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Internal Trust as a Strategic Lever for Public Sector Reform: Lessons from High-Performing Governments

Lance BARBIER[1]

Abstract: *This paper explores how trust among public sector employees acts as a key driver of government reform. It argues that internal trust is not just a "soft" value but a measurable capability that shapes how reforms succeed. While most governance research focuses on citizen trust, this study looks inward at trust within government systems across three dimensions: systemic, vertical (between leaders and staff), and horizontal (among peers). The research examined governance cultures in five high-performing countries: Singapore, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland, using a qualitative comparative case study approach. It found that strong internal trust, built on psychological safety, shared leadership, and transparent institutions, enables reforms that are agile, sustainable, and widely accepted. In contrast, low-trust environments that rely on rigid compliance tend to block innovation and weaken legitimacy. The paper introduces a "Trust Chain" framework that combines case evidence with theory to fill a gap in public administration scholarship. Practically, the findings offer guidance for countries like South Africa: embed trust metrics in performance systems, invest in leadership development, and create knowledge-sharing platforms to strengthen reform credibility and improve public sector performance.*

Keywords: Internal Trust, Public Sector Reform, Trust-Based Governance, Knowledge Management.

JEL: H83, D73, M15.

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Introduction

Governments work only as well as the people inside them. While global governance rankings tell us a lot about institutional performance, they often miss a key internal factor: the trust public servants have in their leaders, systems, and colleagues. This paper argues that employee trust is not a "soft" value; it's a strategic asset that drives innovation, reform adoption, and ultimately, public legitimacy (OECD, 2025).
Recent studies show that trust is more than a cultural by-product; it's a structural force that shapes reform success. The OECD (2025) finds that internal trust

[1] PhD, Independent Researcher and Scholar (Public Administration), Cape Town, South Africa; email: lance.barbier@gmail.com; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9275-4704

confidence in rules, fairness, and leadership integrity is a strong predictor of citizen satisfaction and policy responsiveness. Institutions with high internal trust are better at delivering reforms that are effective, emotionally resonant, and sustainable (OECD, 2025). Smith and Lee (2024) argue that trust should be measured alongside traditional performance indicators like efficiency and compliance. Their PATH model highlights that psychologically healthy workplaces marked by safety, inclusion, and ethical leadership boost employee engagement and reform agility. This suggests that trust is not just relational; it's an institutional capability that can be tracked and strengthened. Building on these insights, this paper examines how internal trust functions as a governance lever in five high-performing countries. It explores what builds trust, what outcomes it enables, and what lessons this holds for reform strategies in South Africa.

1. Literature review

Most governance research focuses on external trust how much confidence citizens have in public institutions, usually based on competence and integrity. What's often missing is the internal side: the trust public servants have in their leaders, systems, and colleagues. This gap matters because internal trust is rarely treated as a governance tool or built into performance and reform management systems (OECD, 2022; OECD, 2024; Prats, Phillips, & Smid, 2023).

Management and organisational psychology show that trust creates real value, often described as "trust dividends" versus "trust taxes", and that psychological safety supports learning and innovation. But these insights mostly come from the private sector and have not been widely adopted into public-sector structures with formal ways to measure and manage trust (CIPD, 2024; Gube & Hennelly, 2022).

In public administration, internal trust is usually studied in fragments: vertical trust between leaders and staff, or horizontal trust among peers. Few studies combine these with systemic trust into a single framework or examine how their interaction shapes reform speed and legitimacy. Most research also looks at one level at a time, missing how trust works across multiple layers of government (Hasche, Höglund, & Mårtensson, 2021; Berg, 2005).

Recent employee surveys in the public sector show that trust among staff improves cooperation, information sharing, openness to innovation, and commitment to organisational goals, especially where merit protections are weak (Keefer, Perilla, & Vlaicu, 2021; Keefer & Vlaicu, 2022). But these studies are region-specific, mainly in Latin America, and don't provide comparative models across high-performing OECD countries. Nor do they clearly link internal trust to reform adoption or service quality (Keefer, Perilla, & Vlaicu, 2021; Keefer & Vlaicu, 2022).

Measurement is another gap. While some reviews suggest ways to assess trust and psychological safety, few validated tools exist for the public sector that capture systemic, vertical, and horizontal trust together. A recent Scandinavian initiative makes progress for municipalities, but it treats supervisory and organisational trust separately rather than modelling them as part of an integrated trust chain (CIPD,

2024; Härenstam, 2024; Androniceanu, 2025). Even the OECD Trust Survey, now expanding globally, does not yet include employee-level internal trust as a standard, comparable measure. This makes it hard to draw broad conclusions or integrate trust indicators into reform governance frameworks, especially in Global South contexts (OECD, 2024; World Bank/OECD, 2025). This paper addresses these gaps by:

- Introducing an integrated Trust Chain framework that links systemic, vertical, and horizontal trust as mutually reinforcing drivers of reform agility and institutional legitimacy;
- Synthesising comparative evidence from high-performing governments to identify practical mechanisms and design features that strengthen internal trust; and
- Proposing actionable metrics and leadership/system interventions to embed trust as a measurable, strategic capability within public-sector performance and reform governance, with specific recommendations for South Africa.

2. Research methodology

This study applies a qualitative comparative case study approach, using secondary data, governance index scores, and peer-reviewed literature to examine employee trust, internal governance structures, and reform outcomes in five countries: Singapore, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland. The analysis is guided by a trust-performance model linking internal trust to reform uptake, innovation, and citizen impact.

A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complex, context-dependent nature of trust in governance. Unlike statistical models, qualitative synthesis explores causality, institutional narratives, and cultural dynamics factors that often determine reform success.

The five countries were selected for their inclusion in the OECD Trust Survey, availability of longitudinal governance data, and diversity in administrative traditions, enabling meaningful cross-country comparison with analytical depth.

As Kumar and Patel (2024) note, qualitative synthesis is particularly valuable in public sector research because it captures nuance, supports thematic generalisation, and reveals hidden drivers of institutional performance. This approach provides a robust framework for understanding internal trust as a strategic enabler of reform.

3. Research results and discussions

3.1 Trust as a strategic enabler of public sector reform

3.1.1 Systemic Trust: Institutional Design as the Foundation of Confidence

Systemic trust is about how much confidence employees have in the systems, rules, and processes that guide their work. It's different from personal trust between colleagues; it's about whether the organisation itself feels fair, transparent, and reliable. Research shows that systemic trust grows when public institutions use

strong knowledge management systems because these make processes more open, accountable, and responsive (Barbier & Tengeh, 2022).
Key elements of systemic trust include:

- Procedural fairness: Employees need to believe that decisions such as promotions, disciplinary actions, and resource allocations are made fairly and consistently (OECD, 2022);
- Transparency and accountability: Clear rules, open communication, and accessible grievance mechanisms strengthen trust in the system (Department of Public Service and Administration, 2025); and
- Data integrity and ethical governance: When employees trust that data is used ethically and leaders follow governance standards, they are more likely to support reform initiatives (Singapore Computer Society, 2024).

Examples of systemic trust in action:

- Singapore's Smart Nation: Uses open dashboards and citizen feedback to make digital governance transparent (GovTech Singapore, 2024).
- Norway's participatory policy design: Involves employees and citizens in shaping decisions, creating shared ownership (OECD, 2022; Standal & Feenstra, 2022).
- South Africa's Integrity Management Framework: Institutionalises ethical conduct and whistleblower protection (DPSA, 2025).

Leadership experts agree that trust is not a "soft" value. Maxwell (2007) calls it the foundation of leadership, while Covey (2006) describes it as an economic driver. His "Trust Dividend" concept shows that high-trust environments speed up collaboration and innovation, while low-trust systems impose a "trust tax" that slows everything down. Covey's Five Waves of Trust model also reminds us that trust must be built at every level, from individuals to organisations and society.:

3.1.2 Trust Chains: Integrating Vertical, Horizontal, and Systemic

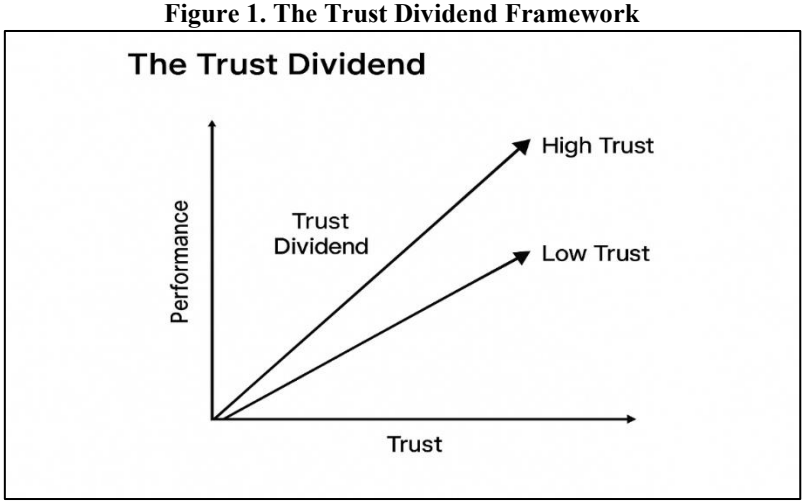
Trust chains explain how three types of trust work together to create strong, high-performing public institutions (Johansson, 2024; Bringselius, 2018; Lægreid & Rykkja, 2020):

- Systemic trust: Confidence in fair and transparent systems and rules.
- Vertical trust: Confidence employees have in their leaders.
- Horizontal trust: Trust built through collaboration and psychological safety among peers.

When these three forms of trust align, they create a "trust dividend", a positive effect that speeds up reforms and strengthens legitimacy (Johansson, 2024). But if any link is weak, the chain breaks, slowing progress and undermining performance.
This framework draws on the OECD Trust Survey, which shows that internal trust is a strong predictor of policy responsiveness and public legitimacy (OECD, 2025). It also builds on Smith and Lee's (2024) PATH model, which links psychologically healthy workplaces to reform agility and better performance.

Figure 1 illustrates how these dimensions interact to strengthen reform agility, employee engagement, and citizen satisfaction.

Figure 1. The Trust Dividend Framework



Source: The author's contribution based on OECD (2025) and Smith & Lee (2024)

3.1.3 Case Illustrations: Trust Chains in Action

Sweden – The Trust Delegation (Tillitsdelegationen)

- Vertical trust: Managers give frontline staff more decision-making power.
- Horizontal trust: Teams work together across traditional silos.
- Systemic trust: National frameworks support autonomy while ensuring accountability.
- Result: Faster responses and less bureaucratic red tape (Bringselius, 2018).

New Zealand – Public Service Act (2020)

- Vertical trust: Leadership programs focus on ethics and integrity.
- Horizontal trust: Cross-agency collaboration is actively encouraged.
- Systemic trust: Legal requirements promote transparency and citizen engagement.
- Result: Stronger public trust and better service delivery (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2020).

Canada – Open Government Initiative

- Vertical trust: Senior leaders model openness and responsiveness.
- Horizontal trust: Interdepartmental teams share data and insights.
- Systemic trust: Open data platforms and public reporting build transparency.
- Result: Greater legitimacy and more innovative policy design (OECD, 2022).

These examples show that trust cannot exist in silos. It must be built across all three dimensions: systemic, vertical, and horizontal. If one link is weak (for example,

opaque systems despite strong personal relationships), the chain breaks, and reform efforts lose momentum.

3.2 Analysis: Trust as a Predictor of Reform Success

Recent studies confirm that employee trust is one of the strongest signals of whether reforms will succeed and gain public legitimacy. The OECD (2025) reports that countries with high internal trust consistently outperform others on citizen satisfaction, policy responsiveness, and innovation. Trust shapes not only how reforms are implemented but also how they are perceived by the public.

Internal trust acts like a multiplier. When employees feel safe, respected, and empowered, they are more likely to support and sustain reforms. In contrast, low-trust environments often face resistance, policy fatigue, and gaps in implementation (Smith & Lee, 2024).

Key factors such as leadership behaviour, employee voice, and systemic fairness play a critical role in linking trust to performance outcomes (OECD, 2025). These factors influence how reforms are communicated, co-designed, and delivered (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlation Between Internal Trust and Reform Success

Country	Internal Trust Level	Reform Uptake	Electoral Gains	Citizen Satisfaction	Notes
Singapore	High	High	Moderate	High	Strong systemic trust and digital transparency
Sweden	High	High	High	High	Trust-based governance and decentralised leadership
Norway	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Participatory policy design and employee feedback
Denmark	Low	Low	Low	Moderate	Compliance-heavy culture stifles innovation
Switzerland	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	Efficient but emotionally distant federalism

Source: The author's contribution based on OECD (2025); Bringselius (2018); Torfing & Bentzen (2022); Sciarini et al. (2015); Smith & Lee (2024)

Table 1 above illustrates that internal trust correlates strongly with reform uptake and citizen satisfaction, and moderately with electoral gains. Countries with high internal trust tend to have more resilient and adaptive public sectors, capable of delivering reforms that resonate both internally and externally.

3.3 Case studies: internal trust in high-performing governments

High-performing governments show that internal trust doesn't happen by chance; it is built through deliberate design, leadership behaviour, and workplace culture.

- **Singapore – A Trust-Centric Public Service:** Singapore's Smart Nation initiative combines transparent performance dashboards, digital feedback loops, and employee empowerment tools to strengthen both systemic and interpersonal trust. Trust is reinforced through merit-based recruitment, continuous professional development, and a culture of accountability (GovTech Singapore, 2024).
- **Sweden – The Trust Delegation (Tillitsdelegationen):** Sweden pioneered trust-based governance by decentralising decision-making to frontline staff. This approach promotes autonomy, responsiveness, and psychological safety. Built on three pillars: culture, governance, and work organisation, it has reduced administrative burden and improved service quality (Bringselius, 2018).
- **Norway – Participatory Governance:** Norway integrates employee and citizen feedback into policy design through participatory mechanisms. Drawing on sociotechnical systems theory, it enables worker-managed change and shared decision-making, aligning institutional processes with employee values (Elden, 1986).
- **Denmark – The Risk of Over-Regulation:** Denmark illustrates the downside of rigid compliance cultures. Over-regulation has eroded internal trust and stifled innovation, particularly in welfare services. Employees report high administrative burden and low autonomy, undermining reform agility and morale (Torfing & Bentzen, 2022).
- **Switzerland – Consensus with Gaps:** Switzerland's consensus-based federalism ensures fairness and efficiency but struggles with emotional engagement among public servants. While cantonal autonomy supports systemic trust, the lack of shared cultural narratives can slow reform momentum (Vatter, 2018).

Key Insight: Internal trust is not a by-product of good governance; it is a prerequisite. Governments that invest in trust-building across systemic, vertical, and horizontal dimensions are better positioned to deliver reforms that resonate with employees and citizens.

3.4 Strategic Implications for South Africa

South Africa faces a dual challenge: improving service delivery while rebuilding internal trust. Slow and fragmented implementation of knowledge management has weakened reform momentum (Barbier & Tengeh, 2023). Historical legacies of opacity, politicisation, and uneven accountability have further eroded trust (DPSA, 2025). To reverse this, trust must be treated as a measurable, structural enabler of reform, not a soft value.

Recommended Strategies**:**

- **Reposition employees as partners:** Move beyond compliance-driven performance management to models that involve staff in service design and policy feedback (Nguyen et al., 2024).
- **Invest in psychological safety and whistleblower protection:** Enable employees to speak up without fear and strengthen integrity frameworks (Roche, 2025; DPSA, 2025).
- **Redesign performance metrics:** Include trust, collaboration, and engagement indicators in departmental scorecards (Smith & Lee, 2024).
- **Institutionalise knowledge sharing:** Create platforms for interdepartmental learning and digital repositories to reduce silos (OECD, 2025).
- **Embed trust in leadership development:** Train leaders in ethical governance, emotional intelligence, and inclusive decision-making (Chen et al., 2025).
- **Leverage citizen co-design:** Align internal motivation with external legitimacy through participatory initiatives like the Public Service Charter dialogues (DPSA, 2025).

These strategies align with the IPSM 2025-2028 framework, which positions trust-building as central to democratic renewal and service excellence. By embedding trust into the architecture of public administration, South Africa can unlock reform legitimacy, employee engagement, and citizen satisfaction.

4. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of internal trust in public sector reform, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- ***Reliance*** **on Secondary Data:** The analysis is based primarily on secondary sources, including governance indices, peer-reviewed literature, and official reports. While these sources are credible, they may not fully capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and informal dynamics within public institutions.
- ***Lack*** **of Primary Fieldwork:** The absence of direct fieldwork, such as interviews, focus groups, or employee-level surveys, limits the ability to validate findings through firsthand accounts. This constraint affects the depth of insight into trust-building mechanisms and their operational realities.
- ***Contextual*** **Differences Across Case Study Countries:** The five countries examined, Singapore, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland, represent diverse administrative traditions, political cultures, and socio-economic contexts. These differences may influence how trust is cultivated and sustained, and they pose challenges for generalising findings to other settings, particularly in the Global South.
- ***Potential*** **Interpretive Bias:** As with any qualitative synthesis, the interpretation of data is subject to researcher bias. Efforts were made to triangulate sources and

apply consistent analytical frameworks, but subjective judgments may still influence conclusions.

Despite these limitations, a qualitative synthesis approach is justified because it is ideal for exploring the multidimensional nature of trust, which is shaped by cultural norms, leadership behaviours, and institutional design. This method accommodates interpretive nuance and supports thematic generalisation, which are particularly valuable in public sector research for uncovering the hidden drivers of institutional performance. Efforts were made to mitigate potential interpretive bias by triangulating sources and applying consistent analytical frameworks.

5. Justification for qualitative synthesis

This study adopts a qualitative synthesis approach to explore the multidimensional nature of trust within public institutions. Trust is not a singular variable; it is shaped by cultural norms, leadership behaviours, institutional design, and interpersonal dynamics. Capturing this complexity requires methods that go beyond numerical correlation.

Qualitative methods allow for the exploration of causality, context, and institutional narratives, which are often obscured in large-scale quantitative datasets. By synthesising insights from case studies, governance reports, and peer-reviewed literature, this approach reveals how trust is cultivated, sustained, and operationalised across different administrative systems.

In governance and reform studies, qualitative synthesis is particularly valuable because it accommodates interpretive nuance and supports thematic generalisation. According to Kumar & Patel (2024), qualitative approaches are ideal for uncovering hidden drivers of institutional performance, especially in settings where reform outcomes are shaped by informal norms and relational dynamics.

This methodology also enables the identification of trust-building mechanisms that are context sensitive and adaptable, such as decentralised leadership, participatory policy design, and ethical governance frameworks. These insights are essential for informing reform strategies in diverse public sector environments, including South Africa.

6. Conclusions

Employee trust is the invisible infrastructure of an effective government. It shapes how reforms are designed, implemented, and experienced both internally by public servants and externally by citizens. Trust is not merely a cultural asset; it is a structural force that determines whether institutions can adapt, innovate, and deliver public value under pressure. Governments that invest in internal trust reap dividends in performance, legitimacy, and public support. High-trust environments foster psychological safety, ethical leadership, and collaborative cultures, conditions that enable reform agility and resilience. These environments are more likely to produce emotionally resonant policies, reduce implementation gaps, and sustain long-term change.

For South Africa, building a high-trust public service is not just a moral imperative; it is a strategic necessity. In a context marked by historical inequities, bureaucratic opacity, and uneven accountability, trust must be deliberately engineered through institutional design, leadership development, and inclusive governance practices. This includes embedding trust metrics into performance frameworks, protecting whistleblowers, and repositioning employees as co-creators of public value. Ultimately, trust is the foundation upon which reform legitimacy is built. Without it, even the most technically sound policies risk failure. With it, governments can unlock the full potential of their workforce, restore public confidence, and chart a path toward democratic renewal and service excellence.

Future research should explore how internal trust is experienced at the frontline of public service delivery, particularly through primary fieldwork such as interviews and employee-level surveys. Longitudinal studies could examine how trust evolves and influences reform resilience. There is also scope to develop and validate trust metrics for integration into performance frameworks, and to investigate how digital transformation, leadership development, and multilevel governance affect trust dynamics in diverse public sector contexts.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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