

Study: How firefighters and others take leaps of faith

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A study of firefighters in the United States breaks new ground in understanding how groups of workers—especially those in high-risk occupations—are able to take leaps of faith. The study conveys what

goes into a person's ability to make critical trust-related judgments. It also has relevance and managerial implications in an era of declining trust in both people and institutions, the study's authors said.

"The Hidden Side of Trust: Supporting and Sustaining Leaps of Faith Among Firefighters" was authored by management and organizational behavior experts at Rice University, Boston College and Western Michigan University and will appear in the print version of the journal *Administrative Science Quarterly* later this year.

The study suggests that leaps of faith are initiated and perpetuated through two sets of dynamics: supporting and sustaining.

The authors studied firefighters who, in a high-stakes profession, have to take such leaps. Only around 4 percent of calls to a fire station are fire-related, so firefighters may not have seen their colleagues fight a fire. They may not even know them by reputation.

"We found that firefighters take a leap of faith to move from weak evidence derived from mundane tasks and behaviors at the fire station to trust in terms of entering a burning building with other firefighters," the authors wrote.

The dynamics of support begin with knowing who is—or isn't—a good [firefighter](#), the authors said. This knowledge is passed from one firefighter to another through stories that have to be clear enough to indicate a firefighter's trustworthiness. In this way, cues at the firehouse—how people look, act and talk—are used to determine how someone will act in a fire.

Groups also need to be sure new information doesn't cause one person to constantly upend judgments about someone else, as that could make an already dangerous job more hazardous, the authors said. Thus,

firefighters also need sustaining dynamics that cut off or diminish new information and keep their judgments stable. These dynamics can also mean that firefighters who are initially categorized as untrustworthy aren't provided with many chances to prove otherwise.

The study was authored by Erik Dane, an associate professor of management in Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business; Michael Pratt, the O'Connor Family Professor at Boston College's Carroll School of Management; and Douglas Lepisto, an assistant professor of management at Western Michigan.

Past research has looked at the types of information that lead to trust, but because such information is rarely perfect or complete, trust always involves a leap of faith, the researchers said. They noted that few previous studies have looked at how people do this.

Through a multiphase study of more than 60 firefighters in the U.S.—beginning with firefighters at stations in the Midwest and West Coast and narrowed to a single firefighting department in New England—the authors explored processes that facilitate and maintain leaps of faith. All but one of the firefighters were male, and they ranged in tenure from three months to 40 years. Nationally, firefighters are overwhelmingly male (96 percent) and white (82 percent), and 75 percent are between the ages of 32 and 50, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

Through interviews, observations and surveys, they asked about different types of firefighters (for example, those "with heart" versus those "working for a paycheck"), issues of trust and how trust was assessed at the site of a fire. For example, the authors asked firefighters to describe colleagues they trusted and those they didn't, why they held those opinions and what concrete information they relied on as evidence of trustworthiness. The authors resided at the station with the firefighters so

they could observe them performing daily routines, such as grocery shopping, preparing and eating meals, conducting inspections and responding to calls.

The authors said similar trust dynamics are likely to be found in occupations where there is not a lot of direct information about another person, such as bodyguards or nuclear power plant emergency operators. But because work relationships can be complex, one person might never really have all of the direct evidence needed to judge a colleague.

For example, the researchers said it may be difficult for employers to gain direct evidence that employees won't embezzle from them. One needs to take a leap of faith, the authors said.

This, they said, is likely true for most of a person's strong personal relationships as well. Leaps of faith are also important at the beginning of a relationship, when the participants don't have any direct evidence.

Managerial implications

Trust can be strongly influenced by company culture, the authors said. The stories and values in an organization shape who will—and will not—be trusted. For these stories and values to be useful in strengthening trust, they need to be sustained such that employees come to see evidence that supports the story. The authors stressed that those who are or aren't trusted might not be determined by what they actually do, but by the categories that people fit others into. This means bias in trust is real, the authors said.

The authors concluded, "Trust comprises both knowledge and faith. Although we know much about the role of the former, faith has remained rather inscrutable. We shed light on the dynamics that allow members of an occupation to accept the uncertainty inherent to [trust](#) and

to maintain a willingness to be vulnerable despite not knowing when or whether they will ever observe the trustee perform in the task domain—and in this case, a high-risk domain. As Saint Augustine said, 'Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.' For occupational members and others needing to take a leap of faith, there may be processes in place that both support and sustain people's ability to 'see what they believe.'"

More information: Michael G. Pratt et al. The Hidden Side of Trust: Supporting and Sustaining Leaps of Faith among Firefighters, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0001839218769252](https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839218769252)

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