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How to earn respect as a leader

Posted 22 Sep 2015 by

[\(/users/jwhitehurst\)](#) Jim Whitehurst [\(/users/jwhitehurst\)](#) (Red Hat)

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In this adaptation from his new book, the CEO of Red Hat, Jim Whitehurst, shares advice for how to build credibility in an organization—especially if you are new to it, have a different background than others on your team, or are not in a position of authority.

How would you be perceived in your organization's meritocracy? Ask yourself if you command respect because people *have to* respect you or, rather, because you've truly earned respect. Many people aspire to titles because that forces others to respect them. But, to me, this is the lowest form of respect, especially if the person you're receiving respect from is more junior than you or works at a lower rung in the bureaucracy. Respect has to be earned. It's not about a title.

When people respect you only because of your authority, they will give you the minimum effort. Some incredibly brilliant people have earned respect because they are so smart, but most people aren't incredibly brilliant. So how do you go about it? There are three ways:

Show passion for the purpose of your organization and constantly drive interest in it. People are drawn to and generally want to follow passionate people.

Demonstrate confidence. Many people in positions of authority don't show confidence well, especially with their team. It's one thing to convey confidence to your own boss, but it's just as important to share that same confidence with those who report to you.

Engage your people. Trust has to be earned, and it's not enough to call a meeting and tell people what to do and then retreat behind your own closed door. You also need to be open about your weaknesses and ask the team to help you address them. Nobody expects perfection, so don't hold your cards too close; get your team to work with you.

Joining Red Hat posed a challenge for me—would I be trusted and respected as a leader? While I had considerable leadership experience and a degree in computer science, I had no background in enterprise IT. In a very open, interactive culture like Red Hat's, there was no way for me to fake it. However, I found that being very open about the things I did not know actually had the opposite effect than I would have thought. It helped me build credibility. My team learned that I

wouldn't feign knowledge where I did not have it and therefore was more likely to give me the benefit of the doubt when I did talk confidently. No one expects leaders to know everything all the time, but we do expect our leaders to be truthful and forthright.

Owning up to what you don't know is an important way to build trust. But it's just as important to be able to contribute your knowledge and expertise in a way that's more about the community and what it needs than it is about you and your ego. At Red Hat, one of the greatest insults or blows to your ego comes when you put something on one of the internal discussion threads and receive nothing back—neither positive nor negative. "That's the worst outcome, truly," Kim Jokisch, director of Red Hat's employment branding and communications team, told me. "That means they're likely ignoring it, which means you've failed in some way."

Even so, the goal is not simply to generate posts and responses. That's not what builds your credibility. Rather, it's all about your true purpose. "People smell out intention around here," says Emily Stancil Martinez, a member of Red Hat's corporate communications team. "If your intention is just to stick your nose into every little thing so you can be front and center, people see it and will take note. But if you are thoughtful when you weigh in, in order to make a real contribution for the greater good, that's what truly builds your credibility and raises your profile."

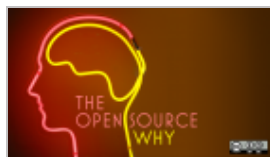
But having the patience to build up that level of credibility can be frustrating to someone who joins the team. A new hire—especially someone who hasn't already built a reputation in the open source community—simply won't have the same level of influence. It doesn't always seem fair, and some good ideas are likely never heard as a result. An enthusiastic new hire may join the company with the thought that his ideas will be heard equally, only to fall into a rut when he feels as if his good ideas are ignored. That can quickly lead to a disengaged employee who either leaves the company or, worse, becomes a cultural naysayer. Part of the solution is to set expectations so people know that earning a reputation takes time and hard work. It's as if you want to sell something on a site like eBay: without any history or reputation score, you can find it far harder to locate buyers interested in what you're selling. That takes time, patience, and a commitment to working at building your reputation, which isn't something everyone enjoys doing. To make the process easier, here are some tips:

1. **Don't use phrases like "the boss wants it this way" or rely on hierarchical name dropping.** While that may get things done in the short term, it can curtail discussion that's core to building a meritocracy.
2. **Publicly recognize a great effort or contribution.** It can be a simple thank-you e-mail in which you copy the whole team.
3. **Consider whether your influence comes from your position in the hierarchy (or access to privileged information), or whether it truly comes from respect that you have earned.** If it is the former, start working on the latter.
4. **Proactively ask for feedback and ideas on a specific topic.** You must respond to them all, but implement only the good ones. And don't just take the best ideas and move on; take every opportunity to reinforce the spirit of meritocracy by giving credit where it's due.
5. **Reward a high-performing member of your team with an interesting assignment, even if it is not in his or her usual area.**

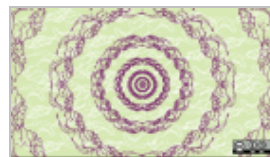
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[Don Watkins \(/users/don-watkins\)](/users/don-watkins) on 22 Sep 2015

" I found that being very open about the things I did not know actually had the opposite effect than I would have thought. It helped me build credibility." I love that quote. Transparency and authenticity are indispensable leadership skills.

2 0



Jim Whitehurst is President and Chief Executive Officer of Red Hat, the world's leading provider of open source enterprise IT products and services. With a background in business

development, finance, and global operations, Whitehurst has proven expertise in helping companies flourish—even in the most challenging economic and business environments. Since joining Red Hat in 2008, Whitehurst has grown the company, and its influence on a variety of industries, by reaching key milestones—the

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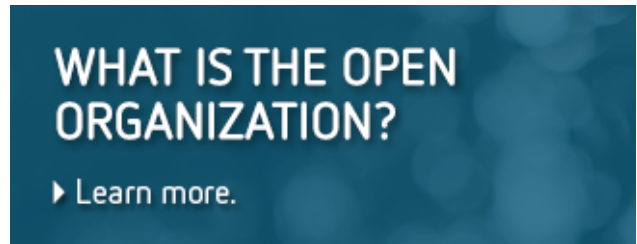
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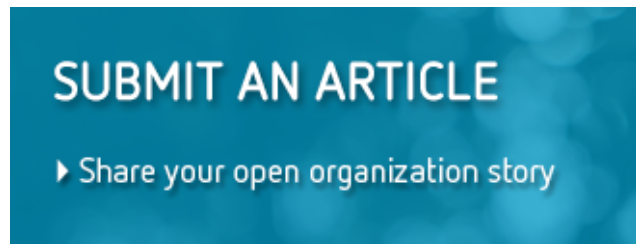
Recommended reading

- [Create a culture where difficult conversations aren't so hard \(https://hbr.org/2015/08/create-a-culture-where-difficult-conversations-arent-so-hard"\)](https://hbr.org/2015/08/create-a-culture-where-difficult-conversations-arent-so-hard)
- [Unlearning Command And Control \(http://www.forbes.com/sites/brookmanville/2015/08/10/unlearning-command-and-control/\)](http://www.forbes.com/sites/brookmanville/2015/08/10/unlearning-command-and-control/)

- [Managing Performance When It's Hard to Measure](https://hbr.org/2015/05/managing-performance-when-its-hard-to-measure)
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- [Why I Wrote "The Open Organization"](http://www.redhat.com/en/about/blog/why-i-wrote-open-organization)
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