The Trust Trap

Discussion Guide

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Escaping the Systems Keeping Countries Poor

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A comprehensive guide for book clubs, university seminars,
corporate leadership teams, and policy discussion groups

How to Use This Guide

Purpose: This discussion guide provides additional reflection questions designed to complement "The Trust Trap: Escaping the Systems Keeping Countries Poor." Each chapter includes 3-4 discussion questions focused on application, debate, and group reflection, distinct from the reflective questions within the book itself.

For Book Clubs: Select 2-3 questions per chapter to explore in depth. Encourage members to relate concepts to their own communities and experiences.

For University Seminars: Use these questions to facilitate structured debates, case study analysis, and critical examination of institutional theory. Consider pairing with real-world examples from your region.

For Corporate Leadership Teams: Adapt questions to your organization's context. Focus on systemic challenges, institutional design, and how leaders can build trust-based cultures that outlast individuals.

For Policy Discussion Groups: Use cross-chapter questions to synthesize insights and identify policy levers for institutional reform. Consider concrete applications to governance challenges.

Chapter 1: The Trust Trap

Trust is infrastructural

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1. In your own organization or community, what are examples of 'broken systems' that breed disengagement? How could recognizing trust as a system outcome change how you address these issues?

2. The chapter argues that trust is a feedback loop outcome. Can you think of a situation where improving one system component created unexpected improvements elsewhere?

3. How might focusing on system design rather than changing individual behavior yield different results in addressing low-trust environments?

4. What are the costs of treating trust as a temporary 'mood' rather than an infrastructural outcome?

Chapter 2: The Myth of Culture

Culture as dependent variable

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1. How does attributing poor governance to 'cultural differences' prevent meaningful institutional reform? What assumptions might we challenge?

2. Describe a cultural behavior you've observed. Now, how might changing the underlying institutions reshape that behavior without cultural intervention?

3. If institutions truly shape culture, what institutional changes would most impact the behaviors your organization or country wants to encourage?

4. How do we avoid the trap of cultural essentialism while still respecting local context in institutional design?

Chapter 3: The First Brick

Systems outlive personalities

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1. The chapter presents cases from Bahrain, Rwanda, and Singapore. Which example most resonates with your context, and why?

2. How do well-designed institutions persist despite leadership changes? What mechanisms ensure durability?

3. If you were designing an institution to outlast its founders, what 'first bricks' would you prioritize?

4. What happens when institutions are built around personalities rather than systems? Share examples from your experience.

Chapter 4: When Rules Block Growth

Beyond reform theater

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1. Can you identify examples of 'Reform Theater' in your sector, reforms that appear transformative but maintain the status quo?

2. Why do well-intentioned reforms often become performative? What conditions enable real systemic change versus illusion?

3. If you were tasked with evaluating whether a reform was genuine or theatrical, what indicators would you use?

4. How do communities or organizations become trapped in inertia despite apparent reform efforts?

Chapter 5: The Selectorate Illusion

System design and leader incentives

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1. Apply Bueno de Mesquita's Selectorate Theory to your organization: Does the system incentivize leaders to prioritize loyalty or performance? What are the consequences?

2. How does the size and composition of the selectorate shape institutional outcomes?

3. If you could redesign the selectorate in your institution, what changes would shift leader incentives toward performance?

4. What real-world political or corporate examples demonstrate this theory in action?

Chapter 6: Fragile by Design

Institutional decay and vulnerability

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1. What signs of systemic fragility do you observe in institutions you know well? How might these escalate if unaddressed?

2. The chapter discusses personalization and lack of redundancy. Where do you see these vulnerabilities?

3. How can institutions build redundancy and institutional memory to resist collapse?

4. If an institution lacks succession planning or institutional knowledge, what emergency interventions would help?

Chapter 7: Tracing Trust

Institutional memory and legacy

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1. What role does institutional memory play in sustaining trust? How is it created and maintained?

2. Compare Estonia's digital institutional memory with Bahrain's institutional practices. What lessons transfer across contexts?

3. How do organizations lose institutional memory, and what are the consequences?

4. What mechanisms could your organization implement to preserve and transmit institutional memory?

Chapter 8: Tracing Back Trust

Education and formative institutions

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1. How do schools and youth programs function as 'training grounds' for institutional trust? What specific practices matter most?

2. Beyond academics, what lessons about fairness, predictability, and accountability should educational institutions teach?

3. How can sports and competitive activities build trust in systems and fair play? What's transferable to civic institutions?

4. If you were redesigning education to build institutional trust, what would change?

Chapter 9: When Law Enforcement Meets a Higher Law

Public scrutiny and constitutional design

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1. The chapter uses First Amendment audits as a test of institutional integrity. What similar public scrutiny mechanisms exist in your country or sector?

2. Why might institutions resist public oversight, and what does that reveal about their actual design versus stated values?

3. How can citizens or stakeholders meaningfully audit whether institutions follow their own rules?

4. What would change if every institution faced regular, transparent tests of constitutional or ethical adherence?

Chapter 10: System Over Self

Designing for institutional outlast

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1. What does it mean to engineer institutions 'with trust built into their architecture'? Provide concrete examples.

2. How do you transition from leadership-dependent to system-dependent institutions? What's the hardest part?

3. If you could redesign one institution to prioritize systems over personalities, what would change first?

4. How do we measure success: by individual leaders or by institutional resilience?

Epilogue: The Architecture of Trust

1. The epilogue consolidates themes around 'The Architecture of Trust.' How have your views on trust evolved through this book?

2. Which chapter or concept most challenged your assumptions about institutions and trust?

3. What's one concrete institutional change you'd implement based on this book's insights?

4. How can you bring these trust-building principles into your own sphere of influence?

Bringing It All Together

Use these cross-chapter questions to synthesize insights across "The Trust Trap" and deepen understanding of how the book's core concepts interconnect.

1. How do Chapters 2 and 3 together argue against cultural determinism and for systemic design?

2. Trace the concept of trust through Chapters 1, 7, and 10. How does the definition and role of trust evolve?

3. How do Chapters 4, 5, and 6 together diagnose institutional pathologies and fragility?

4. How do Chapters 8 and 9 provide practical examples of trust-building that threads back to Chapter 1's theory?

5. What would an institution designed around all the principles in this book look like?

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