

The Power of Promises

By Tony V. Zampella (Jan/Feb. 2005)

The beginning of any year finds us making declarations about the future. Such declarations involve our ability to make and keep promises. Often by February, circumstances get in the way of our best intentions. Perhaps this has as much to do with *how* we promise as *what* we promise.

To honor “promises” we must understand the set of assumptions and expectations that accompany any promise. In my work, we define a promise as *a commitment to another to fulfill a condition of satisfaction through specific action by some particular time*. Promises, agreements and commitments alter the future; they add meaning to our word, which defines our trustworthiness.

Consider that all financial transactions depend on promises, allowing us to purchase food; to own, lease or rent dwellings and transportation; to use utilities; and even to acquire a college education. Moreover, our relationship with time is formed by how we manage our promises. We are over-extended because we have over-promised and are not aware of it until it is—and we are—too late!

Promises involve a strong responsibility to our word; yet, daily we often make dozens of promises unintentionally. Strengthening promises requires strengthening our word by increasing our awareness of how we routinely promise.

- First, **a promise follows a request**. Answering “yes” to any request is a promise, which brings forth a set of expectations. Often we nod “yes” just to move on to another topic; or we say “yes” but only as it relates to ideal conditions, and we really mean: “yes, but ...”. Be clear what you mean when you say, yes.
- Second, **we over-promise to look good**. Often we make promises to impress someone, or to seek agreement. Here, we curry favor, which engenders long-term frustration for the sake of instant gratification.
- Third, **we over-promise, which overextends us**. Because it is uncomfortable to say “no,” we over-extend our capacity to deliver on our promises and find ourselves out of time, always “owing” others, and trying keep up with others’ “expectations.”

Expectations:

To build trust and generate commitment in others, consider the following expectations *prior* to promising:

1. **Who:** To whom am I promising? Will he/she/they hold me accountable?
2. **What:** Precisely what am I promising to fulfill? Is there shared agreement between the listener and me, as to what is being promised?
3. **Time:** Specifically, when will I deliver on this promise? Do I have time to deliver as promised? How will my fulfilling or not fulfilling this promise alter the future?
4. **Specifics:** Is there a specific place or are there other conditions required to deliver on this promise? Am I willing be held accountable for these specifics?
5. **Competence:** Am I competent to deliver on this promise?
6. **Context:** Do I appreciate that content is context-dependent? For instance, in some settings, just accepting a business card is a promise to make a call.

Practices:

All new learning requires steps that are awkward, requiring time to integrate them as normal habits:

- First, **pause before agreeing** to any promise. Pausing helps us embody each request, and to hear it as a commitment.
- Second, when pausing, **listen to your gut**. Are you sure about the promise? If not, promise-to-promise: tell the person, “*I will get back to you,*” and then be prepared to do so.
- Third, **check your time**. Schedule each promise and related actions in your PDA or calendar system. Take the time to accept, decline or negotiate any/all aspects of each request.

Soon this process will earn you a reputation for being trustworthy and generating commitment. As for this New Year, try resolving to relearn the fundamentals of promising to strengthen your word, and the rest will fall into place.