Communicating under Conditions of Mistrust

**Presented by Dan Yankelovich to the
Higher Education Roundtable
UCSD
May 18, 2005**

Wave I:
Mistrust in the Great Depression

Duration: 1930 - WWII

Causes: Massive, unyielding unemployment

Consequences:
- Large scale government regulation
- Strengthened trade unions
- Loss of confidence in Republicans

Targets: Business, market capitalism

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Wave II:
Mistrust in the 1970s

Duration:
Late 1960s - 1980

Causes:
- Vietnam, Watergate
- Stagflation
- Changing moral norms

Consequences:
- Grassroots movements (e.g. consumer, environment)
- Regulation
- Cynicism

Targets:
Government, all institutions, business, authority, other people

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Wave III:
The Current Wave of Mistrust

Duration:

2001 -

Causes:

- Scandals
- Failure of gatekeeper systems
- Decline in social morality

Consequences:
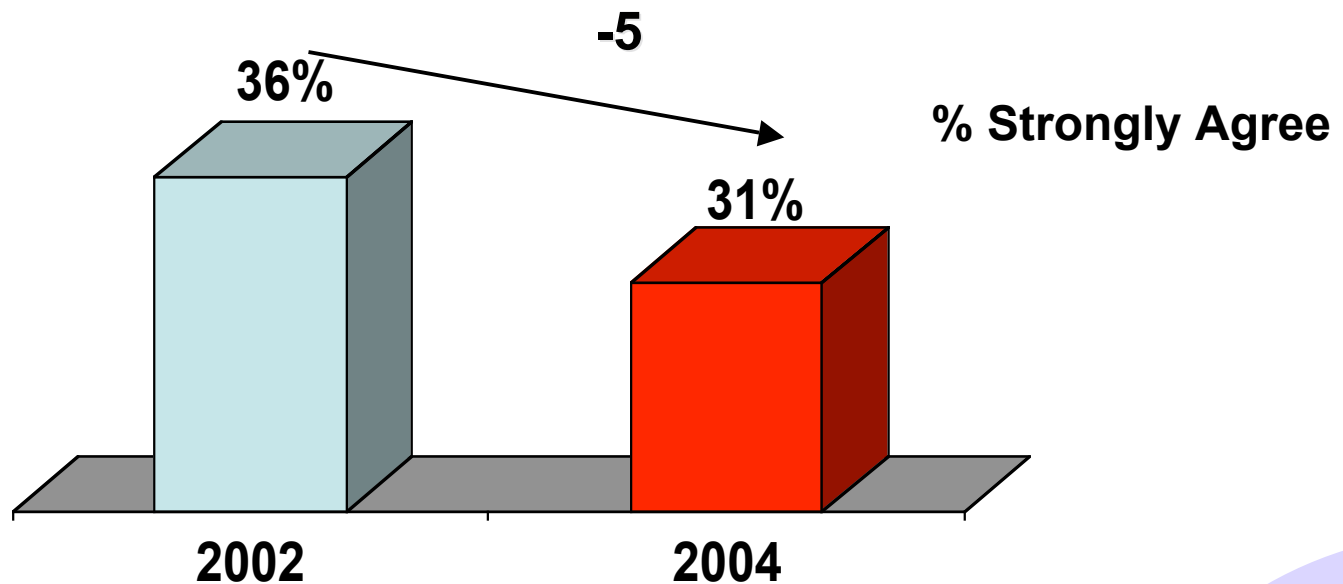
- Regulation
- Punitive attitudes
- Integrity becomes more important

Targets:

- Big business (primarily)
- Gatekeepers
- Other organizations

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Public trust in business is low and declining

"You can trust business leaders to do what is right almost always/most of the time"

-5

36%

31%

% Strongly Agree

2002

2004

(DYG SCAN©)

Targets of mistrust broader than corporations and gatekeepers

- Media

- Courts

- Local government

- Red Cross/NGO's

- Liberal institutions

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How Long Will It Last?

1st wave

1932 - 1942

2nd wave

1968-1980

Current wave

2001 - ??

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Scandals and mistrust reflect discomfort with:

○ The state of our ethics

○ Negative effects of America's "Cultural Revolution"

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Many positive consequences of the Cultural Revolution

Far greater

- Pluralism

- Tolerance

- Individualism

- Choice of lifestyles

- Opportunity for self-expression and self-fulfillment

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Also negative consequences

Heavy toll on ethical norms:

- ○ "If it isn't illegal, it's OK"

- ○ Gaming the system is good sport

- ○ Win at any cost

- ○ Conflict of interest is for dummies

- ○ Strip away all regulations and constraints

"Winning for myself"
(by bending the rules)

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The rise of "winning for myself" is generationally linked

Harvard Business School Class of 1949 study reveals traditional guiding principles of the pre-Boomer generation:

- Work hard

- Live by the rules

- Distinguish right from wrong (apart from legality)

- Practice self-discipline and self-sacrifice

- Self-respect is more important than winning

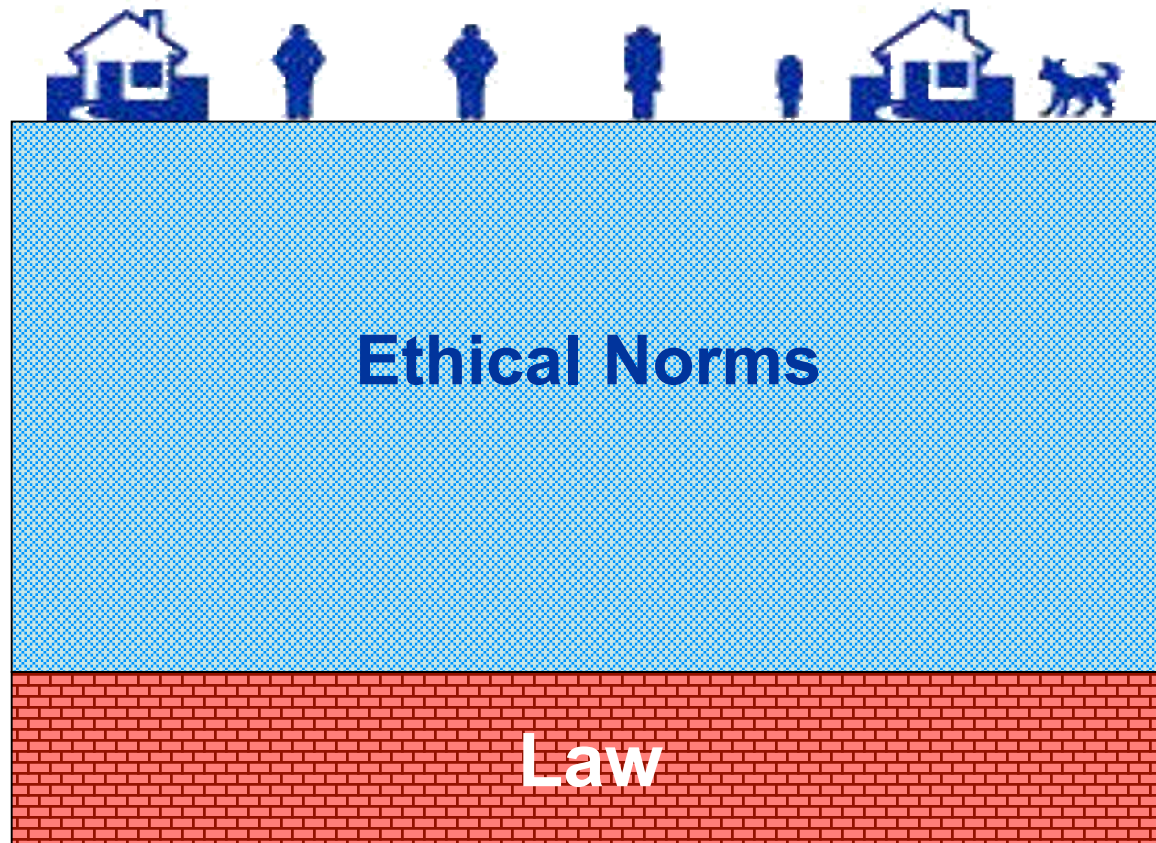- Being a leader means putting others' needs ahead of your own

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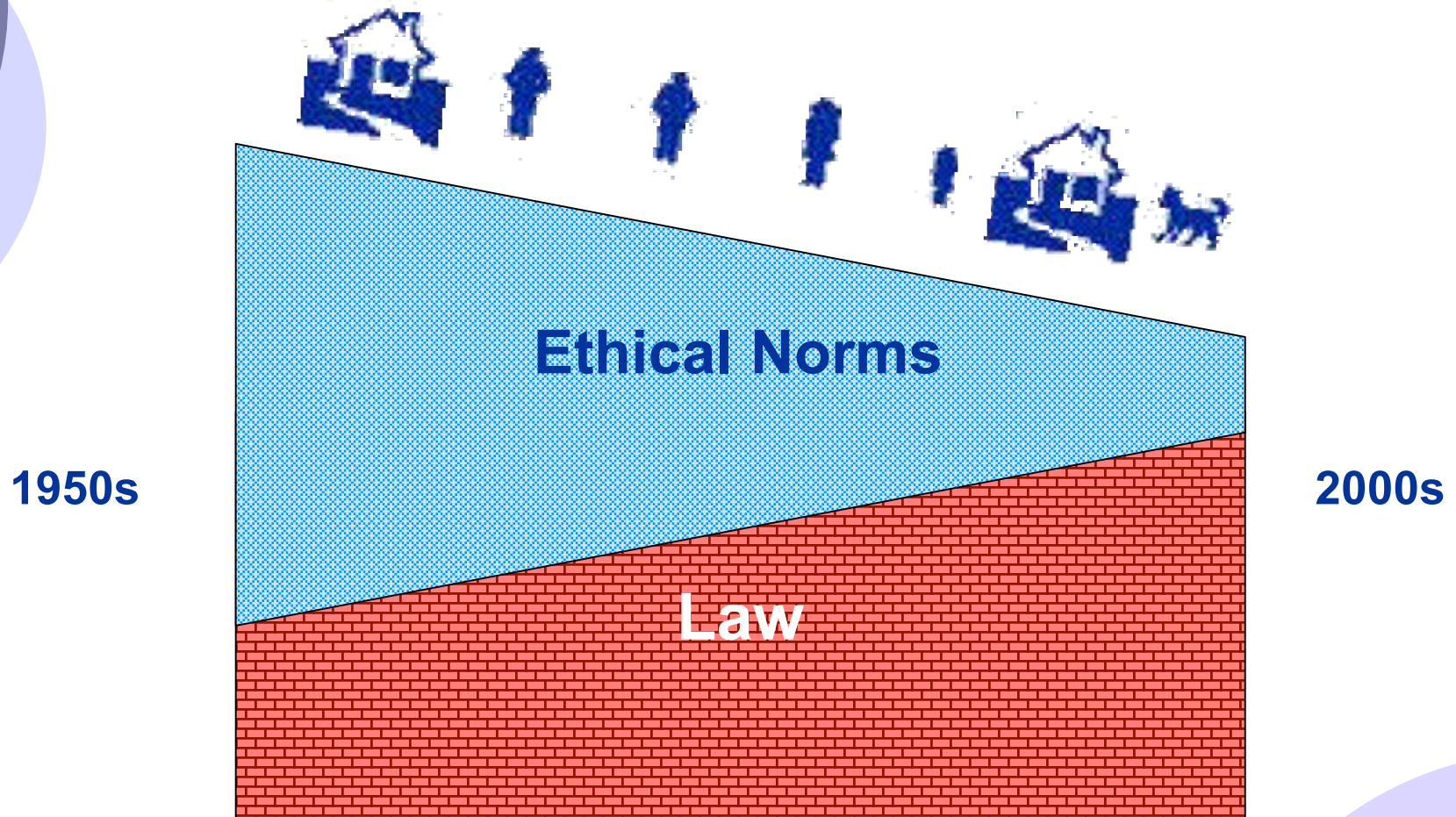
"Winning for myself"

↓
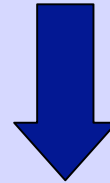
UN-enlightened self-interest replaces tradition of enlightened self-interest

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Normal relationship between norms and laws

Ethical Norms

Law

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The current relationship

Ethical Norms

Law

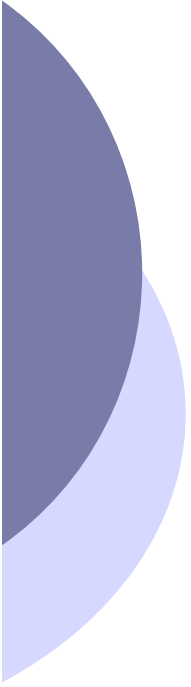**1950s**

2000s

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Results

○ A core value threatened

○ Balance between norms and laws upset

○ High levels of "unsustainable" problems

○ High levels of polarization and ideology

○ Strong anti-rationalism

Challenges specific to universities

Universities are not in the direct line of fire, but…

- Emerging anti-rationalist bias

- Town/gown split is easy to exacerbate

- Strong links between universities and gatekeeper failure

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Universities have a special opportunity to exercise leadership in setting higher standards (if they have clean hands):

● Strong convening power

● Credibility as a "neutral broker"

● Acceptability as a leader in setting standards

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10 Principles for communicating under conditions of mistrust

I. **Ethically neutral/value-free stand seen as deceitful**

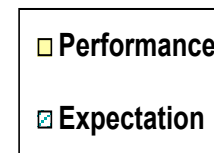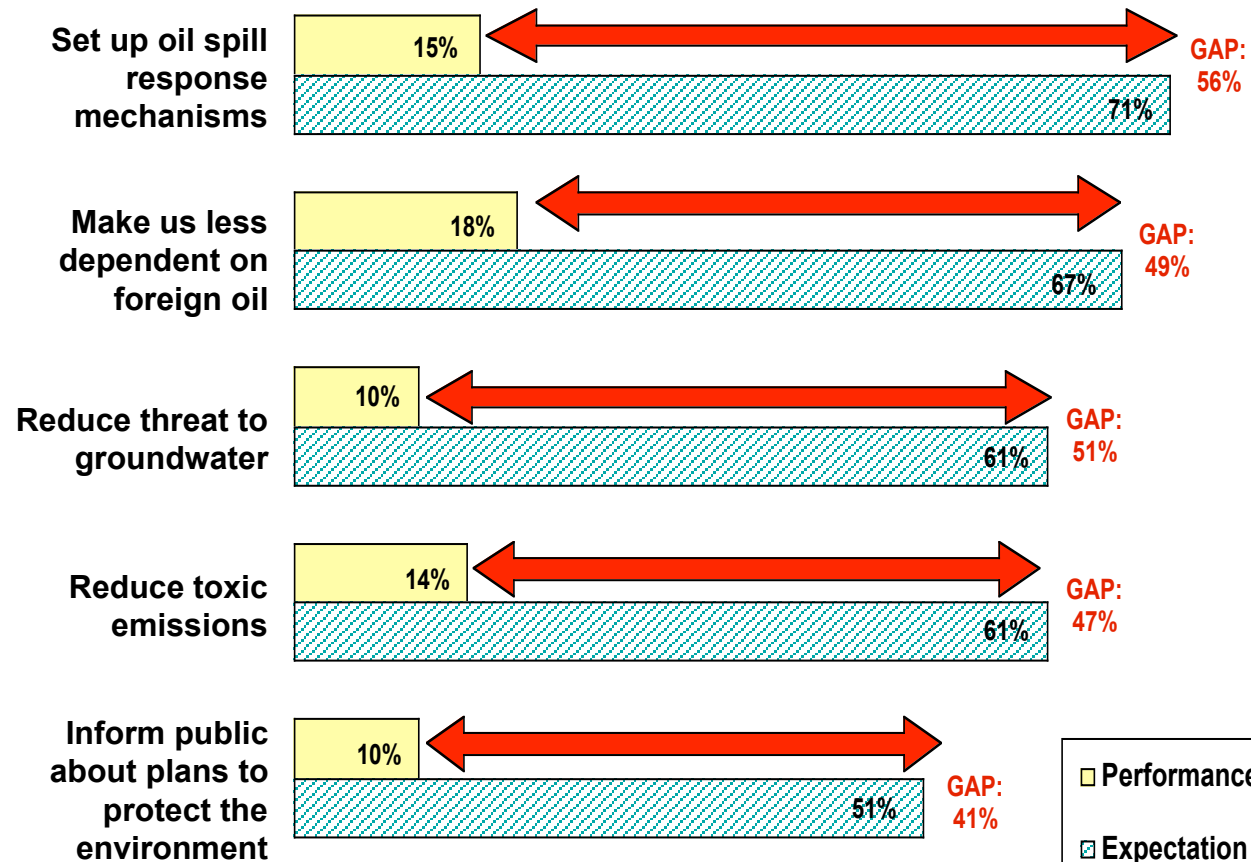Core values must be made explicit and framed in ethical terms

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II. More is expected from privileged institutions

Privileged faculty in research universities may be vulnerable

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Metrics of the expectation gap

A pipeline company (mid-1990s)

A good steward would:

Set up oil spill response mechanisms
- 15%
- 71%
- GAP: 56%

Make us less dependent on foreign oil
- 18%
- 67%
- GAP: 49%

Reduce threat to groundwater
- 10%
- 61%
- GAP: 51%

Reduce toxic emissions
- 14%
- 61%
- GAP: 47%

Inform public about plans to protect the environment
- 10%
- 51%
- GAP: 41%

☐ Performance
☒ Expectation

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III. **Silence/denial/closed doors almost always interpreted as evidence of bad faith**

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IV. **No one gets the benefit of the doubt**

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V. Important to work out positions on emotion-laden issues in advance:

(e.g.) race

(e.g.) gender
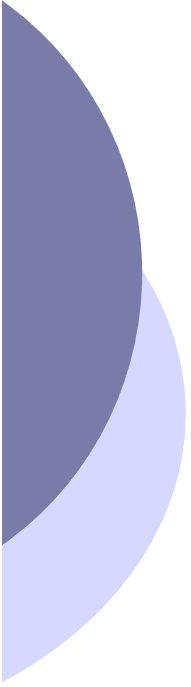
(e.g.) class

(e.g.) boundaries of political expression

(e.g.) religion

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VI. **Anything but plain talk is suspect**

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VII. **Being "good people" and having "good motives" are not acceptable rationalizations**

Noble goals with deeply flawed execution = hypocrisy, not idealism

VIII. **Honesty/integrity responds to a genuine hunger**

Public standards for trust

Old, but re-emphasized

- ✓ **Honesty**
- ✓ **Respect stakeholders**
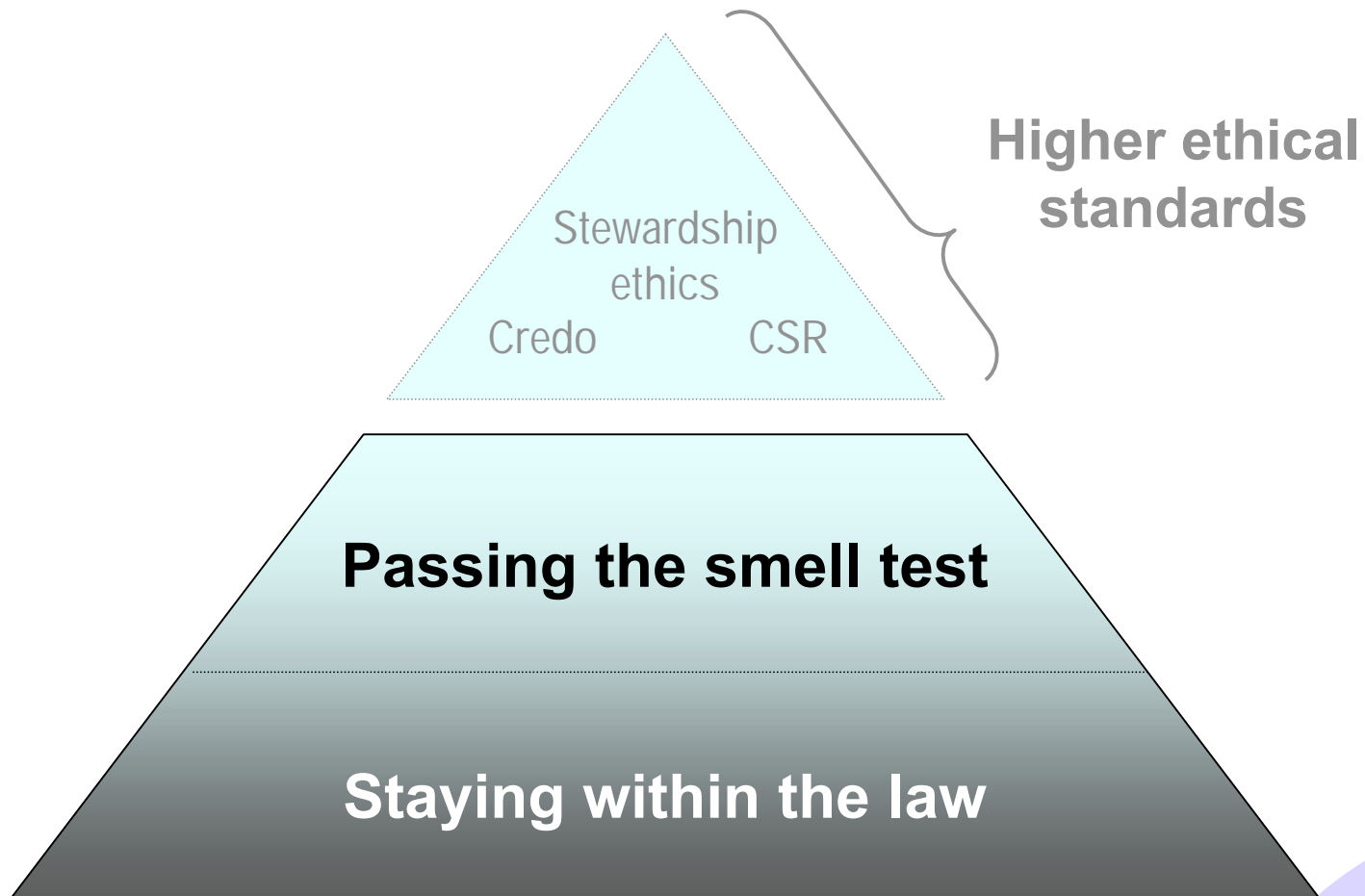- ✓ **Quality**
- ✓ **Value**

Newer elements

- ✓ **Transparency**
- ✓ **A Human Face**
- ✓ **Walking the Walk**
- ✓ **Stewardship**

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IX. **Build trust:**

- **Make few promises/commitments**

- **Live up to each faithfully**

- **Performance should <u>exceed</u> expectations**

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X. **Make a conscious effort to move toward a "stewardship" ethic**

Existing ethical hierarchy

Stewardship
ethics

Credo   CSR

Higher ethical
standards

Passing the smell test

Staying within the law

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Contribute to new norms, higher standards

Accelerate shift to top part of the ethical standards hierarchy

Stewardship ethics

Credo   CSR

Passing the smell test

Staying within the law

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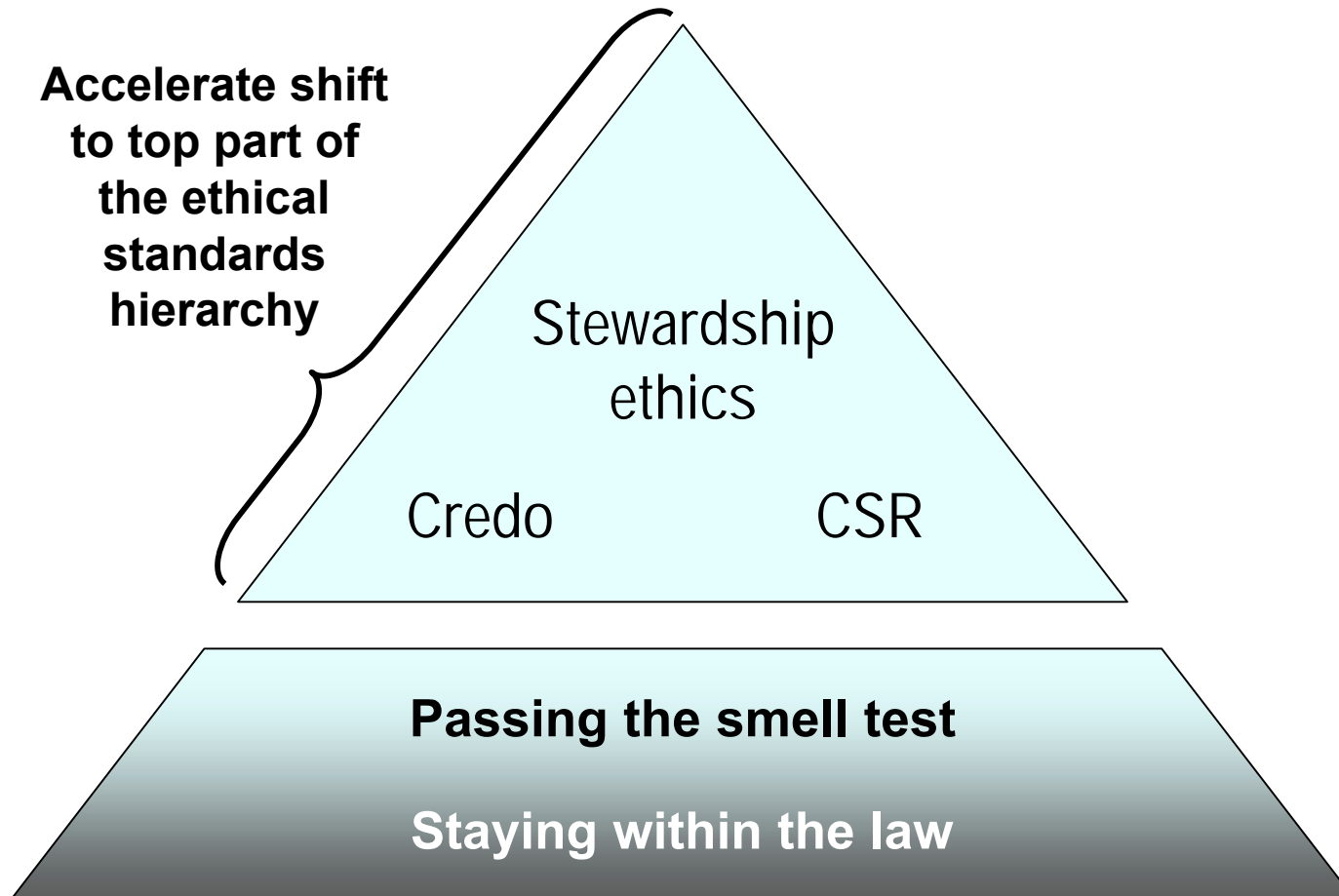
Stewardship ethics fits with cultural trends

Social Trends

○ Greater demand for honesty and openness from business

○ Struggle with relative vs. absolute moral values

○ Hunger for civil society/communal values

Life Stage Trends:

○ Boomers' desire to leave a positive legacy

○ Young adults' search for meaningful goals

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Summary/Conclusion

○ The present period is an aberration

○ Its negativities have not yet run their course

○ Our great universities can either prolong or shorten the aberration, depending on their leadership stance.

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