

Leaders. Read Your Hat

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I used to enjoy watching the Alf show on television. The gags were very creative, as was Alf. I remember a concept from one episode that has a lot to do with trust. In that edition, Willie was dealing with a CEO of a large organization. This leader wore t-shirts and a hat that were inscribed, "Save the Earth!" The leader was saying the right things, but 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."

The concept of reminding leaders when they are not practicing what they preach is one that can build trust or it can destroy what trust is already there. It all depends on how the person wearing the hat treats the person holding up the "You are Acting Like a Hypocrite" sign.

If the leader becomes defensive and in some way punishes an individual for pointing out a perceived inconsistency, then that leader is destroying trust by blocking a vital communication channel in the future. Future messages of potentially wrong behavior will not be sent.

It is probably impossible for any leader, no matter how enlightened, to practice this 100% of the time. For one thing, the person with a gripe may pick a poor time, place, or method of describing the paradox. I think if a leader can move from a typical low percentage of making people feel glad when they point out a disconnect (my opinion is that most leaders can do this roughly 10% of the time) to doing it over 70% of the time, then the culture will shift. The environment will become one of higher trust and respect.

If the leader is wearing a hat with the words, "I want to build trust" on it, then the best way to do it is to reinforce people when they are candid with their observations. 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!

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com 585-392-7763. Website www.leadergrow.com BLOG www.thetrustambassador.com He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*

