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# 02

## FUNDED BY TRUST

*Why Relationships Matter More Than Applications*

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Before funders invest in ideas, they invest in confidence.

TYLER J. BUTLER



# 02 FUNDED BY TRUST

*Why Relationships Matter More Than Applications*

By Tyler J. Butler



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## 78%

Of employees trust their own employer, 14 points above trust in business overall<sup>1</sup>

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## 9 of 14

Major sectors where most companies surveyed were cutting back on climate communications (2024 survey)<sup>2</sup>

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## 75%

Of companies studied obtained assurance on their sustainability disclosures in 2024<sup>3</sup>

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01

## THE NUMBER MISSING FROM YOUR DECK

*Two weeks before the budget review, your deck is nearly done: dollars granted, volunteer hours logged, a partner story with a good photo. Then a note arrives from the CFO's office. Before the meeting, she wants to know what the community really thinks of the company, and whether employees believe what the sustainability report says. You have a number for the dollars that went out the door. You do not have a number for trust.*

Trust sits behind every line in your budget. It shapes whether a community welcomes your next facility, whether employees join your programs, whether partners tell you the truth, and whether investors and regulators believe your reports. It is also hard to see until it starts to slip.

This guide shows where trust in business stands, why substance beats slogans, how trust-based giving practices apply to corporate funders, and what to watch as reporting rules tighten.

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# TRUST HAS MOVED TO THE WORKPLACE

The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer surveyed nearly 34,000 people in 28 countries in late 2025. Business was trusted by 64 percent, ahead of government at 53 percent, and Edelman calls business "the only institution seen as both ethical and competent." Trust rises the closer it gets to home: 78 percent of employees trust their own employer, and 66 percent trust their own CEO.<sup>1</sup> NGOs stood at 58 percent and were the only institution measured whose trust did not rise from the year before.<sup>4</sup>

## TRUST IS HIGHEST CLOSE TO HOME

Share who trust each institution, 2026, 28 countries



Figure 1. Bars drawn to a 0 to 100 percent scale. "My employer" reflects employees' answers. Source: Edelman, 2026 Trust Barometer.<sup>1,4</sup>

The same survey describes a society turning inward. Seven in 10 respondents said they were unwilling or hesitant to trust someone with different values or backgrounds, and the trust gap between high-income and low-income respondents reached 15 points, up from 6 in 2012. Respondents endorsed CEOs who consult people with different values and backgrounds when making decisions (75 percent) and who engage constructively with employees who criticize the

company (74 percent).<sup>1</sup> As reported by Ragan, 75 percent said CEOs are obligated to help bridge trust divides, but just 44 percent said CEOs do it well.<sup>5</sup>

In the United States, companies start behind the nonprofits they fund. In Independent Sector's 2026 polling of 3,000 adults, 56 percent reported high trust in nonprofits, and nonprofits outscored corporations on three basic tests of integrity. Only 29 percent reported high trust in philanthropic organizations, down 4 points in a year.<sup>6</sup>

WHERE COMPANIES TRAIL NONPROFITS

Share of U.S. adults who trust each type of organization on each measure, 2026

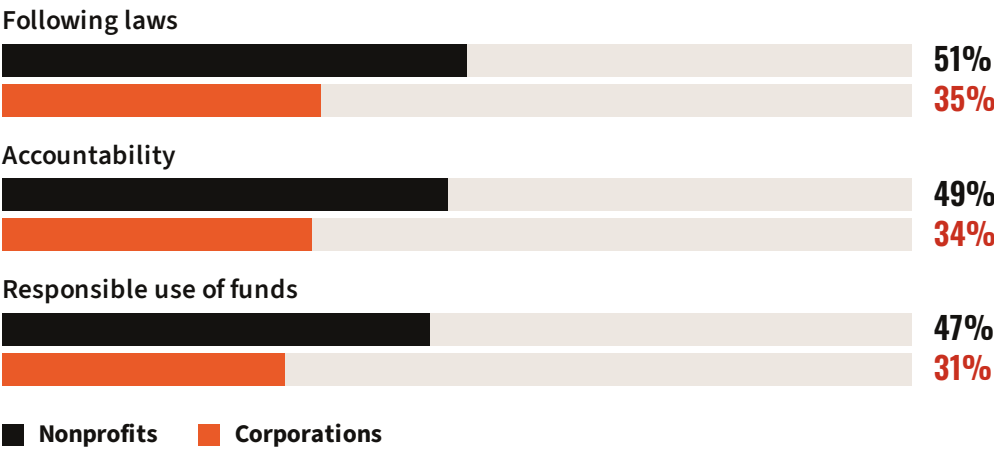


Figure 2. Bars drawn to a 0 to 100 percent scale. Source: Independent Sector, 2026 trust polling, fielded by Edelman Data & Intelligence.<sup>6</sup>

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU** Your employees are your most trusting audience and your most believable messengers. The wider public is warier of companies than of the nonprofits you fund, so a strong partner lends your programs credibility, and a partner's bad experience with you can cost you some.

# BUILD TRUST BEFORE YOU NEED IT

In August 2019, 181 CEOs signed the Business Roundtable's Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation, committing to lead their companies for the benefit of all stakeholders. The statement puts it plainly: "Each of our stakeholders is essential."<sup>7</sup> A signed commitment is the easy part. Trust grows when employees, communities, and investors see the commitment kept, year after year, including in hard years.

## FROM THE RESEARCH

Lins, Servaes, and Tamayo, Journal of Finance, 2017. Comparison of firms' stock returns and operating results during the 2008 to 2009 financial crisis, using CSR intensity as a measure of social capital.<sup>8</sup>

"During the 2008-2009 financial crisis, firms with high social capital, measured as corporate social responsibility (CSR) intensity, had stock returns that were four to seven percentage points higher than firms with low social capital." High-CSR firms also showed higher profitability, growth, and sales per employee, and raised more debt.

**Why it matters.** Trust behaves like insurance. It pays out when conditions are worst, and you cannot buy it in the moment you need it. Bring this finding to your CFO.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU** Treat stakeholder trust as a balance you build over years. The time to add to it is before the restructuring, the site closure, or the public controversy.

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*Before funders invest in ideas, they invest in confidence.*

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# WALK THE TALK

Greenwashing means making environmental claims that run ahead of what a company actually does. Researchers have warned about it for years, and the evidence suggests that talk without action carries a cost.

## TALK

Walker and Wan, Journal of Business Ethics, 2012. Empirical study of more than 100 Canadian firms in polluting industries.<sup>9</sup>

Symbolic actions, which the authors call "green talk," were negatively related to financial performance. Substantive actions, or "green walk," neither harmed nor helped firms financially.

One industry group in one country.

## CONFIDENCE

Delmas and Burbano, California Management Review, 2011. Conceptual paper on why firms greenwash.<sup>10</sup>

The authors warn that "the skyrocketing incidence of greenwashing can have profound negative effects on consumer and investor confidence in environmentally friendly firms and products."

A framework, not a measured effect.

Many companies have responded by going quiet, a practice called greenhushing. South Pole surveyed more than 1,400 companies in 12 countries and found that most companies in 9 of 14 major sectors were decreasing their climate communications. Eighty-one percent said communicating about net zero is good for their bottom line, yet 44 percent found it harder than before, and about 58 percent of those planned to cut external messaging. South Pole published the survey in January 2024, so treat it as a dated signal.<sup>2</sup>

The same pattern shows up in equity and community work. In ACCP's 2026 CSR Insights Report, 58 percent of corporate social impact teams said they are reframing how they talk about their work.<sup>11</sup> The Conference Board found that 53 percent of S&P 100 companies adjusted their DEI messaging in 2025 filings, use of the acronym "DEI" fell 68 percent, and 21 percent cut or removed DEI metrics and targets. Its researchers added: "This shift in public disclosure doesn't signal companies are abandoning DEI."<sup>12</sup> The legal environment has shifted as well. Executive Order 14173, signed in January 2025, requires federal contract counterparties to certify that they do not operate DEI programs that violate applicable federal anti-discrimination laws.<sup>13</sup>

THE SAY AND DO MATRIX

Where your claims sit relative to your action

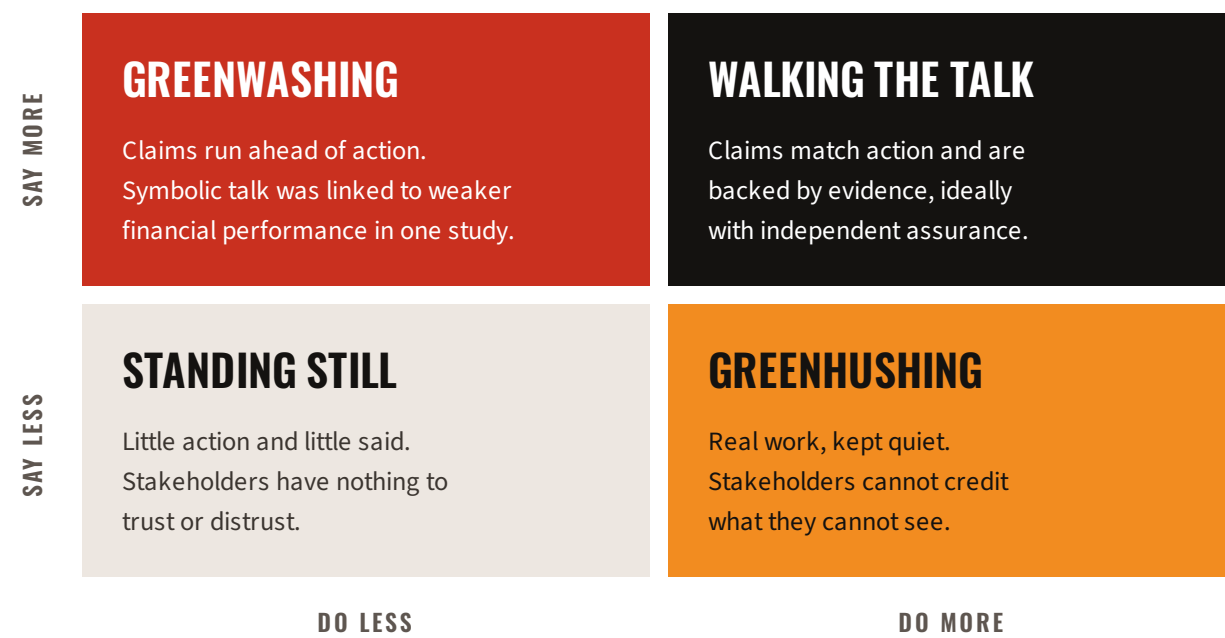


Figure 3. A Collaboration for Good framework, drawing on Walker and Wan and on South Pole's greenhushing research.<sup>9,2</sup>

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU** Silence carries its own risk, because stakeholders cannot trust work they cannot see. Say less if you need to, but say what you can prove, and keep the evidence ready for your auditors, your employees, and your partners.

# YOUR EMPLOYEES SEE IT FIRST

Employees are the one audience that sees both the public claim and the daily reality. That makes them the toughest judges of whether a company walks its talk, and the most credible witnesses when it does. As reported by Ragan, 81 percent of Edelman's 2026 respondents said their employer is responsible for bridging divides.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-three percent expect their CEO to lead efforts to broker trust.<sup>1</sup>

## RETENTION

Bode, Singh, and Rogan, Organization Science, 2015. Study of about 10,000 employees at a global consulting firm.<sup>14</sup>

Employees who took part in a company initiative with social impact goals were more likely to stay with the firm.

One firm, one industry.

## RECRUITING

Burbano, Organization Science, 2016. Randomized field experiments in online labor marketplaces.<sup>15</sup>

In the second study, workers submitted "44% lower wage bids for the same job after learning about the employer's social responsibility." In the first, the effect was concentrated among top performers.

Short-term online gig work.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU** Volunteer, giving, and inclusion programs are trust programs. They give employees firsthand proof that the company means what it says. When the sustainability report and the break room tell different stories, employees notice before anyone else does.

# GIVE THE WAY YOU WANT TO BE TRUSTED

Your giving program is a trust relationship too, and your grantees judge it the way employees judge the company. A growing number of funders practice trust-based philanthropy. The Trust-Based Philanthropy Project lists six practices, and it notes that doing the homework "moves the onus to grantmakers."<sup>16</sup> Corporate programs answer to business goals, legal review, and brand risk, so not every practice translates one for one. Most can be adapted.

| TRUST-BASED PRACTICE                  | WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE IN A CORPORATE PROGRAM                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Give multi-year, unrestricted funding | Commit to core partners for more than one budget cycle, and fund general operations where your legal and tax teams agree. |
| Do the homework                       | Your team researches a partner before asking it to apply, instead of making the partner prove fit from scratch.           |
| Simplify and streamline paperwork     | Size applications and reports to the grant, and accept reports partners already prepare for other funders.                |
| Be transparent and responsive         | Tell partners early about budget changes, decision timelines, and shifts in focus areas.                                  |
| Solicit and act on feedback           | Survey partners anonymously each year and report back what you changed.                                                   |
| Offer support beyond the check        | Skills-based volunteers, introductions, and in-kind help that partners actually ask for.                                  |

Earlier CEP research, drawing on responses from nearly 20,000 grantees of 86 foundations, found understanding and transparency to be the two most powerful predictors of a strong funder and grantee relationship.<sup>17</sup> A more recent CEP study suggests foundations may overestimate the first. It asked foundation leaders and nonprofit leaders the same question.

# DO FUNDERS UNDERSTAND GRANTEES' CHALLENGES?

Share who say foundations have been effective in understanding the challenges grantees face

## Foundation leaders



## Nonprofit leaders



Figure 4. A 43-point gap between how foundation leaders and nonprofit leaders see it. Surveys fielded August and September 2025. The study covers foundations, and corporate funders may see a similar blind spot. Source: Center for Effective Philanthropy, A Sector in Crisis, 2026.<sup>18</sup>

Foundations are already moving. In a CEP survey fielded in August and September 2025, 42 percent of foundations reported making more unrestricted grants than before 2025, and 28 percent reported making more multiyear grants.<sup>19</sup> Comparable data for corporate funders has not been published.

### FROM THE RESEARCH

Smith Arrillaga, Buteau, Im, and Grundhoefer, Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2025. Three-year study: surveys of 813 nonprofit leaders plus Form 990 analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Among recipients of MacKenzie Scott's large, unrestricted gifts, nearly 90 percent of leaders said the grant moderately or significantly strengthened their long-term financial sustainability. Two years after the grant, recipients held a median of twice as many months of operating expenses in cash reserves as comparable nonprofits.

**Why it matters.** Flexible money appears to build real resilience in the organizations you depend on. These were very large gifts, the results are largely self-reported, and the study is not peer reviewed, so expect smaller effects from ordinary corporate grants.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU** Multi-year, lighter-touch funding gives partners room to plan and gives you a longer runway to show results. Bring that case to your CFO before the next budget cycle, alongside the reporting you plan to drop.

## FOR YOUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Your nonprofit, community foundation, and small business partners carry your reputation into places your company may never reach directly. They also see your program from the other side of the table. What they need most from you is predictability: clear timelines, early notice of changes, a named contact, flexible dollars where you can offer them, and reporting sized to the grant.

Partners can help themselves be ready for a trust-based relationship, too. Share these points with them.

- **Nurture current funders.** In 2023, 70 percent of private foundation funding to an organization came from funders that had given to it before.<sup>21</sup>
- **Invite people to see the work.** Among Americans who engaged directly with a nonprofit in the past year, 60 percent reported higher trust afterward.<sup>6</sup>
- **Be open about AI.** Seventy-six percent of Americans agree nonprofits should fully disclose when and how they use AI, and 37 percent say AI use would make them less likely to trust a nonprofit.<sup>6</sup>
- **Turn trust into shared purpose.** Research on U.K. donors found that trust works through commitment: "It is concluded that commitment plays a mediating role."<sup>22</sup> Show funders where the work is going and the role they play in it.

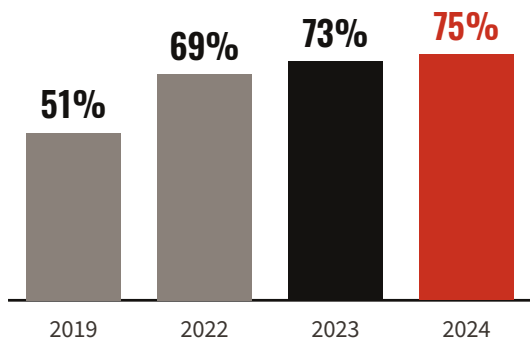
## WHAT TO WATCH NEXT

Trust is increasingly tied to proof. Assurance, an independent check of sustainability disclosures, keeps climbing. Several milestones arrive over the next few years, mostly outside the United States: the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and its due diligence directive (CSDDD), and California's SB 253, which adds Scope 3 reporting, meaning emissions across a company's value chain. At the federal level in the U.S., the SEC proposed rescinding its climate disclosure rules on May 29, 2026, and as of September 2026 the rescission was still a proposal.<sup>23</sup>

### MORE ASSURANCE, AND MORE DEADLINES AHEAD

Share of companies studied with assurance on sustainability disclosures, and scheduled milestones

#### COMPANIES WITH ASSURANCE



#### MILESTONES AHEAD

- **DEC 15, 2026**  
ISSA 5000 assurance standard applies to periods starting on or after this date
- **MAR 19, 2027**  
EU deadline to write amended CSRD reporting rules into national law
- **FROM 2027**  
California SB 253: Scope 3 emissions reporting for companies over \$1B revenue
- **JUL 26, 2029**  
EU due diligence directive (CSDDD) compliance date for the largest firms

Figure 5. Left: IFAC and AICPA & CIMA, State of Play, about 1,400 companies for 2024, with earlier years from the prior edition; years shown are those reported.<sup>3,24</sup> Right: IAASB,<sup>25</sup> SB 253 as reported by Morgan Lewis,<sup>26</sup> EU dates as reported by Covington.<sup>27</sup> Scheduled dates can change.



#### ASSURANCE

### 75% and rising

Assurance on sustainability disclosures rose from 73 percent of companies studied in 2023 to 75 percent in 2024, and 97 percent disclosed some sustainability information.<sup>3</sup>



#### FLEXIBLE FUNDING

### More unrestricted grants

42 percent of foundations report making more unrestricted grants than before 2025, and 28 percent more multiyear grants. Corporate data is not yet available.<sup>19</sup>



## PUBLIC MESSAGING

### Quieter

Most companies in 9 of 14 sectors were cutting climate communications (survey published 2024), and 58 percent of CSR teams are reframing how they describe their work.<sup>2,11</sup>



## TRUST IN PHILANTHROPY

### Down 4 points

Only 29 percent of Americans report high trust in philanthropic organizations, while trust in nonprofits holds at 56 percent.<sup>6</sup>

## COLLABORATION FOR GOOD OUTLOOK

Over the next few years, trust in companies seems likely to depend more on proof than on promises. As assurance becomes the norm and new assurance and reporting rules take effect abroad, claims that cannot be backed up may turn into a bigger liability, while quiet but well-documented work may be easier to defend. U.S. federal rules remain unsettled as of September 2026, so plan for more than one outcome. With employers now the most trusted institution and public trust in philanthropy slipping, your most credible voices may be your own employees and your community partners. Companies that pair multi-year, flexible commitments with honest, evidence-based reporting look best placed to keep that trust through budget pressure and political change.

Our analysis, based on the sources cited in this section. Not a prediction from any single source.

## TALK IT THROUGH

1. If your CFO asked what employees and communities think of the company, what evidence could you show?
2. Which of your public claims could you back up today with assured or auditable data?
3. Where has your team gone quiet, and can stakeholders still see the work?
4. Which partners have you funded for three years or more, and what would change if those commitments were multi-year on paper?
5. How many hours does your application and report take a partner, compared with the size of the grant?
6. When did you last ask partners for anonymous feedback, and what did you change because of it?

## START THIS WEEK

- ☐ List every public sustainability, equity, and community claim your company makes, with the evidence behind each.
- ☐ Ask your reporting or audit team which figures are assured, and flag the ones that are not.
- ☐ Mark each grant in your portfolio as single-year or multi-year, restricted or unrestricted.
- ☐ Drop one reporting requirement you never use to make a decision.
- ☐ Send partners a short anonymous survey on how your program works for them.
- ☐ Bring the crisis-period research in Section 03 to your CFO as part of your business case.
- ☐ Invite a group of employees to see a partner's work firsthand this quarter.

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*Before funders invest in ideas, they invest in confidence.  
Confidence is built long before the application.*

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Tyler J. Butler is the founder and CEO of Collaboration for Good, a social impact consultancy she founded in 2016. She has led corporate social responsibility and community investment at global technology companies, including a Fortune 500 company and the world's largest domain registrar. She is a certified GRI practitioner and has served on the Arizona Governor's Commission on Service and Volunteerism since 2015. Collaboration for Good led the development of the Arizona Sustainability Navigator, a statewide sustainability resource for small businesses, nonprofits, and government, built with contributions from public, philanthropic, and community partners.

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