

COMMITMENT CONVERSATIONS

The Process, Pitfalls and Possibilities of Promise-making

BY Micki McMillan, MCC

A promise is a cloud;

FULFILLMENT IS RAIN.

- ARABIAN PROVERB

LANGUAGE IS ACTION A **commitment** is a pledge, a bond between two or more people. When you make a commitment, you aren't just giving your word; you're agreeing to take action. Every family, every friendship, every community and certainly every organization is a network of commitments. In business, the more rigorous the commitments, the more effective the organization—in customer satisfaction, safety, employee satisfaction and profitability.

Commitment conversations are operational tools by which leaders coordinate action and measure results. Through our commitments, we are affecting change and shaping new realities.

PROMISES, OFFERS, REQUESTS, OH MY As leaders who inspire and coordinate action, we use written and spoken conversation as our primary tools for establishing, tracking and fulfilling commitments. In our commitment conversations, we use three types of social constructs: offers, requests and promises.

MAKE ME AN OFFER I CAN'T REFUSE.

An **offer** is a conditional promise in which one person expresses readiness to do something for or on behalf of someone else. Offers, like requests and promises, can be explicit or implicit. For example, an explicit offer might sound like, "You are eligible for a full benefits package on July 20. This is 90 days past your hire date. The explanation of what the full benefits package includes is in this employee handbook. No action is required on your part to receive your benefits, since HR will take care of the necessary details." Whereas an implicit offer might sound like, "You're eligible for a full benefits package after 90 days."

Sometimes offers need to be clarified. Other times, an offer is up for negotiation. Offers (or counteroffers) may be accepted or rejected. However, *whenever an offer is made, it is never a commitment.* It is, simply, an offer.

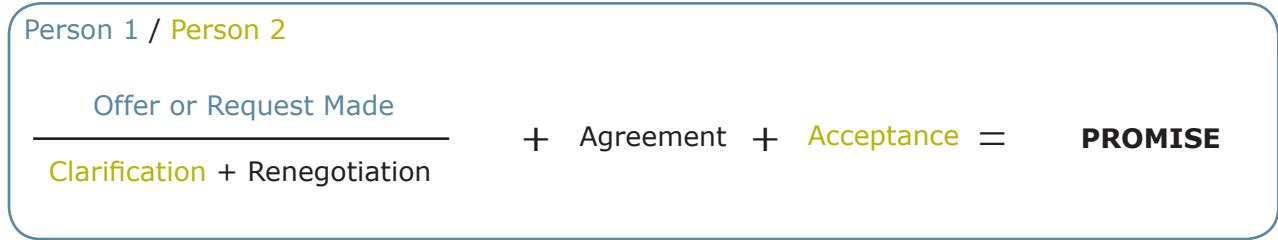
WOULD YOU, COULD YOU...?

A **request** is an attempt to obtain a promise. When you make a request, you have not automatically exacted a commitment. *Just because you make a request, you cannot expect others to fulfill it.* People must accept your request and agree to fulfill it before you can expect it will be executed.

As with offers, people have the right to ask you for and receive clarification about the terms of the

request. People may also make counteroffers and renegotiate the terms of the request before mov-

Figure 1
What Is A Promise?



We must not promise

WHAT WE OUGHT NOT, LEST WE BE CALLED
ON TO PERFORM WHAT WE CANNOT.

- ABRAHAM LINCOLN

When you make requests, or when you are on the receiving end of a request, try to remember this: a request is meant to take care of a concern. You should not be focused on convincing (or expecting) another person to accept your request. Likewise, you should never feel obligated to accept a request. Rather, both people need to engage one another and determine if the person of whom you’re making the request is the right person—at this time—to help address the concern.

How to make a request

Here are some tips for making explicit, fair requests:

1. Say, “I.”

Read the following two statements. (1) “Discharges need to happen on time.” (2) “I need you to make sure patients are discharged by 5:30 PM.” Which statement seems more powerful, more motivating to you? And which statement seems to pave the way for more measurable results?

2. Ask.

Don’t invite. Don’t suggest. Don’t hope. Don’t say, “Wouldn’t it be nice if...” or, “I’d prefer...” or “I don’t like the way this looks,” or “I’m not happy with these options.” Clearly, explicitly make your request: “I’m not happy with these options. The messages are off brand, and I think the copy is just too long. Will you bring me three new options to consider before you leave tomorrow?”

3. Direct it to one person.

You need to address your request to someone specific. For instance, when you say, “We really need to respond to this,” no one can be clear on who will do what, when

Negotiating *Before* Committing

Yes or No are not the only possible responses to an offer or request.

You can make a counteroffer:

“I cannot swing that deadline without pushing back the Manfred project. Are you willing to accept that?”

Then, the original offer or request is no longer on the table and the counteroffer is up for acceptance, rejection or further renegotiation.

and how. There’s too much room for misunderstanding and too much opportunity for no one to step up. In other words, when all of us are responsible, no one is responsible.

Similarly, when you ask, “Can somebody please tell me what went wrong?” it’s a sure-fire way to silence the room. Maybe somebody will respond. Tentatively. Feeling their way rather than speaking authentically. Or, more likely, nobody will speak because they’re waiting for *you* to say what you think went wrong. If you really want to get results, you need to speak directly to a listener: “Maya, tell me, what are your thoughts about this situation?” “Carmine, can you partner with Micah? I want you to hammer out our best options, troubleshoot them and then present them to me before the end of this month.”

4. Set the bar. And the timer.

You’ve got to let people know what your expectations are. Under what conditions will you perceive a commitment fulfilled? What will make you feel satisfied? By when does the commitment need to be fulfilled? And you’ve got to make sure the listener understands the terms of your request.

For example, when you make a request, including the conditions of your satisfaction and the expected time of delivery may sound like this: “Jorge, I’ve written this report for the Board. Will you please read it for accuracy? I’m not sure that the statistics I’ve reported from your department are correct. The Board meeting is next Tuesday. Will you be able to read the report, correct any errors and meet with me on Friday at noon?”

5. Get commitment.

When you make a request, you must receive explicit agreement to the terms of your request: that person must verbally accept your request, out loud or in print. Remember, a commitment can only be fulfilled if performance lines up with expectations. And another person is only obligated to perform if he explicitly accepts your request.

A good way to ensure this acceptance is to ask for it: “Gillian, are you willing to take that on this month?” And, if she accepts your request, recap the conversation, “So, if I understand our conversation correctly, you’re going to identify the associates on your team whom you think have the potential to go to the next level. And you’re going to

get that list to me and to HR no later than 10AM next Thursday. Is that right?”

6. Leave no room for ambiguity.

While it may seem obvious, you actually need to express your request in such a way that the other person can hear it and respond to it. The classic case of this breakdown is when your daughter asks you—at 9:30, Thursday night—to make 3 dozen cupcakes for her lacrosse club’s bake sale tomorrow. “Mom,” she says, “I posted the flyer on the fridge, like, two weeks ago!” She may have thought she sent you a message, but she didn’t actually voice her request until the last minute. Likewise, you may be waiting for Peter to get you those Test Procedure Spec reports, but unless he knows you’re waiting for them—because you asked him for them, by 9AM Friday—you can’t expect them to show up.

Power and Commitment

In our culture, we tend to assume people with power have the right to extract commitments from less powerful people. If we are in the power seat, many of us adopt this posture: “I have the authority to control your behavior, and if you deny me this authority, I will find a way to punish you.”

In the same way, when someone with more power asks us for something, we feel obligated to say yes, or at least to acquiesce. ...Why is that?

Reflect on this cultural habit and mental model:

- Do you now, or have you ever held this mental model?
- How has that mental model served you? Your relationships?
- When a colleague or a subordinate staff member questions your offer or declines your request, do you feel like your power has been challenged?
- Why?
- How do you know he is challenging your power or authority?
- Where is that challenge coming from?
- What else might that “challenge” be?
- What’s going on with you when you step into this mindset?
- Is it possible that what you perceive as a challenge is a form of productive inquiry or advocacy?

- What else might be going on with you?
- What's going on with the person you thought was challenging you? E.g. is she even able to fulfill your request? What conflicts might she be trying to manage?
- Why are you so threatened?

If someone expresses discomfort with your (reasonable, legal) offer or request, or you sense there's some discomfort, try to create a safe space for dialogue. Help your team stretch by stepping into productive inquiry and advocacy:

- "I can see you're uncomfortable. What's the nature of your concern?"
- "I understand. Those are all good reasons. Let's think of ways to release you from those commitments while we work on X."
- "What needs to happen before you're comfortable accepting my request?"

Finally, if you're comfortable with your colleagues and staff negotiating through offers and requests, if you're comfortable and trust them to say, "No," and if you're committed to multilateral (vs. unilateral) control, you may still have a tough time convincing your team. Lots of people say they're comfortable with it, but when they're tested, it's clear they aren't. Here are a few suggestions for how to build trust:

- "I've been in situations where I've been told, 'It's okay to speak your mind,' but when I did, I was penalized. So, I can understand your hesitation. Here's the thing... if you don't believe me when I tell you it's okay to speak up, and you don't test me to see if I'm being straight with you, we're never going to get past this place of intention, mistrust and disappointment. How can I show you I'm for real, here?"
- "I've been told, 'It's okay to say no, but when I did, people withheld other opportunities from me and held grudges. But, I'm serious about this. What can I do to help you and encourage you to at least test me and see if I mean what I say?"

RÉSPONDEZ SI'L VOUS PLAÎT

There are five ways to respond to an offer or request:

1. **Ask for clarification**, e.g. "I'm not sure I understand what you're asking of me." Or, "If I understand you correctly, you're offering X if I can produce Y. Is that right?"
2. **Make a counteroffer and negotiate** the terms and conditions of the request.

Committing to Respond

When presented with an offer or a request, you need not respond immediately.

You can express your willingness to commit, but also your need to get your ducks in a row first.

“That sounds terrific, Curtis. Before I say yes, though, I need to run a few numbers and check resource availability.”

Or, “I can’t answer that right now. I need you to give me more time. I’ll have a response to you by the end of the day today. Okay?”

3. **Commit to respond**, e.g. “I can’t make that commitment right now. I need to check XYZ. But, I will have a response for you by (DATE and/or TIME).
4. **No, I decline**. “Yes” means nothing unless you have the capability to say, “No.” And it’s imperative to learn to say, “No.” Sometimes you’ll need to share your reasons, other times you won’t. The power of saying, “No” tells others that you have boundaries and the courage of your convictions. Strangely, it also builds trust since you are signaling to another that you take your role seriously—you understand your resource limitations (such as staff time, capability, your own time).
5. **Yes, I accept**. And the commitment has been made.

YOU MADE ME PROMISES, PROMISES...

A **promise** is a declaration of your intention to help someone. When you make a promise, you vouch for your own future action and results, or you vouch for others whom, presumably, you have permission or authority to speak for. “I will you email you those figures before I leave tonight.” Or, “I’ll put my best person on this project. We’ll get you exactly what you need before the week is out.”

Know what you’re getting into.

While a promise can focus your action, promises can and will limit you, too. For example, when you say, “I’ll put my best person on this project,” your best person may not be available to deliver on other projects. This may or may not be problematic for you. It depends on what other promises you (and he!) have made. In other words, when you make a commitment, you are implicitly promising that you will not make other commitments that will compromise or sabotage your ability to make good on your original promise.

Also, understand that many promises spontaneously generate—and potentially threaten—other promises. Like the rungs on Jacob’s Ladder, your promise to present next Tuesday at the Board meeting hinges upon the sales leader’s agreement to get you the data by Friday. But before he can do that, he’s asked each of the office leaders to promise to send him their numbers before close of business on Wednesday. And since you have to analyze the data and prep next year’s budgets before you can hand the file off to your assistant who will promise to have your slides ready by 4PM on Monday, you have to promise your wife, “I’ll

make it up to you,” since you have to break your promise to help her get the house and yard ready for the barbecue on Saturday.

Thou ought to be nice,

EVEN TO SUPERSTITION, IN KEEP-
ING THY PROMISES, AND THEREFORE
EQUALLY CAUTIOUS IN MAKING THEM.

- THOMAS FULLER

*Every promise is a strand in a fragile, sticky web of commitments:
when every strand holds fast, you and your organization are stronger.
But, when promises don't stick, your network, your effectiveness
and your reputation begin to break down.*

When good promises go bad

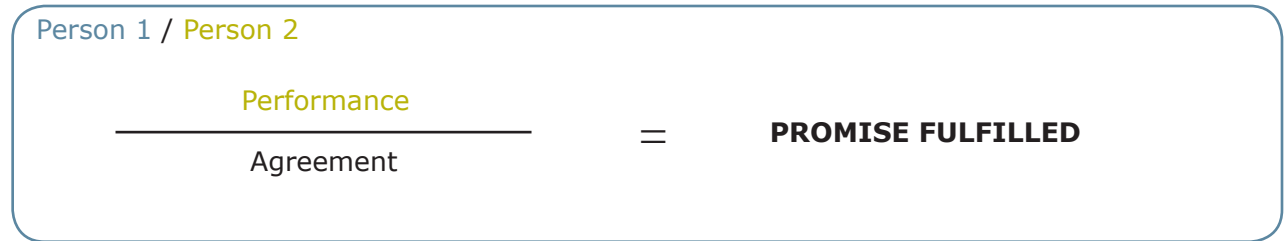
There are a ton of reasons why people break promises and commitments fall through. Often, one person thinks a commitment has been made, but the other does not (see Offers and Requests). Other times, it's because the standards, or terms and conditions of the commitment have not been agreed upon or made clear, up front.

For example, suppose Lin, an associate, asks you, “Can I come by tomorrow to show you my proposal before I pitch it to my client?” You say, “Sure, sure. How about tomorrow afternoon, anytime after lunch.” And then... tomorrow comes. The associate appears at your door at 3:45 PM. “After lunch.” Unfortunately, you left the office at 3:00 PM for a meeting across town. You thought, since she didn't come by just after lunchtime, Lin no longer needed your help. When Lin appears in your door the next morning to ask you what happened, you explain to her, “I didn't see you after lunch, so I thought you didn't need me anymore.” Meanwhile, she thinks you reneged, or skipped out or maybe that you don't value her. Lin might even think you just paid her a little lip service and never even intended to help her in the first place.

Even these “small” types of commitment breakdowns can crack your reputation, your team and your organization. But, you can avoid these types of misunderstandings if one person makes an offer or a request in explicit terms; if the other person(s) accepts the offer or request; and if that person fulfills it according to the first person's standards and expectations.

Remember a commitment is never satisfied unless *all* parties involved in the commitment believe that it has been fulfilled by meeting *all* the terms of the agreement (Fig. 2).

Figure 2
A Promise Fulfilled



IT'S ABOUT TRUST.

When you engage in a commitment, you are creating an opportunity to test, build or destroy trust. As Fernando Flores says, **trust** is one person's assessment of another person's competency, sincerity and reliability. So when you miscommunicate, break a promise or fail to fulfill a commitment, you create gaps between who you are at your core, your actions and either the results you desire or the results you deliver. These gaps manifest as breakdowns in trust at the personal and organizational level.

Even with the best of intentions, trust can be challenged. Breakdowns are bound to happen, and gaps are bound to arise. We are complex people operating in complex situations, and there are so many factors that can affect our abilities to fulfill commitments. That's why it's important to not only strive to prevent commitment breakdowns, you must also know how to act when they happen (Table 1).

Table 1
The Do's and Don'ts of
Commitment Breakdowns

DON'T'S	DO'S
<p><i>Don't vent to friends and other sympathetic characters.</i></p> <p>Venting and complaining isn't going to help improve the situation, and in the end, it's not even going to make you feel better. For most people, this venting fuels their anger, grows deeper resentments and casts them into the role of victim. Venting, while a knee jerk reaction, does nothing to move you forward, and it does nothing to repair the damage done. Venting is like taking a tonic to cover up the discomfort: it may feel good for a moment or two, but in the end, you have not stepped up to the real issue.</p> <p>Many times, this venting, which is usually a barrage of ungrounded assessments, actually spreads baseless conflict. Colleagues who were once collaborative (or neutral) may become oppositional and resentful, without cause.</p>	<p><i>Do speak with the person whom you feel has missed a commitment to you. And do it as soon as possible.</i></p> <p>The longer you wait to address the issue, the more time it has to fester or scar. And the only person who can help you in this process is the person with whom you shared a commitment.</p> <p>Remember, your goal isn't to tarnish someone's reputation or gain sympathy from third parties; your goal is to resolve the problem and rebuild trust, so you all can be more effective. You need to make an actionable complaint.</p> <p>Read more about actionable complaints in the next section, Recommitment Conversations.</p>

Table 1, *continued*
 The Do's and Don'ts of
 Commitment Breakdowns

Trust exists when you demonstrate your competency, sincerity and reliability.

Competency

"I assess you have the skills and resources necessary to fulfill your commitment."

Sincerity "I assess you expect to fulfill your commitment."

Reliability "I assess that you are dependable, based on my history with you and/or based on your history with other people whom I trust."

<p><i>Don't unload on the person who missed the commitment, or who thinks you missed your commitment to them.</i></p> <p>When we give somebody "a piece of our mind" or decide to tell them off, we are only a shadow of our best selves. These (usually one-sided) conversations are really about assigning blame. This type of attack is rarely productive.</p>	<p><i>Check your intention.</i></p> <p>Yes, you want to move forward. Do you also want to "put this person in his place"? Do you want revenge? Do you want to have ammunition against the person? Do you want to appear superior? Do you want to be right? Or, do you want to find out what you might have done to prevent this situation? Do you want to learn more about this person, what they're going through and how to help them be more effective? Do you want to strengthen your relationship with this person, and perhaps even with yourself?</p> <p>If an apology is called for make it. And if an actionable complaint is appropriate, have that conversation, too.</p> <p>Read more about apologies and actionable complaints in the next section, Recommitment Conversations.</p>
<p><i>Don't assume anything.</i></p> <p>Chances are the commitment breakdown is not somebody's dark attempt to make things harder for you. And, if someone lets you down, it may not be a competence or character issue. 99% of the time, you've simply misunderstood each other and the situation. Once you start inferring "facts" from impressions, you're creating ungrounded assessments, "untruths" which will only become obstacles along your path to desired results.</p>	<p><i>Practice Productive Inquiry and Advocacy.</i></p> <p>Would you rather be "right" or effective?</p> <p>When you strive to be effective rather than cling to being right, possibilities open up. Review the article, "Productive Advocacy and Inquiry: How to Resolve Conflict Effectively and Make Vetted, Sound Decisions".</p>
<p><i>Don't complain to somebody else whom you think can and should step in.</i></p> <p>This, too, casts you as a victim. And depending on whom you ask, it may even cast you as a fink. Besides, if another person steps in, what are the chances they will really resolve the conflict in a way that prevents a similar problem from happening again? Pretty slim. Wouldn't you rather learn to be a more powerful person and a skillful communicator?</p>	<p><i>When faced with an irresolvable conflict, escalate to a higher authority with responsibility.</i></p> <p>The best way is to meet the boss <i>with</i> the person with whom you have conflict. Together you can present your points of view and all of you can engage in a productive conversation to get to the best result. This conversation isn't about win/lose: it's about deciding what is going to be best for the organization.</p>

RECOMMITMENT CONVERSATIONS

Sometimes commitments cannot be fulfilled, despite the best intentions. When this happens, skillful leaders engage in recommitment conversations. A **recommitment conversation** is dialogue meant to rebuild relationships, restore trust and reactivate effectiveness. There are two parts of a recommitment conversation: apologies and actionable complaints.

Transparency builds trust.

If a breakdown happens or you foresee a breakdown coming, have the courage to be honest about it.

You'll actually build trust because people will see you as honest, responsible, accountable and transparent.

I'M SORRY, AND I MEAN THAT.

When you do not meet your commitment, an apology is in order. An **apology** is an explicit expression of regret for an offense or a failure to fulfill a commitment. Apologies are shared directly with the person(s) whom you have let down. When you make an apology, you must acknowledge the specific commitment you made, call out your role in the commitment breakdown and explain what happened and why it happened. (An explanation is not an excuse: excuses attempt to reassign blame and overlook personal responsibility; whereas explanations are grounded in facts and revelations.)

You also need to investigate what damage has been done. For example, if Armand was counting on you to deliver the materials by 6 PM today, and you did not meet that deadline, you should explore what harm was done at several levels. First, with the materials coming late, how did that impact his commitments to his constituents? Second, will Armand trust you in the future? To what degree? Will he be willing to make another request of you? Once you understand what harm you've caused to your relationship and your organization, you can—and must—make an offer to help repair that damage and restore effectiveness.

Many people hold the mental model that apologies are akin to weakness. But we can be humble without giving up our dignity. Skillful, sincere apologies are honorable and necessary.

How to make a sincere, productive apology

1. Acknowledge that you missed on your commitment.
2. Explain why you missed that commitment.
3. Inquire about the damage done because you missed your commitment.
4. Ask what you can do to repair the damage done.

5. If there is something you can do, and they're willing to let you make it up to them, extend an offer to help in specific ways.
6. Plan for the future: discuss how to work together better in the future to rebuild trust and fulfill other commitments.

***YOU'VE MISSED YOUR COMMITMENT TO ME,
AND WE NEED TO GET BACK ON TRACK.***

When someone fails to meet a commitment made to you, it's time to make an actionable complaint. An **actionable complaint** is an explicit statement of dissatisfaction when a commitment is unfulfilled. Actionable complaints must be made right away to the person(s) who let you down; you must use the conversation as a means to seek resolution; and you need to come from a place of learning and forgiveness—not anger or victimhood. At the same time, actionable complaints end in requests and recommitments.

How to approach an actionable complaint

1. Identify what was committed to you and how that commitment was unfulfilled.
2. Ask why it broke down.
3. Explain what damage has been incurred.
4. Ask if the other person(s) would like to help repair the damage.
5. If they answer yes (which is the norm), make a request and work toward a new commitment.
6. Establish expectations for how you'd like similar commitments to work going forward.

Here's an example of an actionable complaint:

“Ana, you made a commitment to train all of the hospital nurses on our new discharge procedures by July 3. Today is August 1, and I've learned that Psyche and the PEDs unit still have not completed their training. What's the holdup?”

*Any fool can criticize,
CONDEMN AND COMPLAIN--AND MOST
FOOLS DO.*

- BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

“I understand you were called out of town for a family emergency and were gone the last two weeks of June; unfortunately there was no one designated to complete the training in your absence. So, you fell behind on your commitment. The problem is this: both of those units are experiencing delays and confusion, and there are both omissions and redundancies happening in patient and hospital records. Besides the fact that this is bad for patients and frustrating for the staff, it also puts the hospital’s reputation and safety standards at risk. Frankly, I also feel confused about whether or not I can trust your judgment: I find myself questioning why you’d taken this project on entirely by yourself and why, nearly a month after your return, the training still isn’t complete.

“Are you comfortable and willing to help set things right?”

If Ana answers, “No,” (which she has the right to do) it’s worth exploring why.

If Ana answers, “Yes,” you can ask her, “What do you think needs to be done to repair the damage? And how can I help you or how can you get the help you need to complete the staff training and move forward?” Or you can suggest something like, “I’d like you to designate at least one experienced daytime nurse to assist you in completing the training. You and he or she will need to work out a temporary schedule so all shifts are covered and supported until the staff is competent. This training needs to be complete before August 8. And I’d like you to come up with a plan that accounts for any nurses who may miss training due to vacations or other time off.” Then, ask for her commitment, “Will you make this happen? ...Thank you. Please let me know, immediately, if you run into any obstacles along the way. Okay? ...Thank you, Ana.”

**THE MOST RIGOROUS LAW
OF OUR BEING**

Commitment conversations are both a tool and a system intended to facilitate growth. They are also a hallmark of trust.

*As we call for and participate in commitment conversations,
we are required to be awake and stay awake.*

This mindfulness is a core factor in our personal and organizational abilities to remain alert for opportunities to grow and to stay focused on the outcomes we are trying to achieve. Rigorous, conscientious commitment conversations are the key to organizational success.

READ MORE

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