Time Management or Promise Management?

The secret to getting things done and building high performing cultures

By David Brown, Eddie Marmol and Bonnie Flatt

Complaints about the importance of delivering on time are so common in organizations that we hardly count on them happening anymore. Delving deeper, the problem with not delivering on time ranges from not keeping one's word to not having committed to "by when" something will be done, or even making a clear request. Nor is this just a business problem. Virtually everything that ever happens as a result of the coordination between people is based on a particular set of speech acts called requests and promises.

It happens every day. Just imagine if everyone kept their word when they gave it, or at least they were clear that they weren't promising anything, but would just do their best. At least you would know where you stood and could proceed accordingly. Fortunately there is a simple (not necessarily easy) way to manage this age-old conundrum. We call it **"Promise Management."**

A typical scapegoat for not getting things done on time is poor "time management." But we can't really manage time. Time just happens. What we really are managing are the promises we make, the delivery of which occur later, in time. This is one reason a calendar or planner is a more useful tool than a to-do list. It displays promises as they occur in time, so we can see if we're about to over-commit (and under-deliver). We can see at a glance our capacity for making promises before committing.

There's a large body of work about "speech acts" that includes a seminal collection of essays by Fernando Flores for those who want to dive deeper. **Our focus here is on two critical speech acts: requests and promises.** Requests and promises are like the ones and zeros at the heart of computer software. They are the essential mechanisms by which actions between human beings are coordinated. **Clarity and rigor in this simple exchange can change the world. And it starts with us, one conversation at a time.**

When we make a clear request, there are a finite number of responses:

- We promise to do what is requested.
- We decline to do what is requested.
- We make a counter-offer.
- We promise to get back to the person with one of the above by a specific date.

There are a couple of key areas where things go wrong with most people. One is they don't make a clear request. The Conditions Of Satisfaction (COS) that will satisfy the request must be clear such that both parties are on the same page, including a clear time frame for completion.

The other one is distinguishing the uttering of the word "yes" from making a promise. In other words, many people say "yes" to a promise, but actually mean "I'm free to re-prioritize your request in light of current or future requests, without telling you about it." To begin to get a handle on this, we invite you to try out the following next time you make a request. When the other person says "*yes, I'll do that,*" you reply with: "*I want to be clear. I'll be making promises to others based on the promise you're making to me. So I need to make sure I have your word that you will do what you say by the time you said it. Is that OK?*" In our experience, that's where the fun begins!

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Most of the time people will backpedal. "*If you put it that way, how can I guarantee something in the future when there are things I can't control that could happen?*" But aren't all promises about that same future? Do we never count on anyone to do anything because who knows what could happen? That's why so many people say "yes" so freely: if something interferes that's beyond their control, it's not their fault. We like to be judged by our intentions, yet we judge others by their behavior! Knowing why we're disappointed doesn't change that we are!

The solution is simple. Promises are distinct and need to be distinguished as such. When we say "I promise, you have my word," those words live in a different physical and emotional state for most people, than does a simple "yes." More importantly, there needs to be clarity about what uniquely constitutes a promise. More specifically,

- When we give our word, it's understood that we are clear about what we're committing to.
- We believe that we have the skills and resources to fulfill on the commitment.
- We have the will to do it (i.e., we will overcome obstacles to fulfill on the promise).

There are four additional distinctions regarding requests and promises:

1. A request allows for the dignity of a response that is a "no." If our request doesn't allow for a "*No, I won't do it*" from the other person, then we're making a demand, and not a request. Demands are sometimes necessary (e.g. "*There's a fire! Get out of the building now!*"), and are seldom needed in organizations with high performing, engaged cultures.
2. A criminal promise is when we make a promise where we know at the moment we make it that we can't or won't deliver on it. Criminal promises are a significant problem that we observe in organizations. They lead to lower levels of trust, morale, and engagement.
3. Promises are not guarantees. A promise allows for the possibility that we live in a real world where things happen outside of our control, such as people getting sick, flights getting delayed, or equipment failing.
4. Requests and promises reveal a great deal about the relationship we have with another person. At the moment people reply to a request, they communicate a great deal about their sincerity, disposition, attitude, trust, loyalty, integrity, etc. No matter how someone replies to our request, we get useful indications as to where we stand with that person.

To honor our promises, there are two possibilities:

- Fulfill them.
- Don't fulfill them and be responsible:
  - At the earliest moment when we realize we may not be able to keep our promise, we contact the person and apologize *(a renegotiated promise is not a broken promise).* The closer it gets to the promised delivery time, the worse it is. Cross that delivery time threshold and our integrity is severely eroded. Neglect to even get back to the person and now we're slime.
  - Offer an explanation, inquire about any damage caused, and offer repair/restitution. Regardless of why we're not able to deliver per the agreed-upon conditions of satisfaction, it doesn't alter the fact that someone made plans based on our word. Think "The Golden Rule."
  - If appropriate, make a new promise.

More needs to be said about being responsible. We live in a real world where things happen outside of our control: people get sick, equipment fails, and accidents happen. There's a chance of not delivering on our promise. Therefore, being responsible means **informing** at the earliest

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possible opportunity. Ask yourself: "*When would I have wanted to be informed if someone had made that promise to me?"* The act of informing is an opportunity to acknowledge and maintain our relationship in the face of unintended obstacles. By informing, we involve the other person in co-creating an alternative solution with us. Our offering of repair and restitution restores integrity to the relationship, trustworthiness, and our ability to work effectively together in the future.

Lastly, there's the important topic of **accountability**. There's an implied mutual accountability that's put into place when a promise of "yes" is made in response to a request. What would happen, for example, when a promise is made, the delivery doesn't take place, and we don't hold the other person accountable for their lack of delivery? We encourage more missed deliveries and erode the trust/integrity of the relationship! To manage this, it's important to make a valid complaint. Here's an example of what to say when a colleague fails to deliver on a promise. Please ensure there's no charge or emotion in your voice as you say this: "*Jim, did we not agree that you would send me your salary plan by Friday at 3pm?*" By asking that question we're first confirming that we have an agreement in place. If Jim answers affirmatively, the next statement should be: "*I didn't receive it.*" In other words, we describe our experience of what happened and, when appropriate, its impact vs. what Jim did or did not do. This should lead to a fruitful resolution.

If the above is a valid complaint, then what's an invalid complaint? An invalid complaint is what we hear from people when they complain without there being a promise in place. This is sometimes described as "nagging" or "whining". When we hear nagging or whining from people, it's useful to ask: "*What request do you want to make?*"

That's it. One of the most important acts of leadership and management is to effectively coordinate actions through these kinds of conversations. It's ultimately how everything gets done. Or not. Build a culture of integrity where requests and promises are treated this way and the amount of wasted time, energy and resources that get freed up will astound you.

Please write to us at support@mastercoaches.com and tell us your stories about implementing Promise Management in your organization.

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Actionable Steps for Implementing Requests and Promises

Requests and Promises are essential for coordinating the actions in any organization and getting things done. Impeccable implementations of requests and promises lead to increases in organizational effectiveness – higher trust and better execution. Here are the top 8 ways to implement requests and promises in your organization:

1) **Begin with yourself**. Make requests and promises of yourself and deliver on them. For example, commit to arriving early to your meetings and actually get there 5 minutes early. Use the mantra "*Early is on-time and on-time is late*". Use the 5 minutes to review your notes, center yourself, and connect with your teammates.
2) **Shift your thinking**. Instead of managing your time, realize you're actually managing your promises, which occur within time! In doing so, you will be more effective with your time, thus taking care of both. Realize that time can't be managed, only what you do within it.
3) **Educate others**. Start by using specific language and provide context. Initially you may get some push back about being this rigorous, but in practice this will begin to raise the trust, integrity, and effectiveness in your relationships. Educating people without you practicing this yourself is dishonest.
4) **Set clear conditions of satisfaction**. Make sure that all of your promises specify a delivery date and a delivery format. Ensure that people involved agree to those conditions. In this way there will be complete alignment regarding what constitutes the promise and the conditions for success. It is critical that both requester and promisor acknowledge and are aligned to the conditions of satisfaction.
5) **Listen for the response to a request and be clear that it is a promise.** There are a finite set of responses to a request: "*Yes, I promise I will do it*," "*No, I won't do it*," "*I will let you know by a specific day/time whether or not I can do it*" or a counteroffer. Because of cultural norms, it is essential that you also distinguish between uttering the word "*Yes*" vs. "*I promise*," as most people treat these differently in practice. A promise is usually connected to a more solemn, inviolable emotional and physical state. And we can only hold people accountable to promises they make to us. So if we don't receive positive confirmation from the person making the promise, there is no promise.
6) **Hold people accountable.** If someone makes a promise to us and doesn't deliver or inform us of a problem in their delivery, then we must hold them accountable. Not doing so reduces mutual trust and respect.
7) **Hold the relationship as sacred.** Requests and promises reveal a great deal about our relationship with others. When we promise something, there are elements of commitment, care, and relationship involved. If someone makes a promise and doesn't keep it, then it's also important to have a conversation with them about the impact this has on our relationship with them, which, if left unresolved, may undermine future interactions.
8) **Renegotiate the promise if necessary and make restitution if required.** People get sick, computers crash, and flights are delayed. Informing when our delivery is at risk and renegotiating the promise allows us to maintain integrity. While a renegotiated promise is not a broken promise, we have a responsibility to offer restitution to offset any damage that our lack of delivery may have caused, regardless of cause. While promises are not guarantees, people make promises based on the promises we make to them.

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What Happens In Real Life
When We Don't Make A Clear Request

