

Is it possible to rebuild trust in South African institutions?

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Corruption thrives in environments where there is little or no trust, so rebuilding trust in South African institutions should be a priority says Dr Tim London, senior lecturer at the UCT Graduate School of Business, who will be speaking on the topic at the upcoming Leaderex 2018.

On 4 September, an estimated 5000 CEOs, professionals, industry experts and entrepreneurs from around the world will attend over 250 master classes and talks at the Sandton Convention Centre for Leaderex 2018. One talk of particular interest this year will be given by Dr Tim London. He will be speaking about how organisations and leaders can regain trust once they've lost it.

"Trust in South African institutions, both private and public, is pretty abysmal," says London, senior lecturer at the Allan Gray Centre for Values-Based Leadership, UCT Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB). "And it's pretty clear that corruption thrives in environments of little or no trust."

"It ought to be top priority to regain that trust if we want to beat the corruption we see in this country."

South Africa dropped 14 positions in this year's Global Competitive Index, and corruption was identified as the main problem affecting business. In April, in a report entitled *The Time is Now, Corruption Watch* said there were 25% more complaints in 2017 than the year before. A recent Ipsos Report showed that 73% of South Africans surveyed said the country is on the wrong track and 68% said financial and political corruption are at the top of the list of concerns.

"That is a lot of distrust," says London. "Fortunately, there are ways to get it back."

London's work is often focused on how to design organisations in such a way that there are less opportunities for corruption to take root in the first place; at Leaderex, he's going to be focusing on what to do after a crisis or scandal to regain trust once it's been lost.

"Organisations do not operate in a vacuum," he says. "There are internal and external pressures. One can lose the trust of shareholders, customers, employees and society at large. The aim is to build organisations that can weather these pressures positively and, ideally, bounce back when something breaks that trust."

And if things have already gone wrong, he says the best route to take is to re-establish values, bring in and support the right people, and put in place leaders who live these values and set an example for others to do the same.

"Every company should have a set of values that become part of the living fabric of the company's day-to-day existence," he says. "These should be built around a purpose, why the company does what it does. When things get ugly, it is important to see whether the organisational culture has perhaps veered from these core values and if it has – to understand why."

He suggests that organisations also take a closer look at who they hire. "The right person for the organisation should be someone whose passion and core values resonate with those of the organisation."

"These are all positive steps," says London. "Unfortunately, when scandal hits, many organisations opt for quick fixes that don't address the underlying problems. These PR exercise usually revolve around firing a few individuals, and making big promises, but change nothing about the fundamentals that led to the trouble in the first place."

“But unless scandal-ridden companies ask themselves how they can rebuild their organisational structures, re-establish their values, and align their focus with those of their workforce and surrounding communities, they are unlikely to regain our trust,” concludes London.

Dr London will also be speaking at Leaderex on choosing a South African or an international MBA as part of the MBA Summit. He will be joined by Niven Maree, UCT GSB Alumni Relations Manager, who will be talking about careers in consulting, and Amena Hayat, Careers Services Manager, who will be talking about MBAs and entrepreneurship. The UCT Graduate School of Business will additionally host an exhibition at the conference and will participate in the Case Competition running at Leaderex for the first time this year.

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