symposium on trust by Richard Plenty, Ph.D

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