

Philip Morris International: Religious Wisdom as a Strategic Resource

A commissioned independent study on trustworthiness, institutional repair and sustained conduct

Summary

Philip Morris International commissioned an independent exploration of what religious wisdom traditions might contribute to the challenge of restoring institutional trust. Rather than treating religion solely as an employee identity or workplace-accommodation issue, the project drew on Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions as sources of insight into truthfulness, transparency, repentance, forgiveness, stewardship and sustained institutional transformation.

This is a case of commissioned institutional learning and reframing. It does not demonstrate that PMI implemented the framework or restored stakeholder trust.

The organisational challenge

Trust is a foundational but intangible corporate asset. The commissioned paper observes that, at an institutional level, trust is a non-material asset on which material success depends, but that serious or repeated breaches can produce a trust deficit that conventional corporate responses may not repair.

Traditional approaches often focus on apology, restitution, new policies and assurances that misconduct will not recur. These steps may be necessary, but the authors argue that they can remain transactional and may be insufficient where harm, anger and distrust are deeply embedded. Religious traditions may expand the frame through which institutions understand broken relationships and their repair.

The formative source

PMI asked David W. Miller, serving as an independent external ethics adviser, to examine the restoration of trust in a corporate context by drawing on wisdom found in religious traditions. Miller engaged Michael J. Thate, consulted scholars and examined sources principally from Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The authors stated that their conclusions were independent and did not necessarily represent PMI's views.

The project treated the traditions not as decorative cultural references but as accumulated bodies of reflection on:

- human fallibility
- truth and deception

- responsibility
- confession and contrition
- forgiveness
- reconciliation
- stewardship
- covenant
- personal and institutional transformation

The authors argue that the difference and unfamiliarity of ancient traditions can widen institutional imagination, introduce new perspectives and enrich problem-solving.

From religious wisdom to a framework for institutional trustworthiness

The paper's framework moves beyond asking how an organisation can persuade stakeholders to trust it again. Instead, it asks how the organisation can become consistently worthy of trust.

Truthfulness and transparency: Trustworthiness requires sustained behaviour rather than messaging.

Honest self-examination: Institutions must confront motives, pressures and systems that contributed to failure.

Humility: A public or institutional humbling can become a turning point if it produces genuine change.

Transformation: Repair may require changes to underlying systems and even the business model.

Stewardship of time: Trust cannot be demanded or purchased; trustworthy conduct must be demonstrated over time.

Relational responsibility: Repair should involve those harmed rather than being designed solely by the institution.

Covenantal thinking: Durable relationships require commitments deeper than transactional exchange.

The paper states that lost trust cannot simply be recovered but must be built anew through sustained truthfulness, transparency and reparative practice. It also uses religious conversion as an analogy for lasting institutional transformation: a genuine change of direction rather than a reputational adjustment.

Institutional learning pathway

WISDOM TRADITIONS	Truthfulness, repentance, forgiveness, stewardship and covenant.
EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING	Trust as relational, earned and dependent on character and sustained conduct.
POTENTIAL PRACTICES	Self-examination, transparency, stakeholder participation, system repair and long-term transformation.
POSSIBLE OUTCOME	Greater trustworthiness and the possibility, never the guarantee, of renewed stakeholder trust.

Why this matters to Boards

The PMI case shows a different pathway from Japan Airlines. It is not primarily about a leader carrying personal convictions into an organisation. It is about an institution deliberately reaching outside conventional management literature for resources that might deepen its understanding of a difficult governance problem.

That is strategically important because religion and belief communities preserve extensive intellectual and practical traditions concerning:

- how trust is built
- why institutions fail
- how power should be exercised
- what accountability requires
- how relationships may be repaired
- how change becomes credible

Board lesson

Religion and belief can contribute not only through employees and leaders, but also as bodies of accumulated wisdom that broaden institutional decision-making and organisational problem-solving.

Important qualification

This should be presented as a case of institutional learning and reframing, not as evidence that PMI implemented all eleven theses or successfully restored stakeholder trust. The commissioned work offers a serious example of a company opening a major strategic and reputational question to insights from religious traditions.

Selected sources

- David W. Miller and Michael J. Thate, *The Restoration of Trust? Insights and Lessons from Wisdom Traditions*, commissioned by Philip Morris International.
- The authors state that their research and conclusions were independent and did not necessarily reflect PMI's views.