What Impact Does Corporate Culture and Cross Cultural Communication Have on Corporate Trust?

This investigation was undertaken to answer the question, “What impact does corporate culture and cross cultural communication have on corporate trust?” Scholarly and empirical literature about each variable was reviewed. Following the literature review, an analysis of the relationships between the variables was made using both Critical Theory and Feminist Theory. Briefly, each theory determined, as a part of answering the question, that the link between the variables is an issue of power and control. Future research questions are suggested.

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With the concept of a global village becoming more reality than theory, diversity in the American work force is now the rule rather than the exception. With diversity come communication differences and myriad organizational challenges. To that end, I have explored the relationship between corporate culture, cross-cultural communication, and corporate trust. Using critical theories, I argue that power and control distort messages, negatively impacting the credibility of male managerial communication with female workers, thus impeding the development of trust. As a result of my research, I have enhanced my understanding of organizational life in the 21st century. This knowledge will enable me to develop more meaningful communication with my clients as I pursue a career in rehabilitation counseling.

Lou Davidson Tillson, an associate professor in the Department of Organizational Communication, teaches the department’s Senior Seminar. In this class students are required to develop a paper that addresses an original research question. “It has been a wonderful experience for me to watch my students move from accepting information at face value to questioning, evaluating and creating scholarship. When the light bulb switches on for them, it becomes a wonderful “a-ha” moment for student and professor alike! For me, the research by Michael Burkeen and Gentzy Franz is evidence that MSU students are ‘committing acts of scholarship!’”
The American dream remains an important ideal to many: the house with the picket fence, two or three children, an attentive spouse, and the secure and rewarding job. It is Heaven. However, most people’s lives contrast from this illusion of perfection. All other aspects of the dream aside, attainment of the “secure and rewarding job” is a blessing.

The scandals of Enron, Adelphia, Tyco, WorldComm, and other large corporations shook the public’s trust in “Big Business” and corporate messages. Former employees of these organizations have lost trust. From this loss of trust, they have learned a deep and painful lesson that will haunt them throughout their careers.

As with interpersonal relationships, if trust becomes broken, the business relationship will deteriorate. This statement epitomizes the feelings about the corporation to which these ill-treated employees still belong or belonged. Without trust, an entire infrastructure collapse lingers (O’Hair, Friedrich and Dixon, 2002). Moreover, another vital component of corporate trust includes cultural perceptions of organizational behavior. Those behaviors that vastly differ cross culturally place strains on potential trusting relationships. The significance of these cross cultural relationships becomes greater daily due to the globalization of the corporate world.

Yet, many factors leave influences on the creation, maintenance, and/or breakdown of trusting attitudes. The most important factor of corporate trust, as indicated by Gilbert and Tang (1998), is communication. The researchers suggest that unmediated exchanged messages will procure trusting attitudes. However, other influences on corporate trust will be discussed in this paper. Through an analysis of the research, an answer to the following question will result: What impact do corporate culture and cross cultural communication have on corporate trust?

This research question has vast implications in the field of organizational communication. First, many researchers in the early stages of the discipline concerned themselves with employees’ attitudes toward and interactions with their work environment. This investigation seeks to better comprehend corporate culture and cross cultural communication aspects that affect the communicatively developed phenomenon of trust.

Organizational communication scholars attempt to understand how various conditions, dimensions, necessities, purposes, directions and outcomes of the messages sent throughout an organization form the core of that organization. Moreover, the culture of the organization is its heart and soul. Judgments of the rewards and punishment for all organizational behavior rely on the existence of corporate culture; the policies, regulations, situational examples, and, most importantly, directions as to how to communicate the preceding in the most organizationally effective manner will appear here.

As organizational influences expand into varying cultural arenas, an effective blending of culturally communicative interactions will need to occur in order to reach the desired outcomes. Someone new to the United States will be unfamiliar with various communication customs, which could lead to conflict. An understanding and supportive tone will aid in the breaking down of such obstacles.

As stated previously, Gilbert and Tang (1998) express the importance of communication when fostering trust. Viewing this phenomenon in a circular fashion, trust can foster communication. How communication deviations occur is dependent on the level of the worker with whom an individual is speaking: usually, people within the same corporate level will have the most open communication style because the trust exists there to bring about that communication.

In this paper, an investigation of the research variables occurred through a brief review of the literature on each topic. Then, via the utilization of Critical Theory and Feminist Theory, an analysis of corporate culture and cross cultural communication and each variable’s association with corporate trust lead to an answer to the research question. In short, communication within an organization forms the bonds that develop trust, and the culture or climate of the organization and the culturally dependent variety of message
styles from outside the organization shapes the idea components of the communication. Finally, a summary of the discussion and suggestions for future empirical study end the report.

Literature Review

The main focus of this investigation aims to determine what effect corporate culture and cross cultural communication have on the formation and maintenance of corporate trust. Before this evaluation can occur, the variables themselves must be examined. To answer the research question effectively, a brief discussion of corporate culture, cross cultural communication, and corporate trust will take place.

Corporate Culture

Eisenberg and Goodall (1997) said that corporate culture is “something that an organization possesses, manages, and exploits to enhance productivity” (p. 138). Every corporation has its own unique culture. Corporately speaking, culture signifies the manner in which organizational members think, behave and adapt with regards to their company.

Historically, there was no awareness of the creation of corporate identity through corporate culture. Instead, organizations that ran in a programmed fashion existed; each person had a specific job with specific requirements, and that position was all he or she was meant to be, organizationally speaking (Miller, 1999). Nevertheless, the corporate evolutionary process took place, and now the organization’s culture or “the perceived sum of the entire organization, its objectives and plans ... the company’s products, services, management, communication activities, and actions around the world” (Marken, 1990, as cited in Treadwell and Harrison, 1994, p. 65) is what the employees and the outside public view as the organization itself.

Ashkanasy, Wilderom, and Peterson (2000), when editing the book Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate, divided the research and discussion of the topic into five areas: 1) values, 2) symbols, 3) actions, 4) cognitions, emotions, and meanings, and 5) the individual in the culture. The convergence of these items forms the groundwork in which organizational members can generate the desired thought and behavioral patterns needed to institute a corporate culture. More than the five items are needed to create the culture; however, they are the most significant items required.

A good example of comparing values and culture can be found in study by Geresh (2003). In this investigation, Geresh examined the relationship between organizational culture and fraudulent financial reporting or “cooking the books,” as President Bush would say. One of the study’s findings was that corporate officials who in the past had participated in unlawful organizational transgressions were significantly more likely to report misleading economic outcomes. Such was the case with WorldComm and Enron. Since a history of such action has taken place, these organizational officials must place value on cheating the government, which reflects poorly on their corporate culture.

Another area of study in corporate culture is that of cognitions, emotions and meanings; Faules and Drecksel’s (1991) investigation involved this corporate cultural area. The researchers conducted two studies for one report; the first study had four project teams, differing in organizational geography and vocation, answering questions about various organizationally frequent occurrences. The researchers wanted to test if occupation was a factor in cognitive judgments of business scenarios. They found significant differences between the four occupational groups in their perceptions of the study scenarios.

However, the second portion of the Faules and Drecksel (1991) study had greater implications on corporate culture. The participants for the second study were scientific personnel from two different organizations: same vocation, different location. The subjects in this study read the same scenarios as the first set of participants.

The discoveries from the second study were that the two groups contrasted significantly in certain respects; specifically, in the way they described work-related acts. These subjects had the same vocation but, as a whole, each group specified their occupational modus operandi in a significantly contrary manner. Most likely, the organizational culture from which these scientists belonged heavily influenced the work-justification communication (Faules and Drecksel).

More components than the previously stated five items described by Ashkanasy et al. (2000) go into building corporate culture. Essentially, awareness of corporate culture demonstrates the necessity to set up an organizationally productive attitudinal collective. O’Hair et al. (2002) pinpoint a would-be mantra for any effective corporate retreat for the enhancement of
organizational cohesiveness and work product: “Shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense making” (p. 21). From an investigation of many corporations, one would discover a shared sense of understanding, place, work, worth and being.

Eisenberg and Goodall (1997) listed Disney, McDonald’s, PepsiCo, and Microsoft as illustrations of strong or well-defined corporate cultures. Whether being a large corporation, such as Wal-Mart or Southwest Airlines, or a smaller one, such as a local insurance agency or restaurant, having a strong culture significantly helps in the success and growth of that corporation. These organizations seem to have a stronger sense of foundation than their competitors.

Corporate culture can surface in many forms, from monthly garden parties to stories of the heroic corporate founder. Corporations depend on their cultural background to determine success. As mentioned previously, the culture is the heart and soul of the organization. Often, the products and services offered by a corporation are a representation of the culture of the organization. One item to watch is how the corporate culture bleeds its ideas and values into the overall cultural fabric, whether it is exemplary values – loyalty, honor and leadership – or corrupt values – greed. This bleeding of corporate culture can create significant changes in the societal cultures such as the Japanese culture, the American culture, or the interaction between the two.

Cross Cultural Communication

Jandt (1995) defined cross cultural communication as “comparing phenomena in diverse cultures” (p. 30). He gave the illustration of associating the roles of women in different cultures to describe this variable. What happens with cross cultural communication is that a discussion of certain concepts takes place, but varying cultural perspectives are argued about that concept.

In this case, organizational communication and business itself would be the phenomena. As is true with most items, Western and Eastern cultures differ in how their citizens conduct business. Before a discussion of the business practices commences, a brief introduction into the basic tenets of cross cultural communication is necessary.

At the broadest level, the cultural landscape is divided into collectivistic cultures and individualistic societies. According to Ting-Toomey (1999):

Basically, individualism refers to the broad value tendencies of a culture in emphasizing the importance of individual identity over group identity, individual rights over group rights, and individual needs over group needs … In contrast, collectivism refers to the broad value tendencies of a culture in emphasizing the importance of the “we” identity over the “I” identity, group rights over individual rights, and in-group oriented needs over individual wants and desires. (p. 67)

An empirical instance of this interaction is accessible in reading Tang, Kim, and O’Donal’s (2000) study where a comparison between Japanese and American autoworkers was conducted. In this examination, the subjects completed questionnaires concerning the four factors of traditional Japanese philosophy of management: family orientation and loyalty, open communication, team approach and manager knowledge. Any possible confounds lessened as a result of the sample’s comparable job description, sex ratio, income-ratio and educational background.

It should come as no surprise that the Japanese autoworkers outscored the Americans (Tang et al., 2000). The Japanese participants were more family oriented and loyal, were more open with communication, had better team approach, and possessed greater management knowledge; the collectivistic cultural attitude at play. Thus, the tendencies must have developed via cultural learning.

Hirokawa (1987) gave three reasons for the higher degree of open communication for Japanese workers. First, Japanese employees express great anxiety as to how the corporation is performing. Second, organizational officials commit to keeping positive vocational energy flowing throughout the organization and each work team. Finally, less concern over losing one’s employment is present because of Japan’s employment system.

A similar instance of cross cultural differences is seen in the research of Smith and Wang (1997). The investigators conducted a study where they surveyed mid-level Chinese business leaders about their management of a joint venture hotel project that involved workers from diverse cultures. Smith and Wang found that management problems were most frequent and varied when the leaders supervised Western workers. This study demonstrated how cross cultural communication could affect the work environment. In addition, the idea of compromise was discussed.
Often, when working with people whose business and cultural ideas are so different, the use of compromise strategies aids in the finding of middle-ground. In Smith and Wang’s study, the Chinese leaders possessed specific managerial perceptions. Adjustment of these perceptions was difficult. The research corroborated this by statistically exhibiting that few managerially related problems existed between Chinese leaders and Taiwanese workers – the cultural beliefs of the two societies were similar.

With cross cultural communication research, the most examined item is the difference between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures. Consistently, the countries of comparison are the U.S. and Japan. The Tang et al. (2000) study is a perfect example.

With the globalization of industry, the importance of cross cultural communication competence is high. Each culture has a unique way of completing the same task. The butting of heads over how to accomplish a goal may lead to erroneous competency judgments. Being culturally aware of possible differences of opinion will help relieve initial tension, decrease the chance of conflict, and start the process of establishing trust in the corporation.

**Corporate Trust**

As indicated by Gilbert and Tang (1998), corporate or organizational trust is a “feeling of confidence and support in an employer; it is the belief that an employer will be straightforward and will follow through on commitments” (¶ 5). This trust is comparable to the Peanuts© character Linus and his blanket. Trust brings a sense of security and warmth. This is similar to interpersonal relationships: the more trusting the relationship, the more relaxed the individuals feel.

Much research has been conducted on trust in organizations. Furthermore, a bulk of the research came before the knowledge of the Enron, WorldComm, Adelphia, and Tyco corruption scandals. One researcher, Shockley-Zalabak (2000), carried out an examination in which she was searching for universals when it came to corporate trust. What she found was that if the presence of certain phenomena existed within the confines of an organization, then the likelihood for a trusting organization would be high (Shockley-Zalabak). She called these elements “drivers.” The five universal drivers were concern, openness and honesty, identification, reliability and competence.

Effective communication at the organizational level has at its essence trust (Gilbert and Tang, 1998). In fact, a portion of the O’Hair et al. (2002) *Strategic Communication* textbook chapter “Leadership and Management Skills” involved a discussion of trust. The authors described trust as the most crucial characteristic that a leader must have. In addition, they warned future leaders that acquiring this trust would not be easy.

Even at the employee level, trust becomes an indispensable tool in securing entry into the coveted “inner loop” (Nishishiba and Ritchie, 2000). The authors wanted to compare organizational trustworthiness between industrialists in Japan and the United States. Nishishiba and Ritchie noticed that what constituted trust in the U.S. and Japan differed considerably. Corporate workers in Japan tended to place their trust in people who were relationally competent or worked well with other people. As for the U.S. workers, they preferred to work with and trust individuals who possessed task competence or those who could handle the responsibilities of the work.

The vast majority of research focuses on intra-organizational corporate trust. Yet, new inquiries have looked at the development and maintenance of trust in corporate global virtual teams: these are teams that consist of workers from varying geographic areas who are working on the same project but doing so via virtual or electronic resources. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) stated in their article that many communication scholars believe trust cannot develop without close, interpersonal, physical contact. One possible motive for studying global virtual teams could be to prove that the interpersonal necessity of trust statement is false.

Still, an intriguing inquiry arises when thinking of global virtual teams. This involves the construction of trust within virtual teams and the methods used to establish trust. Jarvenpaa and Leidner’s 1998 study attempted to answer the queries.

The study consisted of global virtual work teams. To explore the dimensions between communication and trust, one portion of the participants was able to have actual interpersonal contact with their team members before the commencement of the work project while the other subjects had little or no contact before their work started. By the end of the investigation, four types of groups had emerged: high trust beginners – high trust finishers, high trust beginners – low trust finishers, low trust beginners – high trust finishers, and low trust beginners – low trust finishers (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998).
After an analysis of the behavior of all types of teams, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) distinguished what actions and procedures the teams carried out in order to finish with a high trusting team or a low trusting team. The development and maintenance of high trust emanated from concentrating on the duties, the competency to overcome mechanical difficulties, the ability to be enthused about the task, the consistent use of communication to answer strategic questions, the ability to contribute prompt communication, the formation of anticipated responses, and the capacity to throw themselves into their work. The deterioration and lingering of low trust emerged from no feedback, no effort, no creative notions, no communicative structure, no leader or no followers, and no technical dexterity.

These results demonstrated that even on the other side of the planet, trustworthy corporate virtual teams could acquire a high sense of organizational trust; moreover, to achieve this feat, a great amount of effort and work was required. When managing the team’s trust in their relationship with their organizational leaders, such an effort would be comparable.

The review of the research on corporate trust shows how important the concept is to effective and productive organizational communication. Trust has turned into the field of organizational communication’s blue security blanket. In the Peanuts® cartoons, whenever Linus would lose his blanket, a multitude of emotion would travel through him. The same would be applicable in describing the reactions to the recent corporate scandals.

The variables have been defined. This is the first step needed in answering the research question. This review of the scholarly works on each variable will assist in confirming a valuable link between the concepts and the applicable theories. From that link, the answer will appear.

**Analysis**

Using a theoretical perspective, an answer to the research question, “What impact do corporate culture and cross cultural communication have on corporate trust?,” developed. The theories discussed in this report are similar; in fact, one theory is a product of its counterpart. Nevertheless, specifics that define the purpose of each theory and the specifics that answer the research question differ. The presented theories will be Critical Theory and Feminist Theory. Upon a discussion of each theory, an answer to the research question will be provided.

Critical Theory is a very broad concept. Many theorists and scholars have participated in its evolution. However, true credit for the theory goes back to Karl Marx, someone who could be called “the father of labor and social consciousness (Littlejohn, 2002).” Marx spent much of his career discussing the relationship between the proletariats and bourgeois, or the haves and have-nots. His purpose was to produce a balance in the power struggle between management and labor.

After Marx, many of his devotees, who formed the Frankfurt School, established the formal investigation of Critical Theory (Grimes, 1992). The theorists differed on some aspects of defining Critical Theory; yet, each wrote and lectured about ideological domination (Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997; Grimes, 1992; Miller, 1999; Zak, 1996). Ideology is a grouping of the environmentally programmed cognitive records that influences our attitudes, judgments, and behavior (Eisenberg and Goodall). Critical theorists want to know how this ideology affects the control and power management has over its workers.

Miller (1999) stated that the employment of hegemony is a byproduct of ideology. Hegemony prevails when satisfactory subordination of labor by management becomes commonplace. Ideology creates hegemony, and that hegemony reinforces the ideology: a vicious cycle. As indicated by Miller, the ideology/hegemony effect works on a subconscious level.

The ideology/hegemony concept feeds off the established norms and patterns of behavior in an organization. This overhauling of power is especially apparent in one facet of a corporation’s culture: stories (Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997; Miller, 1999; Zak, 1996). Miller discusses Mumby’s (1987) article on critical theory and control by saying that these stories provide employees with examples of managerially accepted behavior and these instances give legitimacy to the organizational structure that allows for complete and covert domination of labor and its organizational cognates.

Another important aspect of the corporate culture is the language or vernacular of the particular setting. Often in organizations the language of the organization plays a resourceful role for the
employees in keeping the status quo (Littlejohn, 2002). In her reporting, Zak (1996) said that corporate officials used language, the primary medium of verbal communication, as a way to distort and, therefore, reinforce the controlling and powerful relationships that officials had with their employees, as assumed by critical theorists. Essentially, the leaders were lying to get what they wanted from their employees.

The power, control and distortion ability of leaders have a great effect on how trustworthy the managers are perceived. Since communication is the key to establishing trusting relationships, the discovery of intentionally distorted messages would cause a break in any trust the employees have in their officials. Thus, corporate culturally representative artifacts have been used to gain power and control but relinquish trust and support at the same time.

Ideology has similar effects when dealing with other culturally varied people. Eisenberg and Goodall (1997) said that ideology works via how organizational leaders react to working with persons from other cultures. Varner and Beamer, as cited in Eisenberg and Goodall, described three culturally interactive reactions. The first reaction “assumptions of superiority” shows how Westerners will often view culturally different approaches to accomplishing a task as less sophisticated and almost archaic. Second, the view of ethnocentrism (“we are the best”) will cause business people to use communication and regulation tactics that may seem abrasive and shallow in another culture. Last, many Westerners frequently believe that all people, essentially think, interpret and desire in the same fashion, which is completely false (Varner and Beamer, as cited in Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997).

These culturally insensitive mishaps will cause hindrances to any potential communicative efforts at a cross cultural level. These attitudes have damaged the communicative bonds needed to build a sense of trust. Eastern business people may believe that Westerners only want what is best for the Westerners and do not take into account how communication and negotiation could benefit all parties; therefore, little, if any, trust is built in these relationships. The parties from both culturally influenced sides must take the time to communicate with people of different cultures in a mutually respectful environment before a rewarding and trusting business relationship will develop.

With this theory, both variables demonstrated the need for effective communication as the tool in trust building. Plus, this open communication will, according to critical theorists, allow liberation from the corporate control to occur (Littlejohn, 2002). A rewarding, trusting and autonomous organizational setting can then develop.

Critical Theory is similar in the discussion of control and power to Feminist Theory. The introduction of this theory came about due to the realization by communication and social feminist scholars that the ways in which organizations exist, structurally, lean heavily, if not entirely, towards a patriarchal identity (Miller, 1999). Women are not seen as equal members of the organization, and have little or no organizational power or voice (Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997).

Littlejohn (2002) called this exclusion misleading and dangerous. The danger existed in the fact that corporate officials ignored the experience and values of women in the organization. Working women felt unappreciated for the job they performed.

No single scholar was responsible for the growth and development of Feminist Theory. It seemed to be a progressive field of study resulting from the feminist movement beginning in the 1960s. Still, the amount of feminist theoretical literature is steady. The work of feminist theorists has established a gendered or feminine way of organizing the corporate structure (Mumby, 2000). This type of organizing places more emphasis on the holistic and supportive structure of the organization: knowing its place within the environment. A growing body of literature in feminist theory concerns itself with ecological feminism, the interaction between the organization and the ecosystem.

As could be expected, communication problems of women and other marginalized groups hinder any chance of effectively relaying messages. Often, the struggle is due to management’s performance expectations of the corporate culture. In other words, “this is how it’s done here.”

According to Bullis and Stout (2000), most organizations had a culture that was totally male-influenced. The male-influence set a certain structure to which all organizational processes follow. These structures did not leave much room for categorically “feminine” ideals to pass through and establish influences. Putnam
and Kolb (2000) wrote about the vast difference there was between male communication styles and female communication styles, especially regarding negotiation relationships. With the traditional view, competition and outdoing the other was most important (Putnam and Kolb, 2000). Nonetheless, with a more feminist perspective, shared understanding of needs became vital. It was this vast difference that lead to power struggles and distrust, according to feminist theorists. Often, male dominated groups believed that those who did not want to compete were weak (Putnam and Kolb, 2000). Hence, the group did not take its opponent or negotiant counterpart seriously. The consequent devaluing of worth due to their opponent’s not playing the “man’s game” would cause a break in effective communication and tear down any chance of establishing trusting relationships.

With cross cultural communication, Feminist Theory wants to examine the assumptions of male-dominated societies (Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997). How certain cultures view the sex roles between men and women has exerted the greatest influence on how women are treated within the organizational setting. With the adherence of sex roles, value differences determine women’s interaction between themselves and the corporate climate within various cultures. The first set of working women in the United States had difficulty trusting their colleagues because of the male-dominated culture. In addition, a man growing up in certain Arab cultures may have concerns about taking orders from or working directly with women. This discomfort will hinder communication and trust.

The Feminist theorist wants to investigate how sex role barriers can be broken down. If that occurs, better relaying of messages will happen. As a result, the beginning of a trusting work relationship can develop because these parties will have to work out their power and control issues.

It is power and control issues that draw the link between the answer to the research question and these theories. Abuse and misuse of power and control damages effective communication, which, in turn, lessens the likelihood of developing and maintaining trust. Certain assumptions exist and these assumptions have the power effects of subordination. The abuse of this control has caused the downfall of organizations. This is a good example of where desire for profit overtakes concern for the worker and backfires – an irreversible action that will lead to rampant mistrust of the corporate infrastructure.

Conclusion

In this report, a discussion of the relationship between corporate culture and cross cultural communication on corporate trust took place through a review of the research variables. An analysis of the association between the variables originated from the utilization of Critical Theory and Feminist Theory. The basic explanation that each theory gives is that power and control affect the type and quality of communication that managers or male leaders have with labor or female workers; this distortion of messages causes a lack of credulous communication and, thus, trust cannot form.

This investigation demonstrated the need for more research on the effects each of these variables would have on the other. However, more empirical research using Critical Theory and Feminist Theory on corporate trust needs to be conducted. With more research, communication scholars can provide further support for the importance of effective and supportive communication within the corporate setting.

Workers need and deserve respect. Keeping trust levels high within the organizational environment will ensure that management is getting the best work out of their employees. This will occur because the employees have trust in their organization’s officials and the message the officials send, which is a reward and a blessing. From accounts of former Enron workers, one can see how jaded, scarred and cautious these workers will be with future employers. Thus, gaining trust from employees and new staff members in general will be increasingly challenging but even more necessary. The American dream: it seems like such an ideal. However, most people know that much effort, determination and luck has to come into play in order to gain that dream. With the disenfranchisement of workers, trust in the ability to get that dream is diminishing. Most people must work to survive. Therefore, because they are putting that much effort into something so substantial, the workers of the U.S. deserve to trust the leaders of the corporate world.

References


