

What the Data Tells Us: A Different Perspective on Trust

By Kevin Scheid

How would you rate the level of trust between you and your staff? The Best Christian Workplaces Institute survey directly asks staff in Christian organizations about the level of trust in their organization. Specifically, the survey asks employees to rate the degree to which they agree with the statement: "There is a high level of trust at my organization between senior leadership and employees." Employees are asked to respond according to a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree). In total, 16,680 employees in Christian organizations were asked this question between 2007 and 2008. The mean score for those participants was 3.54, placing trust third from the bottom of the 56 questions.

Secondly, data for trust shows the highest variation and the flattest distribution of any of the 56 questions. This variation and distribution shows a lack of agreement among the 16,680 employees regarding the level of trust in their organization. This lack of agreement is significant and indicates there may be numerous factors that influence the level of trust in an organization. This theory is supported by a very high correlation between trust and employee commitment.

What Impacts Trust? We can determine factors that might have a causal relationship with trust by determining which of the 56 questions most closely correlate with our trust question. The three questions with the highest correlation to trust support qualitative research that indicate in order to have trust, an organization must have:

- 1) Integrity
- 2) Care and compassion for people
- 3) Management competence.

These three factors create a three-legged stool, which supports trust. If any one of the three factors is low, it will decrease trust. Thus, organizational trust is subject to a triple jeopardy. If management is perceived as low on integrity, but high in caring and high in management competence, then trust is low. If senior leadership is perceived to have high integrity and high compassion, but low management competence, then trust is low. All three areas need to be high in order for trust to be high.

Questions Highly Correlated To Trust	Mean Score
My organization's leaders behave with fairness and integrity.	4.02
My organization's leaders demonstrate compassion for people at all levels.	3.96
My organization is well managed.	3.76

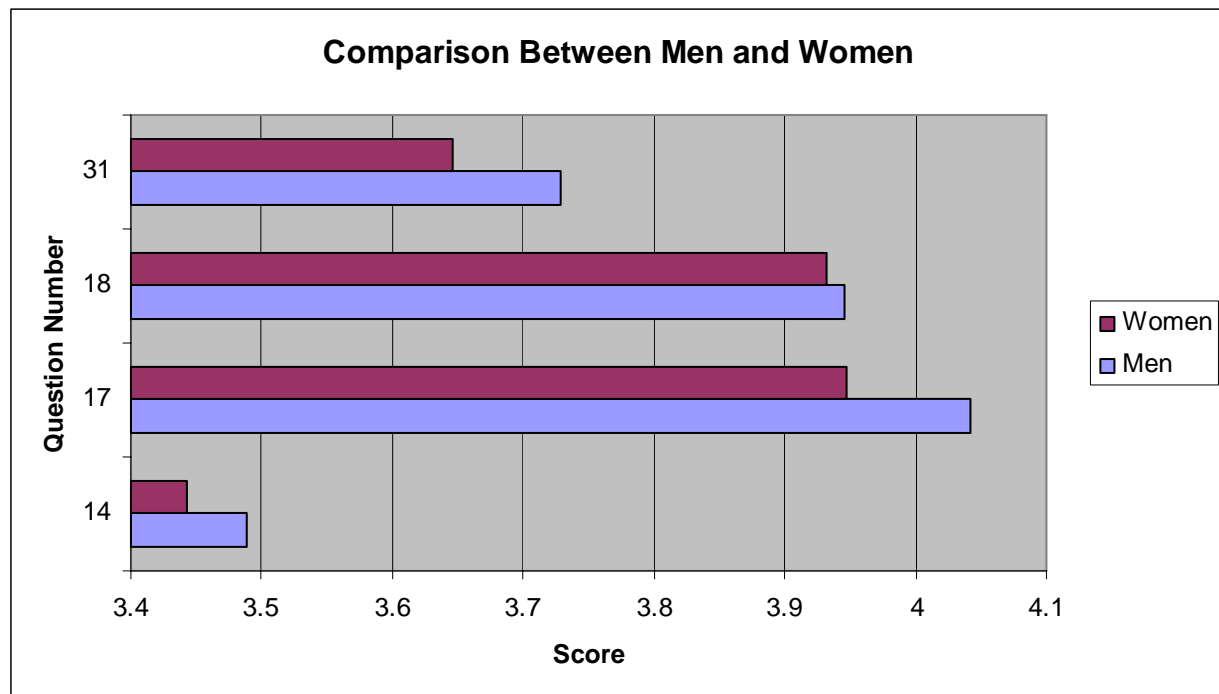
The good news is fairness and integrity as well as compassion are highly rated in Christian organizations. The bad news is the management competence score is low. This seems to indicate that in general Christian organizations may improve their employee trust by concentrating on improving management. However, let us drill down into the data to see what the demographic information might tell us. With our robust sample of 16,680 employees we are confident the findings are representative of Christian organizations. We are simply taking the



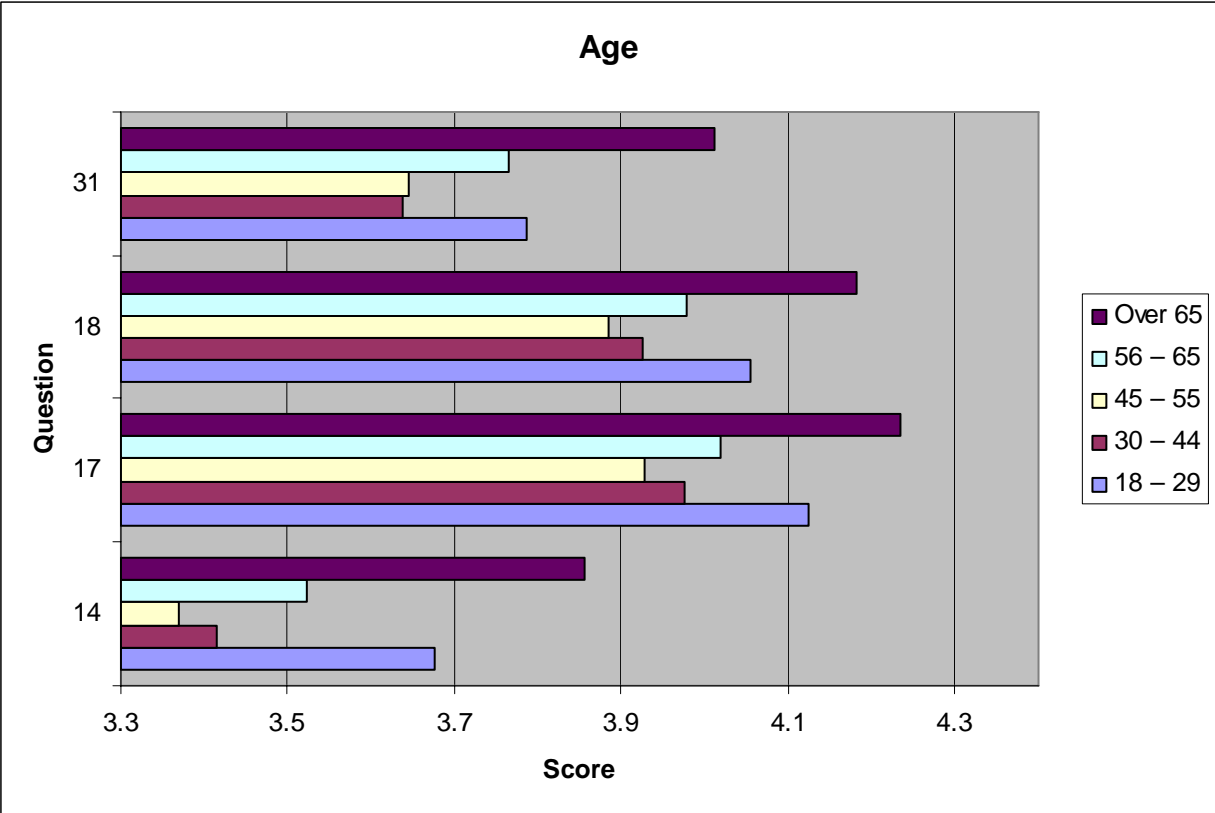
data means to determine the differences. The following table identifies the survey questions impacting trust.

Core BCWI Trust Questions
31. My organization is well managed.
18. My organization's leaders demonstrate compassion for people at all levels.
17. My organization's leaders behave with fairness and integrity.
14. There is a high level of trust at my organization between senior leadership and employees.

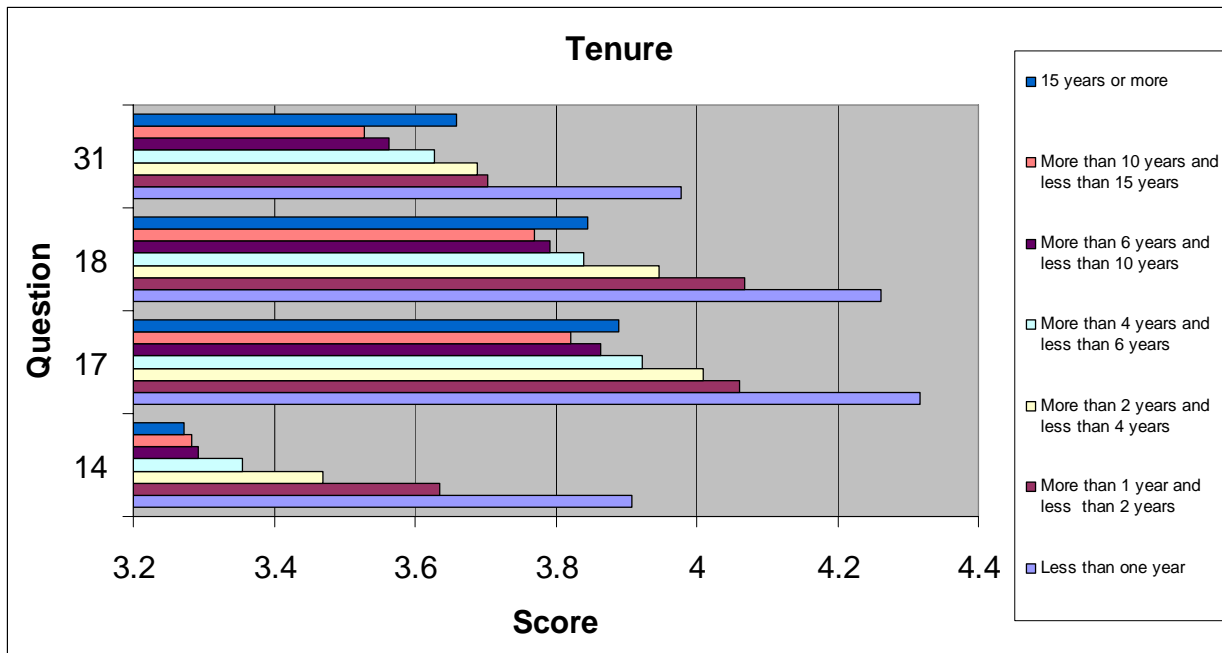
1. **Men Experience Higher Levels of Trust At Work.** Comparing the responses of men and women on these four questions, we can see that women's scores are lower on all four of the questions. However, the question relating to compassion only has a difference of 0.01, directing our attention to the other two factors that we have identified as affecting trust: fairness and integrity; and management competence. Of these two areas, management competence is again significantly lower than fairness and integrity for both men and women and should thus be the first area of attention in working towards improving trust.



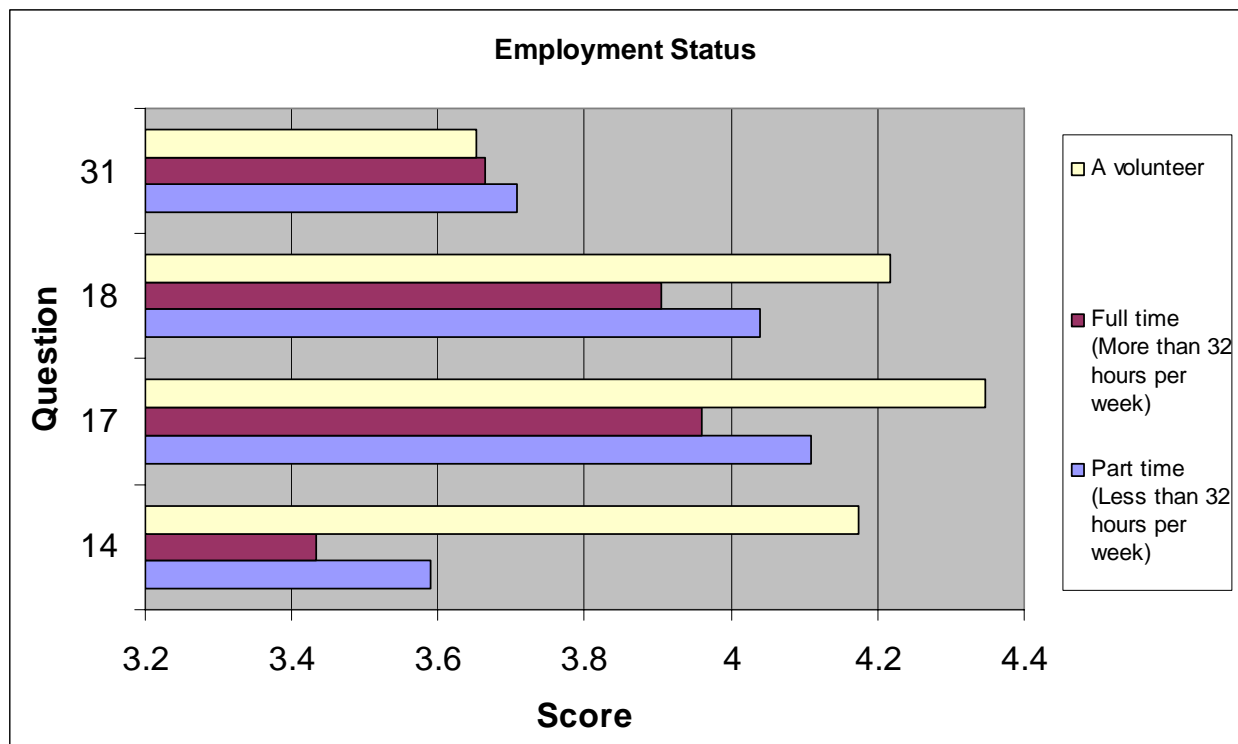
2. Does Middle Age Impact the Outlook on Trust? Looking at responses to the four questions by age group shows an interesting trend. Younger people start out at a relatively higher level of trust and trust levels fall with maturity. The trend bottoms at 45-55 and ends up at the highest level of trust for those 65 years and older. This trend is reflective of the aggregate scores over the years in most organizations. Two trends could be at play here. First, people lose trust as they grow in experience. As people age, they become more skeptical or disillusioned. The second trend of increasing trust satisfaction and commitment could be a reflection of employees who are the most unhappy eventually leaving, while those who are thoroughly engaged work beyond the age for retirement.



3. Trust Levels Deteriorate With Service. Tenure data shows an interesting and surprising pattern. It appears the longer someone works for an organization the lower their perception of trust in senior leadership. This is despite the probable trend that more people with higher tenure are more likely to be in senior leadership. Decreased trust with tenure is a disturbing trend and has two possible inferences. Loss of trust is cumulative and as disappointments accumulate through the years, trust is decreased. There is some support for this inference in the literature, as people who have been laid off in one organization have a more difficult time committing to a new organization. A second possible inference from this data is that the more familiar people are with an organization, the less they trust the people running it.



4. Full Time Staff Reflect Lower Levels of Trust. The results of survey responses based on employment status seem to support the second inference above: the more people become familiar with an organization, the less they trust senior leadership. We can see from the data that volunteers have the highest level of trust, believe management is fair and have integrity and believe management is compassionate. However, they do not rate management effectiveness as high. Senior leadership attention to volunteers is possibly an opportunity for improvement in Christian organizations. People working part time are the second highest overall in the trust indices; however, we do not know the make-up of the part time people. If they are all young with little tenure then these factors could easily confound the relationships.



Summary. The employee satisfaction survey reveals some striking findings. The more exposure staff has had to leadership, be it due to age, tenure, or work status, the more they, on a whole, become cynical towards leadership. Yet another proof that senior leadership is the primary place to focus on in regards to building trust levels in Christian organizations and churches is that of the three elements most strongly correlated to trust in the survey, management has by far the lowest score. All-in-all, any Christian leader would do well to closely examine the level of management competence at his organization. And if lacking, take action to equip the leadership with management skills! But they should also be encouraged that staff in general view their leadership as having high character quality – two legs of the stool that supports trust.