



# WORKPLACES THAT STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY

## A Civic Blueprint for Organizational Health

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Democracy isn't just built in voting booths or Washington, DC – it's shaped daily in living rooms, gymnasiums, neighborhoods, and workplaces. As scholars like Robert Putnam have noted, "For democracy to thrive, people must trust each other enough to listen, collaborate, and care."<sup>1</sup> But trust doesn't come from headlines or hashtags. It grows from real, face-to-face relationships.

Part of making democracy work lies not only within our communities and our families, but also within our workplaces. When trust is strong at home, it ripples outward into neighborhoods and civic life. When it's strong at work, it ripples outward into society as well by shaping how people show up in communities, public spaces, and democratic institutions. When it's nurtured in organizations, it can have a positive impact on both individual and organizational performance.<sup>2</sup> Together, these spaces where culture, connection, and collaboration take root set the tone not only for workplaces, but for the health of democratic society. That's why rebuilding social capital is one of the most powerful things we can do to renew our democratic life.

### What is Social Capital?

Social capital refers to the networks of relationships, trust, and mutual support that hold communities and democracies together.<sup>3</sup> It's the invisible infrastructure that makes families stronger, workplaces healthier, neighborhoods safer, and people more mentally and physically resilient. When people feel connected, they cooperate. When people cooperate, communities and institutions thrive.

A nation's overall well-being and its capacity to thrive economically and civically is deeply influenced by one pervasive cultural attribute: the level of trust embedded within its society. In this sense, trust is not merely a moral virtue; it is a foundational economic and civic asset.<sup>4</sup>

### Why It Matters Right Now

Too many Americans feel disconnected. Only about a quarter say they know most of their neighbors, and this figure has remained largely unchanged for over a decade, despite growing national concern about social isolation.<sup>5</sup> According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report, 25 percent of fully remote employees report daily feelings of loneliness, compared to 16 percent of onsite workers.<sup>6</sup> This supports findings that remote employees are much more likely to feel isolated at work. Virtual meetings often fail to replace the informal, everyday interactions that build real bonds.

This disconnection isn't just personal – it's civic. We're not just disconnected from those we know. Rather we're disengaged from the shared responsibilities that make society work. When people don't feel seen, heard, or valued in their daily lives and whether at home, in their neighborhoods, or in their organizations, it affects how they show up in public life.

When trust in institutions erodes, participation in local groups and civic organizations declines. Dialogue across differences becomes harder, and polarization deepens. People are less likely to vote, volunteer, or believe they can make a difference. In short, a disconnected society becomes a fragile democracy.

We live in a time when political polarization dominates headlines, social media feeds, and dinner table conversations. However, beneath the noise, most people want the same things: safe communities, good schools, meaningful work, and a hopeful future for their children.

### **Shared Values Still Exist**

Despite polarization, Americans are more united than we think. Research shows Americans across the spectrum value kindness, fairness, freedom, and belonging. These shared values offer a foundation for rebuilding trust even when policy views diverge. For example, Gallup finds over 75 percent of Americans rate kindness and respect among their top values.<sup>7</sup>

This isn't about changing people's political opinions, it's about changing the way we relate to one another as neighbors, coworkers, and fellow citizens. We're not trying to reach consensus on every issue; we're trying to restore the capacity to live, work, and care for our communities across differences. Building social capital is about rebuilding the trust, empathy, and shared space that make democratic disagreement possible. It is not about silencing views but strengthening relationships that make democracy possible. In an article about the heart of democracy, Parker Palmer argues that democracy is sustained not by agreement, but by the capacity to hold tension and difference in relationships.<sup>8</sup>

### **Why This Matters in Our Workplaces**

Workplaces are not separate from the social fabric; they help weave it. Far from being isolated spaces, they are deeply embedded in the networks of trust, belonging, and shared purpose that mirror the networks democracy depends on. For many, work is where we spend at least half of the waking hours. That means the tone, trust, and connection (or lack thereof) we experience at work doesn't stay there. Rather it comes home with us, influences our families, and ripples out into our communities.

When trust and connection are missing in the workplace, collaboration weakens, turnover rises, and well-being suffers. When people feel seen, valued, and included, they do their best work. They also contribute to healthier organizations and communities. This in turn deepens relationships with customers, partners, and the public, generating goodwill and long-term impact. In short, building social capital at work just makes everything work better.

## **When Social Capital Erodes, Democracy Weakens**

When social capital is ignored, or worse, destroyed, the effects are corrosive. Silos form. Psychological safety disappears. Innovation slows. Toxic culture takes root. People stop showing up for each other and eventually stop showing up altogether. When this pattern spreads across communities and the country, civic participation declines, trust in institutions collapses and the foundation of democracy begins to crack. If left unaddressed, democracy itself can fail.<sup>9</sup>

## **What Can You Do?**

Here are four small but powerful ways individuals and organizations can rebuild social capital:

### **1. Start with Healthy Conversations**

Facilitate meaningful dialogue at work and in your community. Conversations grounded in active listening build trust, foster inclusion, and spark collective action which are essential ingredients of social capital. The goal isn't to change people's minds, but to better understand one another and strengthen the relationships that hold communities together. When leaders model these conversations, they set the tone for a culture where connection can grow naturally.<sup>10</sup>

### **2. Form Local Partnerships**

Social capital grows fastest across bridges – networks that connect diverse groups and create opportunities for trust to form across lines of difference. Partnering with schools, libraries, civic clubs, faith groups, or nonprofits, not only amplifies reach, but also creates shared spaces where people encounter new perspectives, builds mutual respect, and practices working together toward common goals. These partnerships model the cooperative spirit our democracy depends on, and help weave a stronger, more inclusive social fabric.

### **3. Host Small Gatherings**

Simple gatherings such as workplace lunches, neighborhood potlucks, or storytelling nights foster trust and belonging. These informal moments lower barriers, create a sense of welcome, and allow people to connect as humans – not just as roles or opinions. Over time, these face-to-face interactions build the habits of connection: listening, sharing, showing up. And those habits don't stay confined to the room. Rather, they ripple outward into civic life, shaping how people engage in neighborhoods, workplaces, and democratic spaces. Small gatherings offer the consistency and warmth upon which long-term trust is built.

### **4. Celebrate Stories of Connection**

Highlighting stories of care and unity is a powerful act. Stories make abstract values tangible; they show what trust, compassion, and collaboration look like in real life. By lifting examples of people coming together across differences, you reinforce the belief that connection is possible and worth pursuing. These spotlights do not just inspire hope; they normalize empathy and invite others to participate in building the kind of community they want to live in. In this way, storytelling becomes a catalyst for belonging, trust, and shared action.

## **Start Small. Start Now.**

Most people want to do something to improve our country. They want to connect, contribute, and help heal what is fraying in our communities and institutions. Often, people don't know where to turn or what to do, as there is so much information available – much of it false – that we become overwhelmed and confused.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. Surgeon General has declared loneliness and social disconnection a public health crisis as harmful to long-term health as smoking or obesity and warns that it weakens our capacity to participate meaningfully in civic life.<sup>12</sup>

Rebuilding trust does not require massive movement – it begins with one neighbor, one team, one shared act at a time. Invite someone to coffee and ask what matters to them. Share a story – or simply listen. In divided times, simple acts of connection can plant the seeds of civic renewal. When many of us start small, connection becomes contagious – and democracy grows stronger from the ground up.

## **About the Author**

Stuart Thomas is a career consultant and the founder of Arrow Performance Group, a Colorado-based organizational development firm. He is a seasoned strategist, facilitator, and organizational designer. He brings decades of experience helping communities, organizations, and leaders strengthen trust, connection, and engagement. His work focuses on building cultures of inclusion, resilience, and shared purpose – across sectors and across divides.

Stuart's approach integrates systems thinking and research on social capital, organizational development, and democratic renewal. He has led workshops, strategic initiatives, and community collaborations across the nonprofit, government, and corporate sectors.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000).
- 2 Paul J. Zak, "The Neuroscience of Trust," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>.
- 3 Paul Dekker and Eric M. Uslaner, "Social Capital and Participation in Everyday Life," *Routledge*, 2001.
- 4 Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press; and World Bank. (2015). *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior*. Washington, DC: World Bank. These works highlight the role of trust in enabling cooperation, lowering transaction costs, and strengthening institutions—ultimately contributing to national prosperity and social cohesion.
- 5 Pew Research Center (2025). "How connected do Americans feel to their neighbors?" <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/05/08/how-connected-do-americans-feel-to-their-neighbors>
- 6 Gallup. *State of the Global Workplace: 2024 Report*. Gallup, 2024. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>.
- 7 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Family' Top Value for Americans: Vast majorities regard respect, family, trustworthiness, freedom and kindness as important values," *Gallup News*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.gallup.com/news/gallup/691964/family-top-value-americans.aspx>.
- 8 Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).
- 9 Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown Publishing. The authors argue that the health of a democracy depends not only on formal institutions but also on unwritten norms and civic engagement. As trust and participation erode, the guardrails of democracy weaken, increasing the risk of democratic breakdown.
- 10 Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster; and Goleman, D. (2006). *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. New York: Bantam Books. Putnam explores how social capital is built through networks of trust and civic engagement, while Goleman emphasizes the role of empathetic communication and attuned leadership in strengthening human connection. These works affirm that dialogue and active listening are foundational to community resilience and cohesion.
- 11 Surveys by Pew Research Center, *More in Common*, and the National Conference on Citizenship show that despite growing polarization, most Americans want to contribute to the common good, rebuild trust, and reconnect with their communities.
- 12 U.S. Surgeon General Advisory (2023): <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

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