

# THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES



BRUCE  
COMPTON

**H**onesty is the final principle in this series of columns on CHA's Guiding Principles for Global Health Activities. While these principles are based on research and feedback from collaborations globally and inspired by a desire to improve the impact of our global health activities, honest feedback is not always well received.

There is so much polarization in our world, and trust, which is advanced through honest dialogue, seems harder to find each day. I was recently called the “skunk at the garden party” when providing insights regarding shortcomings of interventions provided globally by U.S. partners. Furthermore, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, differing political views, media coverage that can increase anxiety or highlight divides, and myths circulating on social media play major roles in eroding trust.

In January 2021, the Edelman Trust Barometer, a mechanism that gauges trust and has been around for more than two decades, released the updated Trust Index, which records the average level of trust in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business, government and media. A related news release revealed that people don't know where or who to turn to for reliable information. A majority of respondents believe that government leaders (57%), business leaders (56%) and journalists

(59%) are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false. It also showed that “Trust dropped precipitously in the two largest economies. Respondents deeply distrust the U.S. (40%) and Chinese (30%) governments from the 26 other markets surveyed.”<sup>1</sup>

Why should we stay abreast of something like a trust index? Because it provides important insights into the things we need to discuss and communicate with our global partners. It points out that keeping open communications and seeking input are paramount when building trust.

I invited Laura Berland and Evan Harrel, co-founders of the Center for Compassionate Leadership, to provide insights into trust. Berland is executive director, and Harrel is the chief operating officer. Their insights highlight why being honest and maybe even being called the “skunk at the garden party” is not a terrible thing, especially when building and maintaining trust affects the lives of our brothers and sisters who we are trying to assist.

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## HONESTY

EVAN HARREL AND LAURA BERLAND

**T**he United States and international organizations can have differences in their needs, practices, traditions and definitions of success. These differences can make it hard to speak and share completely openly. What if others criticize us for having different practices or traditions? Will they stay committed to our partnership? Will I hurt their feelings because I have a different view? Speaking up in honest and respectful ways is the role of leaders. If you want others to trust

you and take risk with you, show your own trust first by being openly honest and vulnerable.

### OPEN HONESTY IS HARD

When we allow ourselves to be seen exactly as we are, we reveal our full humanity, including our flaws. Revealing those flaws makes us vulnerable, which no one enjoys. We innately know we are exposed, at risk. Our survival instinct drives us to stay protected, and allowing vulnerability runs

counter to that survival instinct. Unfortunately, the same walls we put up to protect ourselves from potential attack also keep out the human connections that allow for effective collaboration and teamwork, and the fear of vulnerability becomes limiting.

Our research at the Center for Compassionate Leadership confirms how hard it is for leaders to allow themselves to become vulnerable. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we asked leaders and their teams about the leader's vulnerability. While 54% of leaders said they were allowing themselves to be vulnerable in the midst of the pandemic, only 28% of team members said that they were observing the same thing from their leaders. This vulnerability gap demonstrates that even leaders who would like to show vulnerability have a hard time letting that intention be seen.

#### **OPEN HONESTY IS A TRAIT OF A STRONG LEADER**

One reason leaders resist showing themselves fully is that they believe that showing human flaws causes them to appear weak. Research shows that just the opposite is true. Leaders who allow themselves to be seen just as they are often are judged to be stronger leaders. Instead of appearing weak, this openness causes leaders to be seen as human and relatable, and makes it easier for team members to connect, trust, share common goals and work together.

When you are brave and speak up first, you may find that many other people have been thinking or feeling the same thing as you. In a recent cohort of compassionate leadership training for global health professionals, an incredibly accomplished and strong leader spoke up about feeling isolated and exhausted. All heads were nodding in agreement, and several in the peer group opened

up about their own similar experiences. We all noticed the immediate comfort created by this honesty, and it allowed others to feel safe and vulnerable about this issue as well. Each peer started talking about their own situations by first thanking the initial speaker for daring to say the unsaid and having the courage to bring this challenge to the surface for the group.



## HONESTY

*Trust is earned and learned*

Meaningful partnership requires a high level of trust and multiple lines of communication. Both U.S. and international partners must recognize that the other likely perceives risks in being totally honest. Both must listen for things said and unsaid, which takes both time and practice.

#### **CREATE A "YES, GO FIRST" CULTURE**

Start with yourself, and make sure you are ready to be fully vulnerable when you look at yourself in the mirror. The ability to do this arises from another of CHA's Guiding Principles, authenticity. Have you moved past many of your internal limiting beliefs that keep you from taking risks and moving outside your comfort zone?

When you stand fully in your authenticity and truth, you are able to hear ideas that might be different from your own ways of thinking. You will be much less threatened when your partners speak up with a different point of view. Receiving information from such a

stable, confident position will in turn encourage your partners to share their full, honest positions.

As a compassionate leader, recognize the protective instincts among your partners. If they have information that would be useful to you but are hesitant to speak up due to a fear of losing your valuable support, or of violating your cultural boundaries, then you won't get the feedback you need. Explicitly grant permission! Your job is to make it clear that it is safe for them to express a concern or float an alternative, creative idea.

You do this through your words and your actions. Model vulnerability, courage and trust. Acknowledge your partners' unique knowledge and let them know that their point of view is very important to you. Then back up your words with

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actions. Honor those who speak up in risky situations, even if their ideas are off the mark. You can celebrate their initiative even if you choose not to move in the direction they suggested. Don't allow differing opinions to become win/lose scenarios.

**IN CLOSING**

We all need support. We can never do it all alone. Creating the connection and trust that comes from honesty and vulnerability will be great for more than your organization and your partners. You will benefit greatly as well — no longer will you carry the burden of holding on to secrets. Relax a bit and let your shoulders soften. When we all share from a place of vulnerability and openness, where all ideas are welcome, it calls our best selves forward.

Let's imagine a world where we can all speak up in loving, compassionate ways without fear of ridicule or rejection, where we pour out generous affection without worrying about whether it will be returned.

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**NOTE**

1. Edelman Trust Barometer, <https://www.edelman.com/trust>.

U.S. Postal Service  
**STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION**  
(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1. Title of publication: *Health Progress*
2. Publication number: 0882-1577
3. Date of filing: *October 23, 2021*
4. Issue Frequency: *Quarterly*
5. No. of issues published annually: 4
6. Annual subscription price: *free to members, \$29 for nonmembers and foreign subscriptions*
7. Location of known office of publication: *4455 Woodson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63134-3797*
8. Location of headquarters of general business offices of the publisher:  
*4455 Woodson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63134-3797*
9. Names and complete addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor:  
*Catholic Health Association, Publisher; Betsy Taylor, Editor; Charlotte Kelley, Managing Editor; 4455 Woodson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63134-3797*
10. Owner: *The Catholic Health Association of the United States, 4455 Woodson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63134-3797*
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders: *None*
12. *The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.*
13. Publication name: *Health Progress*
14. Issue date for circulation data below: *Fall 2021*

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Actual No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
15. Extent and nature of circulation:		
a. Total no. copies ( <i>net press run</i> )	14,778	14,600
b. Paid and/or requested circulation		
(1) Paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions stated on Form 3541	12,857	12,732
(2) Paid in-county subscriptions	0	0
(3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other USPS paid distribution	0	0
(4) Other classes mailed through the USPS	0	0
c. Total paid and/or requested circulation [ <i>sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4)</i> ]	12,857	12,732
d. Free distribution by mail ( <i>Samples, complimentary, and other free</i> )		
(1) Outside-county as stated on Form 3541	1,626	1,611
(2) In-county as stated on Form 3541	0	0
(3) Other classes mailed through the USPS	0	0
(4) Free distribution outside the mail ( <i>Carriers or other means</i> )	0	0
e. Total free distribution ( <i>sum of 15d (1), (2), (3), (4)</i> )	1,626	1,611
f. Total distribution ( <i>Sum of 15c and 15e</i> )	14,483	14,343
g. Copies not distributed	296	257
h. Total ( <i>sum of 15f and g</i> )	14,779	14,600
i. Percent paid and/or requested circula- tion ( <i>15c divided by 15f times 100</i> )	88.77%	88.77%
16. This statement of ownership will be printed in the <i>Fall 2021</i> issue of this publication.		

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

*Betsy Taylor, Editor*

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Fall 2021, Vol. 102, No. 4  
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