

# Be Part of a Community of Trust

Law firms and other law-related entities can create vital trust-based communities through service, leadership, organizational architecture, and a positive culture.

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In our personal, professional, and community dealings, trust is the foundation of any successful transaction, and sustainable trust is implicit in any healthy relationship. When a relationship has been damaged or diminished by a violation of trust, rebuilding the foundation is arduous at best, unattainable at worst. But even though modern times have created significant stress from several directions, we can ensure that our relationships flourish in times of eroding confidence by consciously setting out to build and nurture trust.

We know that trust extends exponentially as people seek strong, assured support systems. Our communities of peers, represented by the supporting associations in this magazine, are committed to providing trusted sources of information. The communities provide the power of connections to others of similar professional stripes, the wisdom acquired by sharing professional challenges, and the fulfillment derived from delivering a shared mission. By reliably and sustainably delivering quality benefits to its members, our associations will likewise flourish.

Below we will explore issues of trust as a whole then how trust relationships underlie, support, and maintain our associations – our trusted network of peers.

The methods of establishing and maintaining trust are many, but can generally be grouped into four imperatives: achieving results, acting with integrity, demonstrating concern, and communicating bad news. We will briefly explore each of these below; however, it is important to understand that consistency and predictability are key underpinnings of all the imperatives.

### **ACHIEVING RESULTS**

Simply put, one must deliver what was promised when promised. However, this seemingly simple process is actually a continuum of trust-building activities. With any commitment, whether large or small, the key players need to start out with a “handshake” (whether literally that or a 10,000-line project plan) on what needs to be accomplished and when it needs to be accomplished. You can work brilliantly at the task of digging a ditch. If, however, you were entrusted with the task of planting a tree, you have achieved nothing in the context of the trust relationship.

Another critical factor in achieving results is initiating appropriate “pulse checks.” Even if you start a relationship or project with a common definition of success and a well-established time line, a fork in the road can easily lead you astray. Check in regularly to ensure that the criteria for success have not changed and, if they have, to renegotiate the definition of “results.”

### **ACTING WITH INTEGRITY**

Otherwise known as “taking the high road,” acting with integrity encompasses an array of behaviors designed to establish and maintain trust. Again, we have to consider the starting point. To act with integrity, you must begin with a set of values in which you believe, about which you communicate to others, and around which you model your behavior.

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The easiest place to start in acting with integrity is the tried and true “golden rule,” which prescribes that you treat others in the manner you would like to be treated. Other key aspects of acting with integrity include being unfailingly courteous (even when you are “righteously” angry), telling the truth (and being upfront when you have

information you cannot share), providing complete information (i.e., avoiding “sins of omission”), and admitting when you don’t know something.

### **DEMONSTRATING CONCERN**

The difference between empathy (understanding someone’s feelings) and sympathy (sharing someone’s feelings) is subtle but important. A complete sharing of values and emotions is neither realistic to expect nor essential in achieving and maintaining trust relationships. However, it

instances may strike without warning, you will often suspect a task, project, or matter is at risk long before you know it with certainty. While it is human nature to delay unpleasantness for as long as possible, to achieve and sustain trust, you must be willing to deliver bad news as soon as you are aware of it. This empowers the recipient to take action based on the circumstances of which they’re now aware.

Second, you need to understand and observe the rules around delivering bad news. It is generally inappropriate to

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is both realistic and essential for others to expect you to consider their feelings in determining your own course of action with respect to them.

To be successful in practicing this imperative, it is important to seek to understand the feelings of others, to listen reflectively when others are describing their feelings, and to “call out” when you have to act in contravention to another’s feelings. The single most important aspect of this imperative, however, is to behave with sincerity. Paying “lip service” to someone else’s feelings is more damaging to trust relationships than ignoring their feelings altogether.

### **DELIVERING BAD NEWS**

If you consistently achieve results, act with integrity, and demonstrate concern, you may rarely be faced with delivering bad news. However, it is inevitable that – despite your best efforts – you will sometimes have to disappoint someone. Ironically, far from damaging a trust relationship, delivering bad news can be one of the best ways to deepen and cement trust relationships.

To maintain trust when delivering bad news, consider these guidelines. First, whenever possible, the bad news should not be a surprise. Although “acts of God” in some

apologize when terminating someone’s employment or to be flippant when indicating you have failed to meet a deadline. The rules may be personal or, in the business world, proscribed by your environment. In either case, acting consistently in accordance with a set of values is important to the trust relationship.

Finally, it is important to remember that you do not communicate bad news for your own satisfaction. To be effective in communication in general (and in communicating bad news in particular), you must focus on the needs of the person to whom you are communicating.

Although not a separate imperative, receiving bad news is an important corollary. Remember that delivering bad news can be almost as difficult as receiving it. To build and maintain trust, accept bad news as graciously as possible and, when appropriate, provide feedback to the deliverer on how well they delivered the news or how they might have delivered it better.

### **FROM ONE TO MANY**

The importance of communities of trust – both to the individuals who make up the communities and to the larger “whole” – cannot be overstated. Effective leaders and active

members who consistently demonstrate integrity provide solid underpinnings to support the organization’s mission and to underscore the organization’s values. There is no better marketing plan to attract and sustain membership than consistent, predictable delivery of “promised” services. Not surprisingly, professional associations that build and sustain a reputation for trustworthiness will flourish. Individuals who participate will likely bolster their professional acumen; those who volunteer for leadership roles will likely bolster their professional development; and those who stay connected over many years will likely bolster personal relationships that extend well beyond their professional lives. The impact of shared trust is tremendous.

The practice of law is built on tenets of critical thinking and logic, and a measure of skepticism is healthy, if not necessary, to the process of critical thinking. By training (and likely by wiring), lawyers exhibit skepticism in many of their dealings. This type of behavior would seem anathema to the practices of many of our associations, in which the open exchange of information, experience, opinions, and beliefs is encouraged. There really is no secret to the success of our associations that thrive in the legal community; those professionals who perform well in skeptical environments have likely developed skills that telegraph their trustworthiness. It would follow, therefore, that those skills extend outward to the larger communities in which they participate as members.

### **CREATING TRUST-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

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Giving of one’s time and talents and participating actively in your association typically pays you back many times over. By demonstrating the imperatives of trust cited in this article, you achieve professional standing in your community of peers. Performance as a trusted “member” positions you for service as a leader in the community, if you choose that level of participation.

Our associations look to the rich pools of talent within our communities, and we foster the development of



leadership skills that will equip members for service in leadership roles. If you’re not familiar with your association’s volunteer positions, the qualifications for service, and the continuum of leadership that the association desires, reach out to those in leadership positions or the support staff to find out how you can contribute to the trusted roles with the organization.

Professional associations typically have an organizational architecture consisting of a board of directors or other “top-tier” volunteer leadership that is tasked with crafting the vision and the strategy to move the association forward in achievement of its mission and goals. And while the names might vary, each association typically has strata of leadership positions to carry out the volunteer efforts to deliver on the “tasks” required of the vision and strategy. This organizational architecture might change over time, typically in reaction to changes within the community – demographic shifts, new technologies, new markets, etc. – but providing a transparent and understandable framework in which the members and leaders can operate adds to the relationship of trust that is necessary to sustain the organization.

An organization’s culture and core values define the ethos of the organization, and they provide the metrics against which all activities and behaviors of an organization’s members are judged. They are an association’s culture. As a professional looking to participate in an association, you should analyze the core values to see if there is great resonance and harmony with your personal values. Hold the association to task; look to the leaders of the association to see demonstrated behaviors that reflect and reinforce the core values. If you find an ethical culture that is comfortable and supports your own

beliefs and goals, it is likely you'll become an increasingly active member over time. It's a win-win situation for the association and the individual.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In these uncertain times, trust has never been more needed in our relationships – personal, professional, organizational, global – and the imperatives for building and sustaining trusted relationships can be demonstrated in all the spheres in which we operate. Be an active, “trusted” member of your professional association, contributing to the win-win situation. ♦

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## ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL TECHNOLOGY ASSOCIATION



The International Legal Technology Association (ILTA) is an entity-based professional association comprising 1,200 law firms and legal departments (9,500 professionals) from around the globe. Founded almost three decades ago, ILTA began as a users group focused on a single product and has expanded internationally in its breadth and exponentially in its depth, now providing peer-networking opportunities and educational resources to all professional strata in the legal environment. As technology has touched all areas of support to the legal profession, so, too, has ILTA expanded its reach.

### ILTA Membership Benefits

Benefits of ILTA membership include:

- A substantive magazine, *Peer to Peer*, published quarterly
- A nationally recognized survey of technology trends published annually
- White papers on many topics of interest expressed by our members
- A regional network of member firms that meet to discuss issues of local interest
- Vendor- or topic-focused Peer Groups that provide forums for the exchange of timely information on products, services, and best practices with peers
- Discussion forums on a broad array of technology and management topics, providing immediate responses to questions and requests for information
- Webinars and teleconferences providing a way to meet with peers and benefit from educational content without leaving the office.

### ILTA's Statement of Purpose

ILTA is the premier peer networking organization, providing information to members to maximize the value of technology in the support of the legal profession.

### ILTA's Core Values

These beliefs and behaviors inform everything we are and do as an organization, both among ourselves and to the outside world. ILTA's core values are:

- Maximize the value of technology in support of the legal profession
- Provide quality, independent, unbiased, and accurate information to our members about technology and the practice of law
- Maintain vendor independence
- Provide quality educational opportunities for our members and ongoing learning for navigating through change
- Foster, rely on, and celebrate volunteers for their real-world experience and their value as a resource for colleagues
- Recruit and retain the highest caliber of professional staff
- Act as a vehicle for meaningful peer networking
- Respect our colleagues
- Commit to the highest standard of professionalism
- Maintain a financially sound organization that provides full value for the members' investments
- Promote member advocacy with vendors regarding product development and support
- Recognize that ILTA is a volunteer-governed organization managed by a professional staff

### For More Information

Learn more about ILTA by visiting [www.iltanet.org](http://www.iltanet.org) or contact Randi Mayes, ILTA's Executive Director, at [randi@iltanet.org](mailto:randi@iltanet.org).