

Victims of useless potions and empty gestures

By Dr. Lynn Johnson,
Founder, Breaking The Brand Project
www.breakingthebrand.org

An unborn rhino foetus removed from its dead and de-horned mother. This particular poaching incident also cost a wildlife ranger his life. It is not enough for certain businessmen in Vietnam to try to disassociate themselves from this killing spree by saying, "We don't do the poaching, we only buy the horn". This destruction is carried out to fulfil their personal desire for status, bestowed through obtaining a rare, expensive product—genuine rhino horn.

It is common for the wealthy to measure their own wealth and that of others by the luxury goods they own, but there is a stark difference between buying a Bentley or Rolex and obtaining illegal wildlife products. The drive to demonstrate status goes too far when it results in wiping out an iconic species, and in less than one generation to boot. Just how anxious can users of rhino horn be for their peers' acceptance to remain blind to the devastating consequences of their actions?

Humans are social creatures and we aim to conform to social norms to demonstrate that we are willing to fit in. However, this in itself cannot justify destructive behaviour, but all too often the gap between actions and consequences is too large in time or space for us to draw the link. Users of rhino horn are not a large group and consumption is a new fad, having only started in 2007. Although some of the people who buy and use this product are upheld as leading



The trade in rhino horn to Viet Nam is wiping out a species.



members of the business community in Vietnam, their actions in this regard are not what we look for in our leaders or even in our business partners.

Many businesspeople are delicate creatures. As someone who has made a living as a business coach for over a decade and worked with a multitude of executives, I know how fragile their egos can be. When they are struggling with their self-image, they often reach for 'badges of status', such as a corner office, luxury cars, and executive programmes at international business schools to help them feel on top of their game and demonstrate that they are still on the A-team.

As we work together during coaching

sessions, they build a stronger inner self-image. They learn to control their ego rather than the other way around, and become less needy of status symbols or reassurance. Ego blurs judgement and does not make for quality long-term relationships, professional or personal. As ego is corralled, people become more emotionally grounded, which gives them the capacity to have more empathy for the people and the world around them.

Our experience and intuition tells us that good leaders - true leaders - evolve, in part, into custodians. They look to make a positive difference in the world. They begin to consider the consequences of their actions, even the ones they are not directly responsible for.

As the Vietnamese economy has grown at an unprecedented pace, local businessmen have come by significant wealth. These men want to be seen as leaders and, given the recent Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement, more Vietnamese businessmen will seek global opportunities. The TPP is not only about promoting economic growth and opportunities, it is also about fostering greater transparency and good governance.

Regrettably, many Vietnamese businessmen are notorious users of rhino horn, and are thus driving the current killing spree. More businesses around the world will look to the quality of Vietnamese corporate leadership, and future business potentially hinges upon the conclusions they draw.

Wild rhinos became extinct in Vietnam in 2010, lost forever on this current generation's watch. Will the world's remaining wild rhinos be lost on their watch too, because of their hunger for a status symbol, their drive to fit into the local business elite? In taking the next step from local to global business, it is critical for those involved to see that their behaviour—using rhino horn to gain favours—inspires repulsion rather than awe.

If they continue to serve their unethical cravings, all they will turn out to be is another generation of ordinary businessmen, who in a decade or two will be forgotten to all but a few family members and friends, if that.

But if a small group of influential men could work together to influence each other and those around them, to stop using rhino horns as a useless detox drink or a needless business gift, they will be remembered for a hundred and more years as the generation of Vietnamese businessmen that stood together and saved a 50 million-year-old iconic animal species. This would show quality leadership, true and transformational leadership. This could demonstrate that they are the type of people the world should want to do business with. They would become the generation known as the 'Rhino Custodians'—a far more captivating legacy. I hope they choose this path—for the world is watching. ■

