

## Leadership Barometer 172 Leaders Read Your Hat Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



If you are a leader, sometimes you need to stop and read your hat.

I used to enjoy watching the *ALF* TV Series. The gags were very creative, as was furry little creature named ALF. I remember a concept from one episode that has a lot to do with trust.

In that edition, Willie (ALF's host) was dealing with a CEO of a large organization. This leader wore a hat that was inscribed, "Save the Earth!" The leader was sending a good message with his hat. In reality, he was making decisions to dump toxic waste from his factory into the river.

Willie tried in vain to have this manager see the hypocrisy of his actions. Finally, in exasperation, he yelled at the leader, "Read your hat, man."

### **Avoid hypocrisy**

Reminding leaders when they are not practicing what they preach can build trust. In some situations, it can destroy what trust is already there. It all depends on how the leader treats the person who points out the hypocrisy.

If the leader punishes an individual for pointing out a perceived inconsistency, then he is destroying trust. (I am using the male pronoun here, but realize the situation is gender neutral.) He is blocking a vital communication channel in the future. Future messages of potentially wrong behavior will never reach the light of day.

Make sure your actions model your words and reward people who point out when you slip up.

### **Read your hat more often**

It is probably impossible for any leader, no matter how enlightened, to practice this 100% of the time. The person with a gripe may pick a poor time, place, or method to describe the paradox.

Leaders need to move from a typical low percentage of making people feel glad when they point out a disconnect. In my opinion, most leaders have the patience to do this only 10% of the time. Those who can do in over 70% of the time will create higher trust cultures.

### **Why many leaders cannot do it consistently**

Every thought and action a leader takes is coming from his brain. The leader is convinced what he is advocating is the right thing to do under the circumstances. If someone suggests a different path, then that person must be wrong according to the leader. Therefore, he punishes the person for being candid. That action destroys trust fast.

### **Conclusion**

The leader is wearing a hat with the words, "I want to build trust" on it. The best method to do it is to reinforce people for their candor. In other words, make the person glad when he or she points out something you have done that seems inconsistent or wrong. Read your hat!

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