

**A GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS**

*How Government Can Help Support Our  
Faith in Others*

THE

LEAP

A photograph of two men in business attire walking on top of the large yellow letters of the word 'LEAP'. One man is in a white shirt and light-colored trousers, and the other is in a white shirt and dark trousers. They are walking from left to right, with the man in the white shirt leading and the man in the dark trousers following closely behind him, holding onto his arm for support.

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THE SCIENCE OF TRUST & WHY IT MATTERS

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ULRICH BOSER

Note: Some of the material below has been published before, either in *The Leap: The Science of Trust and Why It Matters*, published by New Harvest/Amazon Publishing in September 2014, or in other articles by Ulrich Boser.

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# THE LEAP FOR POLICYMAKERS

## *How Government Can Help Support Our Faith in Others*

Ulrich Boser

During World War II, the U.S. Army hoped to answer the question: Why do men fight?<sup>1</sup> The question should have been easy to answer—we’ve been fighting wars for thousands of years. But the question of bravery is harder than it seems, and at the start of World War II, the army didn’t have a reliable approach for inspiring its new recruits.

At the time, generals seemed to think that bravery was a mix of self-interest and patriotism, and when studies suggested that morale was low, the army often tried to appeal to the soldiers’ inner ego. They talked about pride and changed pay structures and created a point system so that soldiers could figure out when they would be discharged.<sup>2</sup> General George C. Marshall also brought in film director Frank Capra to make a movie that would explain the causes of the war. Almost every incoming soldier saw the resulting film, *Why We Fight*, which argued that World War II was about liberty and American security. Put simply, the men were supposed to be fighting the Nazis to save themselves and their way of life.

*We are born to work with others,  
and as a society, we need to do far more  
to build a sense of cohesion. Policymakers  
can lead the way by creating better social  
and economic structures.*

But the army also knew that might not be enough, so in the 1940s, it tapped sociologist Samuel Stouffer to study the issue of bravery. Stouffer launched a massive research project, surveying some



(Image: DVIDSHUB)

500,000 enlisted men, and it turned out that the men didn’t fight because of patriotism or money or fear of Nazi domination. For them, the war wasn’t about saving American liberty. Instead, the men fought because they believed in each other, and when Stouffer asked soldiers what kept them going, their most common response was finishing the job so that they could return back to the States. But the second most common response—and the “primary combat motivation”—was a sense of connection to others.<sup>3</sup>

Stouffer’s finding might seem odd at first glance. The men were terrified for their lives. They faced mortar rounds and sniper fire, dive-bombings and artillery attacks, Panzers and bombers. Why would their buddies make a difference? Well, trust can provide a type of well-being, a feeling of emotional support, and when you are jumping out of a foxhole, when you expect a bullet in the chest, when a German tank might kill you at any moment, a faith in others can seem like the only thing that matters. A few years ago, Leonard Wong, of the United States Army War College, re-created Stouffer’s study, and the findings held up.<sup>4</sup> As one infantryman told



(Image: John Haslam)

Wong, “You have got to trust [other soldiers] more than your mother, your father, or girlfriend, or your wife, or anybody. It becomes almost like your guardian angel.”

*According to sociologist Eric Uslaner, income inequality explains more than 80 percent of the recent drop in social trust.*

For the most part, we don’t see others as the solution to our problems—or as central to our future well-being. But our social bonds sustain us, and people with deeper social ties live longer and are less likely to die of a heart attack or cancer.<sup>5</sup> They’re also less likely to be anxious or depressed. They’re even less likely to catch a cold. Studies also suggest that people with deeper social connections are more effective at work, and individuals with warmer relationships can earn almost twice as much money as their less connected counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

Why does this happen? Why would working with others give us any sort of support at all? There isn’t a simple explanation. Part of the reason, it seems, is that when we’re connected with others, we

gain more information, which helps us solve problems more easily. By bonding with others, we also feel better about our group. It’s easy to get carried away here, and we’re not built to place our faith in everyone. But the bottom line is that we feel supported by others, and at the same time, we want to feel like we are supporting others.

*We need to improve both trust in government—and the trustworthiness of government. In other words, we need to come together as a society as well as make our intuitions more honest, dependable, and performance-oriented.*

But perhaps the most important take-away here is that society depends on a sense of trust. Humans crave a sense of belonging. We need to feel a part of our communities, our nation, our world. Looking forward, there’s a lot that policymakers can do to improve our trust in others, and below are some proposals to help the nation rebuild its faith in others—and reinvest in its sagging social capital.

## BUILD UP A GRASSROOTS SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Economically, politically, and socially, we've become far too isolated, and today only a minority of elementary schools even teach civics education.

- Support housing initiatives that rebuild cities and town in ways that emphasize socially and economically diverse communities.
- Invest in community policing, drug courts, and other forms of procedural justice that provide citizens with a greater voice in the legal system.
- Expand successful community-building programs and double the number of AmeriCorps participants.
- Resolve the status of the nation's undocumented immigrants.

## CREATE A MORE JUST ECONOMY

Economic mobility is low. Inequality is on the rise. We need to do more to build the nation's middle class—and hold corporations accountable for their actions. In short, we need to create a trustworthy economic system. I adapted the following recommendations from the “300 Million Engines of Growth: A Middle-Out Plan for Jobs, Business, and a Growing Economy.”<sup>7</sup>

- Pass comprehensive personal income tax reform.
- Raise the minimum wage and index it to half the average wage.
- Enact corporate income tax reform.
- Stop the worst effects of high-frequency trading through a transactions tax.

## EMPOWER INDIVIDUALS THROUGH EDUCATION

When it comes to reforming the nation's school systems, there are some straightforward solutions.



(Image: Anthony Quintano)

Proposals include:

- Support schools that lengthen the school day.
- Reform school funding so that it's both more equitable and effective, and have school dollars follow children instead of programs.
- Make college more affordable through Pell Grants.
- Allow college students to gain credit for learning outside the classroom.<sup>8</sup>

## IMPROVE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

It's not enough to build the policies that support our trust in others. We also need to improve the trustworthiness of our governmental institutions. This includes:

- Require agencies to create performance and other return-on-investment indicators that allow the public to measure success.
- Support new technologies that engage the public, improve decision-making, and make government more open and transparent.<sup>9</sup>
- Encourage the development of Social Impact Bonds, which allow agencies to invest in new approaches to social programs.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>1</sup> My account of Stouffer's work relies on Joseph W. Ryan, "Samuel A. Stouffer and the American Soldier," *Journal of Historical Biography* 7 (Spring 2010): 100–137, and Leonard Wong and others, "U.S. Army War College, Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War," Strategic Studies Institute, July 1, 2003, [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=179](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=179). I first came across Stouffer's work in Sebastian Junger, *War* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Ryan, "Samuel A. Stouffer and the American Soldier."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Wong, "U.S. Army War College."

<sup>5</sup> For the summary of the effects of social connections, I relied on Bert N. Uchino, "Understanding the Links Between Social Support and Physical Health: A Life-Span Perspective with Emphasis on the Separability of Perceived and Received Support," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 4, no. 3 (2009): 236–255. For the study on colds, see Sheldon Cohen and others, "Social Ties and Susceptibility to the Common Cold," *JAMA* 277, no. 24 (June 1997): 1940–1944. Also see Vaillant, George, *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Vaillant, *Triumphs of Experience*.

<sup>7</sup> "300 Million Engines of Growth: A Middle-Out Plan for Jobs, Business, and a Growing Economy," eds. Jennifer Erickson and Michael Ettlinger, Center for American Progress, June 13, 2013, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2013/06/13/66204/300-million-engines-of-growth/>.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Klein-Collins, Amy Sherman, and Louis Soares, "Degree Completion Beyond Institutional Borders," Center for American Progress, October 28, 2010, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/report/2010/10/28/8567/degree-completion-beyond-institutional-borders/>.

<sup>9</sup> Podesta and Rushing, "Doing What Works," Center for American Progress, February 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Jitinder Kohli, Douglas J. Besharov, and Kristina Costa, "Social Impact Bonds: What Are Social Impact Bonds?" Center for American Progress, March 22, 2012, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/open-government/report/2012/03/22/11175/what-are-social-impact-bonds/>.