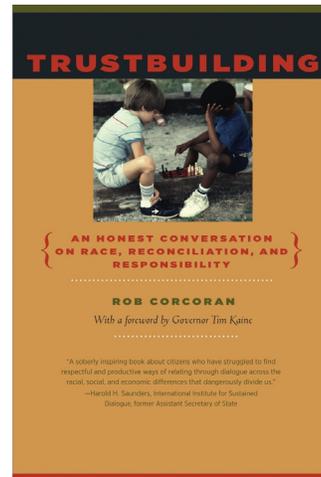# READING GUIDE: TRUSTBUILDING

Initiatives of Change

Trustbuilding:
An Honest Conversation on Race, Reconciliation, and Responsibility

Rob Corcoran, University of Virginia Press, 2010

The stories and case studies in Trustbuilding describe a process for community change based on personal change, honest dialogue, healing the wounds of history, and building new partnerships across traditional boundaries.

Corcoran writes: "Creating a space for change in our communities is an art in which we are all learners. It requires skills of the head and the heart. By identifying and releasing personal "baggage" – in the words of John Coleman – we can create a welcoming environment for others. Through inclusive dialogue, we can hear each other's stories and invite others to share our journey. By acknowledging painful history, we can move toward understanding, shared responsibility, and ultimately forgiveness. Through genuine partnerships and sustained teamwork, we can begin to build trust and to bring about change where it is most needed." (191)

The following questions are designed to stimulate reflection, conversation, and action.

Becoming a Catalyst of Change

"Many social movements advocate change in the behavior of others…the best starting point for improving our neighborhoods or cities is to ask whether our own attitudes and actions reflect a spirit of inclusion or exclusion, resentment or forgiveness, egoism or self- giving. Life is a whole. People pay more attention to how we live than to what we say." (195)

"Trust is a fragile bridge we build each day. Honesty about our failures, purity in our motives, unselfishness in our support of others, and love in our readiness to forgive and accept forgiveness: these are the building blocks of trust. Trust depends on the authenticity of our lives, our openness, and our willingness to start with change in ourselves." (201)

QUESTIONS:

1. Initiatives of Change focuses on the connection between change in the individual and change in society. What do you find most challenging about this approach?

2. What examples of personal change stand out for you in the book?

3. Do you agree with Charles Marsh's assessment of the early civil rights movement as essentially spiritual in nature and the need for "contemplation and moral discipline" in social action? (194) What are the implications for social change movements today?

4. What factors create a welcoming environment where personal change can occur? What are some of the obstacles that we must be aware of?

5. What moments of change or new insights have you experienced in your own life?

6. How do you create space for yourself for renewal and inspiration?

John [Coleman]…. understood the need to "build a bridge of trust strong enough to bear the weight of the truth you are trying to deliver." (49)

"Insight, new relationships, and commitment to action: these are the fruits of good dialogue. Such dialogues create space where people feel able to express their deepest emotions, listen carefully, and find the courage to shine a spotlight on their own responsibility for change instead of accusing others." (205)

QUESTIONS:

1. Think about a difficult conversation that you have experienced. What made it hard?

2. What struck you about Bonnie Dowdy's story (208)? Are there particular people or groups that you find difficult to hear? In what way do they push your "hot buttons" and what have you learned about yourself as a result?

3. What stories of honest conversation with the "opposites" in this chapter or in other parts of the book made the greatest impression on you? What lessons can be drawn from the engagement with the Richmond newspaper, (210-211), the dialogue with Muslims and evangelical Christians (153-161), or the panel discussion with Paul Weyrich (82-83)?

4. Why is engaging "hard to reach" people important in developing a shared vision for the community?

5. Is there a conversation in your community or in your country that is not taking place and that needs to take place? Who needs to be "at the table" and how might you invite them?

6. How can dialogue move from a sharing of information to an experience of transformation?

"History and memory provide material for group myths that are a source of social cohesion because they supply operational codes and a system of ethics." Smith (214)

Walking through history is "the gift of historical imagination." Wise (16)

QUESTIONS:

1. Consider these two statements:
   "Sometimes groups who perpetuate wrongs also see themselves as victims…" (215)

   "People with an uncertain future 'affect distorted engagements with their past. They eschew lived history, shut out its lessons, shun critical inquiry into the past…but at the same time invent an imagined past – shining and glorious upon which are superimposed the prejudices and hatreds of our own times.'" Eqbal Ahmad (215)

   What examples can you think of that support these statements?

2. "Learning to appreciate each other's stories requires 'a moral-historical discrimination not easily achieved by anyone white or black in modern America.' Empathy for individual sacrifice and courage must never imply sympathy for a heritage built on injustice. 'Citizens need time to learn hospitality to each other's feelings about their diverse, painful pasts…. But suffering itself, whatever its nature and circumstances, can evoke a communal bond.'" Shriver (6)

   How do we avoid moral ambivalence while listening to the stories of others? Are we letting our own side down if we try to look at the story from the perspective of the other as one of the Northern Irish felt? (218)

3. How important are symbols in the healing process (e.g. the Reconciliation statue)?

4. Is uncovering of historical facts enough? Is apology necessary and what do you feel about reparations? Hope in the Cities chose to campaign for community commitment to healthy, integrated public schools as the most significant step in repairing a history of slavery and discrimination that has devastating consequences for today's generation.

5. "Each community will develop its own approach to acknowledging its specific history, but an effective process involves an accurate, respectful, inclusive public telling of the story." (231)

   What are some of the common themes that strike you in the stories of Farmville, Atlanta, Tulsa and Wilmington? What, if anything do you think is distinctive about the Richmond experience of walking through history?

6. What are some of the stories need to be told or wounds of the past that need to be acknowledged in your community or your country?

"Thirty years of work in Richmond have convinced me of the need to build diverse, self-sustaining teams, capable of engaging all sectors of the community." (17)

"One stick does not make a strong fire," says Syngman Rhee, "If we are going to carry on a vision for justice and peace we must learn to be a team. However brave and talented I may be, without a container or framework, compassion and commitment can become wrongly directed." (233)

QUESTIONS:

1. What is your experience of teambuilding? What were the biggest challenges? Would you agree that it is the hardest and often most neglected component of social change movements?

2. Think about the four stages of building an "explicit team" described: building a core team; conducting internal dialogue; seeking wider support; taking public action. Imagine the four stages as a constant cycle of internal teambuilding and strategic outreach. How universally applicable is this concept? What might be added or changed for other contexts?

3. What are some of your personal responses to the questions in the teambuilding inventory (237)? And to the tips for maintaining a team (238-239)? Are there other points you would add?

4. What is the value of "implicit teams?" Can you see how this has played out in the Richmond context?

5. What do you think is distinctive about the Initiatives of Change approach to team development?

CLOSING QUESTION:

How could you use the four steps described by Corcoran to initiate a trustbuilding process in your community?