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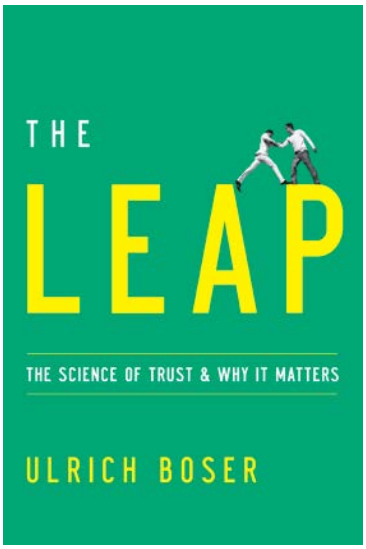
—**KEN STERN**, former Chief Executive Officer of NPR and author of *With Charity for All*

"Twenty years after Americans were warned about 'Bowling Alone,' Ulrich Boser takes us from cutting-edge psychology labs to the villages of Rwanda to better understand who we trust, how we decide, and why it matters. In an increasingly atomized world, *The Leap* charts a path towards stronger human bonds."
—**JOHN PODESTA**, former Chief of Staff to President Bill Clinton

THE LEAP

The Science of Trust and Why It Matters

by Ulrich Boser



We're not supposed to trust others. Look at the headlines. Read the blogs. Study the survey data. It seems that everyone is wary, that everyone is just looking out for themselves. But a sense of social trust and togetherness can be restored.

In ***The Leap*: *The Science of Trust and Why It Matters*** (Amazon Publishing/New Harvest | September 16, 2014) bestselling author Ulrich Boser shows how the emerging research on trust can improve our lives, rebuild our economy, and strengthen society. As part of this engaging and deeply reported narrative, Boser visits a radio soap opera in Rwanda that aims to restore the country's broken trust, profiles the man who brought honesty to one of the most corrupt cities in Latin America, and explains how a college dropout managed to con his way into American high society. Boser even goes skydiving to see if the experience will increase his levels of oxytocin, the so-called "trust hormone."

The book includes insightful policy recommendations along with surprising new data on the state of social trust in America today, including a fascinating look at state-by-state data:

- In Maine, almost 90 percent of people said that they have some sort of faith in strangers. The most trusting states include New Hampshire, Maine, Utah, Iowa, and Nebraska.

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- In some states, almost no one reported completely trusting strangers. The least trusting states include Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Nevada.

- Some states, like New Mexico, show relatively high rates of trust across races. But that isn't the case everywhere, and the states with the least amount of trust for people of another race include Alabama, Nebraska, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

- Trust across the male-female divide is low, and nationally just 5 percent of people said that they completely trust people of the opposite gender. The laggard states include Indiana, Alabama, Nevada, and Kansas.

- Trust in government is highest in the states that surround Washington, D.C., and Virginia and Maryland top out the list of states with the most trust in government. In other states, trust in government is much lower, and in Alabama, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming, more than 30 percent of people said that they have no trust at all in government.

A powerful mix of hard science and compelling storytelling, ***The Leap*** explores how we trust, why we trust, and what we can all do to deepen social trust.

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ULRICH BOSER is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan think tank. He writes about social issues, and has been published in the *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*; he has also appeared on *National Public Radio* and *CNN*. Prior to joining the Center, Boser was a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report* and the founding editor of *The Open Case*, an online criminal justice magazine. He is also the author of the national bestseller, *The Gardner Heist*. Boser lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife and two daughters.

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Early Praise for Ulrich Boser's
The Leap: The Science of Trust and Why It Matters

"Why should we all take a leap of faith into the world of trust? Ulrich Boser provides the profound answer in this thorough, insightful analysis of the psychology of social connectedness where we weigh communal interest over self-interest, selflessness over selfishness, giving to others over being a taker."

—**Philip Zimbardo**, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus at Stanford University and author of *The Lucifer Effect*

"A marvelous book: smart, engrossing and compulsively readable. Everyone talks about loss of trust in government and institutions, and finally there is a book that explores the issue in a meaningful way—and provides real ideas on how to restore trust. A significant contribution to our understanding of what builds civil society."

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—**John Podesta**, former Chief of Staff to President Bill Clinton

"Ulrich Boser examines one of the most crucial questions facing our nation today: Can we work together? In this vitally important book, Boser details the corrupting force that income inequality has had on social cohesion. For all those concerned about our nation's public policy, this book is a critical read."

—**Neera Tanden**, president of the Center for American Progress

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From Ulrich Boser's *The Leap*
A TOOL KIT FOR POLICYMAKERS

There is one audience that may need a special tool kit on how to improve our trust in others: policymakers. 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 fair and 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 a recent report by my colleagues at the Center for American Progress: "300 Million Engines of Growth: A Middle-Out Plan for Jobs, Business, and a Growing Economy."

- 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:

- 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.

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:

- Requiring agencies to create performance and other return-on- investment indicators that allow the public to measure success.
- Supporting new technologies that engage the public, improve decision-making, and make government more open and transparent.
- Encouraging the development of Social Impact Bonds, which allow agencies to invest in new approaches to social programs.

An excerpt from Ulrich Boser's
The Leap: The Science of Trust and Why It Matters

Chapter 10
Path Forward
Sometimes We Need to Leap

Heights have put me in a panic for as long as I can remember. I hate balcony seating. I don't like looking at tall buildings. A ride on an escalator can send me into a roar of shivers. I'm not against a little thrill-seeking. I've owned motorcycles. I've raced cars. My problem is high places, and the Greek myth of Icarus never made much sense to me. I've never seen it as much of a cautionary tale. It's more like a story of the obvious. Forget about the sun melting the wax of his wings. Who cares about his hubris. Of course, Icarus should have spiraled to his death. He tried to soar in the sky. What else could he expect?

But still, near the end of my research for this project, I decided to go skydiving. I had spent more than a year researching issues of social trust, and I wanted to see what I had learned. Are we really that trusting—and trustworthy? Is there a scientific basis for our cooperative ways? Is there a way to rebuild our social fabric? I was also inspired by writers like Jeff Wise, who went skydiving for science for his engaging book *Extreme Fear*.

We know that fight-or-flight chemicals shoot up when people are scared, of course. But what would happen to oxytocin? Would intense fear also cause the trust hormone to shoot up? It shouldn't. Fear is an ego-driven emotion, and when the stress hormone cortisol rockets through our bodies at full blast, the limbic system takes over. Pain feels distant. Muscles tighten. Blood vessels expand. Thoughts become narrow and focused, and when psychologists give cognitive tests before high-stress events, people are often unable to answer a basic question like what's three plus nine. To put it differently, fight-or-flight isn't just a response system. It can become an autopilot system that takes over our bodies.
Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist at Claremont Graduate University, knew this as well as anyone, and in studies, he's found that when people have high levels of cortisol, they tend to act more selfishly. In economic games, they're not as trusting or as trustworthy. During stressful events, testosterone levels also often spike, and the male hormone has a different effect than cortisol. Testosterone builds strong muscles and thick beards. It encourages risk taking and makes people less trustworthy. Basically, it's what makes people act like they're aggressive, entitled teenagers.

Still, Zak believes that our oxytocin-based bonding system remains strong even in the most heart-thumping moments, so when a graduate student mentioned skydiving as a way to test his theory, Zak thought: Great idea. Zak had already done two experiments on himself, and each time, he sampled his blood before and after he went skydiving. The results were hardly scientific. These were illustrative examples.

But the data were suggestive. Zak's cortisol levels skyrocketed, and on the first dive, the stress hormone jumped 400 percent. More surprisingly, Zak's oxytocin levels also ticked upward, increasing more than

40 percent. “It’s remarkable that the oxytocin system works in this sort of situation,” Zak told me. “I mean, think about it. You’re literally scared for your life.”

In the weeks before the jump, I thought a lot about Zak’s “scared for your life” comment. Way too much, actually. Low-level panic attacks would strike without warning. In the middle of the afternoon, sitting in my office, I’d imagine myself jumping out of the airplane, and my chest would grow empty. My hands would tremble. I’d start to cough and choke. Over time, I became convinced that when it came to oxytocin, Zak must have been an outlier. Why would your body release a social hormone if you were convinced that you were about to die?

My fears grew worse, and the night before the jump, I had friends witness the signing of my will. I took a horse-sized dose of Ambien but still couldn’t sleep. My body was nervous and twitchy, and by the time I arrived at the skydiving center the next day and met up with Zak, it felt like panic had short-circuited my brain. I couldn’t seem to make any sort of decision. Would I need sunglasses? Should I bring a snack? Did I need to go to the bathroom one more time? My brain couldn’t quite get a fix on the answers.

Then, much sooner—and much later—than I had hoped, Zak had drawn my blood, and I was shaking hands with my skydiving instructor, Christiaan Rendle. He was broad-shouldered and ponytailed, and I pestered him with one query after another. How often have you been skydiving? Ever had any problems? Did you pack our parachute? It turned out that Rendle was one of the most experienced instructors at the skydiving center. He had done some fourteen thousand jumps and had served as a stunt double in movies and TV commercials. As for the parachute, he didn’t pack it himself, and yes, there was a second parachute in case the first one didn’t work.

Rendle hustled me into the plane along with Zak and his skydiving instructor, and what happened next is a jumbled sequence of vivid snapshots. The hawkish profile of the pilot’s face. Another skydiving instructor telling some corny jokes. Rendle snapping me into what was essentially an adult-sized baby carrier.

In the plane, Zak sat a few feet away from me. “You all right, Ulrich?” A dull pain roiled my stomach. Sweat coated my palms. Someone had already jumped from the plane, but the thundering noise made it too loud to hear any of his screams. It seemed like the sky had just swallowed him alive.

“Yup, I’m good!” I yelled back.

Then, endless minutes later, Zak and his skydiving instructor belly-flopped out of the plane. And then, slowly, like some sort of barely working stop-motion movie, step by slow step, foot by slow foot, Rendle and I hobbled to the open door. I was swaddled by then, and Rendle more or less had to shove me out into the sky.

“Holy fucking shit! Holy fucking shit!” I kept screaming at 120 miles per hour, my body stretched out like a kite. In midair, as I was plunging downward in a screaming, explosive rush, Rendle tapped me, reminding me to release my grip on my harness, and then without warning, after a long velocity-filled high, it was over, and the parachute opened up above us like a giant nylon cloud.

As we floated to the ground, I quickly re-realized my fear of heights, my deep hatred of being off the ground, and eventually I landed on a grassy field. Zak quickly escorted me back to skydiving center, where he would take my blood. I knew, of course, that I had trusted Rendle that afternoon. But would my oxytocin levels go up? I wasn't sure, or as Zak told me, "You looked like a robot up there."

Zak turned out to be half right, and before the jump, my oxytocin was at bottom-of-the-test-tube levels. It seemed as if there was barely a peptide of the trust hormone floating around in my blood. But after the leap, my oxytocin levels had leapt upward by 193 percent. "Huge trust response," Zak explained. I looked at the results for my other hormones. They had increased, but not nearly as much as oxytocin. My testosterone levels were up 8 percent. Cortisol levels increased 9 percent.

Given what we know about stress, it's obvious why my cortisol and testosterone levels increased. But it's not at all clear what might have prompted oxytocin release. When I reached out to neuroscientist Larry Young, he told me that the cause may have been dopamine. "Perhaps the excitement of skydiving stimulated oxytocin release, which then could make the social cues of whoever you are with more salient," Young wrote in an email. "Perhaps when a couple of guys fight off and kill a lion, they feel the exhilaration but also develop a bond."

The data suggest that the brain's bonding system works even in the most stressful of stressful situations, although that still needs to be confirmed. "A two hundred percent increase in oxytocin is extraordinarily rare in all the experiments we've run, and you had it under such high levels of stress and testosterone," Zak told me. "It really tells you that we have a powerful kind of survival system around connection and oxytocin, and if we want to understand human nature, human society, this is a big part of the story." For Zak, the point is that even when we're supposed to be at our most selfish, even when our lives are on the line, we're built to connect. For centuries we've referred to our species as Homo sapiens, which comes from the Latin for "wise man," but I think we've been wrong. Our cooperative ways, our social side, has often mattered far more for the success of our species than our "wisdom," and we might be better off thinking of ourselves as Homo confido, or "trusting man." That, it seems, is a more accurate description of who we are.

The first lesson? We need to do more to consider the perspectives of others. When I first met my skydiving instructor, Christiaan Rendle, he told me that he had a sense of what I was going through. He didn't joke about it. He didn't make me feel spineless or simpleminded. "For a lot of people this is probably one of the most adventurous things they'll ever do," Rendle told me. "They might spend six months planning it, thinking about it, building it up. I always try and remind myself that this is a big deal for people." In other words, even after having done more than fourteen thousand jumps, Rendle tries to show some sympathy for first-timers.

When it comes to trust, building faith in friends and family is often relatively easy. What's harder—and, frankly, far more important—is building faith in people outside of your group. Almost every expert in social ties—from Paul Zak to Robert Putnam to Frans de Waal—highlights the importance of this issue, and indeed, it's at the very center of social trust. Or better yet, ask yourself: Do I interact with people who look different from me? Do I engage with people who have diverse political views? Do I spend time with people who make more or less money than I do?

In this sense, journalist Robert Wright had it right when he recently argued that one of the nation's most pressing issues was the fact that people don't look at problems "from the point of view of other people." As Wright suggests, this means that if you're a gun owner, you might need to understand that not everyone shares your passion for assault rifles. And if you're not a gun owner, it means realizing that people who buy guns often see their weapons as a civil right.

The second lesson is that trust is ultimately a choice. Before I jumped out of the plane at Skydive Elsinore, I had to take a short class and watch a training video. The instructor reviewed all the key lessons with me as well. I knew exactly what I was getting into. This helps explain why schooling often leads to higher levels of social trust; with more education, we're more understanding. This idea also goes back to the story of subway driver Hector Ramirez. We want people to have their own sense of right and wrong. We want people to have a feeling of autonomy. As a society, we don't want to force trust. We want to grow trust.

The third lesson is one that football coach Bill Walsh might have expressed best: "Success belongs to everyone." Or consider this anecdote: Shortly before Rendle and I stepped into the plane, I joked that it should be easy for me to trust him. After all, if Rendle made a mistake, we would both plummet to our deaths. But Rendle quickly corrected me, pointing out that we needed to work together. If I didn't arch my back, the two of us could flip over in midair and potentially have a dangerous landing. He made it clear that we were in the jump together, that we needed to work as partners.

And finally there's this fact: No one wants to jump out of a plane with a hole in his parachute, and when we think about trust, we also need to think about trustworthiness. At the micro level, we need to focus on ourselves. If we want the faith of others, we need to ask: Am I honest? Am I dependable? Do I deliver results? For individuals, the trust-building process doesn't so much begin with faith. It begins with reliability and performance, and we often overestimate how much others believe that we are trustworthy.

At the macro level, the questions around trustworthiness are similar. Do our institutions inspire trust by being productive, transparent, and accountable? Does our society promote justice and equality? Does our economy ensure that everyone gains? There's no doubt that many of our institutions could do better. Within government, agencies will sometimes fail to track performance and show that they are, in fact, responsible and outcome-oriented. Our justice system doesn't do nearly enough to build a sense of shared values either, and too often individuals view our legal system as unfair—and illegitimate.

Or just consider our nation's ever-growing levels of inequality. Because of the yawning gap between the rich and poor, we're less likely to trust—and less optimistic about our future. In a way, we're coming across an idea that we've already seen: When it comes to our faith in others, trustworthiness is the difference between trusting well and trusting poorly. And we need to do more to build this sort of trustworthiness—and this sort of trust. That means stronger communities. That means a deeper social fabric. That means understanding that trust is ultimately a risk—one that might not always pay off. But above all, it's time to leap.

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