
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Is this the era of distrust?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Rob

And I'm Rob.

Neil

As well as bringing the world to a halt, the coronavirus epidemic has led to an increase in misinformation, lies and conspiracy theories on the internet.

Rob

In an era of fake news, where even a president of the United States is accused of spreading misinformation, could it be that we are living through a crisis in trust? What is trust? And who should we place our trust in? – these are some of the questions we'll be discussing in this programme.

Neil

And we'll be hearing from a philosopher who believes the problem is not about trust itself but about trustworthiness – the ability to be trusted as being honest and reliable.

Rob

And as always we'll be learning some related vocabulary along the way. Of course telling lies and lacking trustworthiness is nothing new - just think of the Trojan Horse used to trick the ancient Greeks.

Neil

More recently, the American financier Bernie Madoff became infamous as 'the biggest swindler in history'. In 2009 he was sentenced to 150 years in prison for his part in the Ponzi scam, but how much did he defraud from investors? That's my quiz question. Was it:
a) 6.5 million dollars?,
b) 65 million dollars? or

c) 65 billion dollars?

Rob

I'll say b) 65 million dollars.

Neil

OK, Rob, we'll come back to that later. Generally speaking, trust can be described as a judgement that someone can be believed and relied upon. When we trust each other it makes life easier, quicker and friendlier.

Rob

Society can't function without trust - so does that mean the more trust the better?

Neil

Well, not according to philosopher, Onora O'Neill. Here he is speaking to David Edmonds, presenter of the BBC World Service programme, *The Big Idea*:

Onora O'Neill

We have another word, which is **gullible**, and if you simply place trust **indiscriminately** without making a judgement about whether the other person or institution is **trustworthy** then just **trusting to luck** as we say, is probably not a virtue.

Rob

There's a difference between trusting someone because you have good reason to believe them and being **gullible** – that's easy to deceive because you trust and believe people too quickly.

Neil

If you don't judge who is **trustworthy** and who is not, you are **trusting to luck** – simply believing or hoping that things will happen for the best.

Rob

But being **gullible** and **trusting to luck** is exactly how Bernie Madoff was able to trick so many people into giving him their money. Their biggest mistake was to trust him **indiscriminately** – in a way that does not show care or judgement, usually with harmful results.

Neil

So, if **indiscriminately** trusting people is such a bad idea, how do we avoid it? How can we tell who is trustworthy and who is not? Here's BBC World Service's

The Big Idea presenter, David Edmonds, asking Onora O'Neill to give some details:

David Edmonds

An individual or organisation is **trustworthy** if they can justifiably be trusted. To be trustworthy they need three ingredients. First, honesty – people have to be able to believe what they're told. Second, **competence**. Beyond honesty and competence there's a third element to trustworthiness: **reliability**.

Onora O'Neill

That's the boring one. That's just being honest and **competent** each time so that it's not enough to be episodically honest and **competent** for some of the things you claim to be able to do but not others.

Rob

Philosopher Onora O'Neill identifies three ingredients for **trustworthiness**: honesty, **competence** and **reliability**.

Neil

Competence means the ability to do something well. You would trust a car mechanic to fix your broken car engine, but you wouldn't go to them for dental work – they're not **competent** to remove your tooth like a dentist is.

Rob

And you wouldn't trust your dentist to fix your broken down car, either! Onora O'Neill also mentions **reliability** – being trustworthy because you behave well *all* the time and keep *all* the promises you make.

Neil

It's the combination of these three – being honest, **competent** and **reliable** – that makes someone truly trustworthy.

Rob

And not someone like Bernie Madoff, who would run off with your money and entire life savings.

Neil

All of which brings me to my quiz question. Do you remember, Rob?

Rob

Yep, I do. You asked how much Bernie Madoff stole from the American investors he lied to. And I said b) 65 million dollars.

Neil

But in fact it was c) 65 *billion* dollars – a lot of money to give to such an untrustworthy man!

Rob

So we've been discussing whether there is a crisis of trust and asking how to know who is **trustworthy** – able to be trusted as honest, competent and reliable.

Neil

Placing your trust in someone **trustworthy** is very different from being **gullible** – easy to trick because you trust and believe people too quickly.

Rob

And it can also be unhelpful to **trust things to luck** – simply hope or believe that everything will work out for the best.

Neil

Both of these problems come about when people trust **indiscriminately** - in an unsystematic way that does not show care or judgement, usually with harmful results – as Bernie Madoff's victims found out to their cost.

Rob

But luckily there *are* many trustworthy people around and we can spot them using three criteria: honesty, in other words not lying; **competence**; and **reliability**.

Neil

Competence means an ability to do something well, in the correct and effective way.

Rob

And **reliability** means being honest and **competent**, *all the time*, not just being honest sometimes or reliable in some actions but not others.

Neil

That's all for 6 Minute English. Bye for now!

Rob

Bye bye!

VOCABULARY

trustworthiness

quality of being able to be trusted as honest and reliable

gullible

easy to deceive because you trust and believe people too easily

trust to luck

believe that things will happen for the best

indiscriminately

done in a random way that does not show care or judgement, usually with harmful results.

competence

the ability to do something well, in a satisfactory or effective way

reliability

quality of being trusted to do what you say you will, *all* the time