

The “I AM RIGHT” Paradox

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

One of my MBA students made a comment once that really caught me off guard. He said “I am the type of person who always does what he thinks is right.” The statement sounded perfectly logical until I thought about it a little more. I wonder if there is a person alive who could not make that same claim.



Invariably, people are going to do what they believe is right at that moment. If there is a better alternative action, then they will do that. Human beings instinctively rationalize all data to come up with the best option now, “all things considered.” In essence, we all wear an invisible “I AM RIGHT” button all day every day.

I started weaving this concept into my leadership classes, because it represents some insight that can help leaders build higher trust, if they understand it. The challenging part is to become smart enough to practice it in the crucible of everyday events. This article will describe the process to become enlightened and how to implement the concept in your life. The ideas in this paper can reduce conflict regardless of one’s position in life, but I will focus the remainder of this article on how leaders can use the concept to increase trust within their span of influence.

Sometimes I run into a leader who claims to not have this problem. He might say, “I have always been a highly participative manager and do not form opinions until I understand what my people are thinking.” Regardless of how much information is gathered in advance, once a leader reaches an understanding of the “right” decision, he then owns that point of view. (Note: In this article, I will use the male pronoun to avoid the awkward “he or she” language, but the logic is gender neutral.)

Another way leaders try to be participative is to send out “test balloons” that sound like this: “I am wondering what you all think about reducing the level of overtime for the next couple months.” The problem here is that by simply broaching the question, the leader has put his thumb on the scale, so everyone already knows what he considers the “correct” answer.

Once a leader has reached a conclusion, regardless of how he got there, he owns that opinion, so if someone else has a dissenting point of view, the leader instinctively believes that person is “wrong.” Human nature then takes over, and the leader pushes

back on the person who disagrees. This pushback is not reinforcing to the person who disagrees. The leader in some ways punishes the dissenter for having a different opinion.

According to behavior theory, being rewarded for an action will cause more of that behavior in the future and being punished tends to extinguish that behavior in the future. People quickly learn not to cross the leader once his opinion is known. It is just not safe to do it because the leader has positional power and the ability to inflict future pain in numerous ways. This is where the link to trust is critical.

In my leadership work, my favorite quote is, “The absence of fear is the incubator of trust.” My observation is that trust between people will grow easily in an environment of no fear. Creating a culture where people know the leader is not going to punish them for having an opposing view is the best way to reduce fear in an organization.

This is where the I AM RIGHT concept has so much power. If the leader can picture that the person who is not in agreement is also wearing the button, then it reminds the leader to modify his behavior when another person brings up an opposing point. The leader recognizes that he believes his way is right, but also recognizes the other employee believes his view is the correct one.

That understanding can change the conversation from one of defensive pushback and punishment to one of curious inquiry, deep listening, and understanding. The opposing employee will feel **rewarded rather than punished**. If the leader changes his stance based on the input, then the reward is direct. If the leader considers the alternate seriously but goes with his first instinct, the employee still feels he is rewarded because his points were heard, he was treated like an adult, and he was shown respect. So, regardless of the final decision, trust has been enhanced rather than reduced.

Leaders need to know that the first instinct to defend their initial position may be working against higher trust. They can modify the approach to suspend their own judgment when there is a question or alternate view and truly listen to the opposing view. Asking others what they think about the question will also help to reinforce the nay-sayer, and the trust will still grow. Discussion can also help the employees understand the full set of considerations that went into the decision and therefore appreciate the wisdom of a broader view.

The essential ingredient in this formula for building trust is for the leader to recognize he is wearing the I AM RIGHT Button, but that everyone else has on an invisible I AM RIGHT Button too. The ability to do that is a game changer for leaders who want to have a culture of high trust.

I call this skill “reinforcing candor,” because it is a key behavioral change that has huge impact on the culture. To be able to calmly accept a dissenting view and treat the employee with respect often goes against the gut instinct behaviors. That is why it is so uncommon in real life. If you can learn to do this, you will become one of the elite

leaders of our time. It takes practice to do this, so start today and watch the trust level in your organization rise steadily.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals (2003), 2. Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online (2006), 3. Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind (2009), and 4. Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change (2014). In addition, he has authored over 600 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

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