Commitment Conversations: Getting Results with Impeccability, Trust and Integrity

By Fred Kofman

As human beings we are conscious of a future, we are able to project our concerns into it, and we can plan how to take care of those concerns through actions—ours and others’. When our individual actions do not suffice to satisfy our needs and desires, we can rely on a network of relationships for help and support. The primary way in which we tap into this network is by making requests. With a request, we initiate the dance of coordinating action that we call a “commitment conversation.”

Commitment conversations are structured around requests, offers and promises, all of which entail commitments on the part of the speaker and/or the listener. These linguistic acts are critical to the coordination of action, and, thus, are essential to the successful operation of business. Moreover, effective communication and coordination of action are the pillars of healthy and creative relationships in all domains of life.

Promises

A promise is a linguistic act whereby the promisor commits to accomplish something in the future, by performing certain actions (by himself, or by others for whom he takes responsibility). “I will attend the meeting,” “I promise to call you back with an answer before 6:30,” “I swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States,” “My team will provide you with the sales figures you requested” are examples of promises. In each case, the promisor declares his intention to accomplish something in the future.

Through promises we can accomplish things that vastly exceed our personal power; we can coordinate actions with others and achieve results that are beyond any individual’s capacity. Promises help us maintain relationships and institutions; they provide continuity between the present and the future; they allow individuals, groups and organizations to plan for and move into the future more effectively.

Making and fulfilling promises

Every promise involves two distinct processes: making the promise and fulfilling the promise. Making the promise is a linguistic process that requires, like every communicative act, the agreement of both parties to make it complete. Making a promise, then, is not a statement but a conversation in which at least two speakers come to a shared understanding. This shared understanding about the state of mutual commitments comes about through either of two main paths: speaker A can offer a promise that B accepts (A is committed), or A can request a promise that B accepts (B is committed).

Completing a promise requires a declaration of satisfaction from the promisor. If I accept your request to deliver a report to you by 5:00, my promise remains open until you agree that I fulfilled the conditions of satisfaction stipulated in the promise. For example, I might give you a report on time at 4:30, but you might consider the report sloppy, incomplete, or unacceptable for some other reason—as far as you are concerned, I have not fulfilled the promise. Contrarily, if the report did meet your conditions of satisfaction, you might say “Thank you”—the normal way in which we declare completed promises in our society. It is important to remark that “thank you” is not only an expression of gratitude, but also an
assessments of satisfaction with the completion of the promise.

**Offers and Requests**

An offer is a conditional promise, where the condition can be explicit or implicit. Examples of offers with explicit conditions are: “I’ll finish the report today if you give me the sales information before noon,” “I’ll call you tomorrow if the telephone company reconnects the line,” and “I can take on the new job if you increase the budget to let me hire three more engineers.” By default, when there is no explicit offer that “I will promote you to a management position next month,” you need to accept before my offer becomes a promise.

**Commitment Conversations in Action**

The following outline indicates the steps involved in making a promise. Note that the outline starts with either an offer or a request, which combine to possibly result in a promise. We will define and explain each step in sequence.

I. **Making a request or offer.** In this first step, the speaker uses language to create a new possibility for the listener, with either a request or an offer, such as “Will you please attend this meeting?” (request) or “Would you like me to attend this meeting?” (offer). At this stage, there is no response from the listener, only the speaker is involved in a request or an offer.

II. **Asking for clarification (optional).** This optional step is the listener’s opportunity to learn more about the nature of the request or offer, or acquire other information that will help him or her to move forward in the conversation. For example, the listener could ask the speaker, “Which meeting? The 10:00 a.m. meeting or the 4:00 p.m. meeting?”

III. **Committing to respond (optional).** In this optional step, the listener can respond to the speaker with a commitment to respond—which is, demonstrating a willingness to engage the request or the offer and provide a response, but not being able to do so with his available information at the time. This is not the step at which the response is made; rather the listener commits to give a response at some point in the future. A common commitment to commit would be “I’ll get back to you by the end of the day.”

A valid reason to commit to respond is the need to check the match between needs and resources, especially when the promisor will commit other people with his response. Many breakdowns occur when bosses commit their teams to accomplish a task without checking with them that it is feasible for them to do so given their schedules and resources.

IV. **Responding.** Next, the listener delivers a response to the speaker. Possible responses are:

a. **Accepting the request or offer.** This act on the part of the listener constitutes the creation of a promise. Until this step, only the speaker’s offer or request is on the table; but by agreeing to the terms of the request or offer, the listener has now entered into an informal contract with the speaker, creating a promise. A promise is not a promise until the listener accepts the request or offer. “I’d be happy to attend the meeting tomorrow,” the listener might say.

b. **Declining the request or offer.** The listener turns down the request or offer, promising, in effect, not to accept: “No, I’m afraid it won’t be possible for me to attend.” At this point the commitment conversation ends.

c. **Renegotiating the request or offer.** “Yes or “no” are not the only possible responses to a request or promise. The listener can make a counteroffer, such as “I don’t think I can make it, but I’ll be happy to send Max if you’d like,” or can place conditions upon acceptance: “I’ll be happy to attend, but you’d have to give me an extra day to finish the Johnson report.” Successful renegotiation depends critically on the ability of the listener to understand the concerns underlying the request or offer. If the listener chooses to renegotiate, more steps follow before a promise is concluded.

“**Yes or “no” are not the only possible responses to a request or promise. The listener can make a counteroffer ... or can place conditions upon acceptance...**

V. The speaker responds to the listener’s condition or counteroffer. Again, three responses are possible.

a. **Accepting the renegotiation and concluding a mutual promise.** If the speaker accepts the condition or counteroffer, both parties then agree on the new terms and together agree to abide by the amended promise. “An extra day on the report is fine. 4:00 tomorrow, then,” the speaker might say, to which the listener might respond, “4:00. I’ll be there. And I’ll have the report to you by Friday.”

b. **Declining the renegotiation.** Rather than accept the condition or counteroffer, the speaker declines. “No, I’m afraid I need the report by Thursday,” the speaker might say. “Thanks anyway. I’ll ask Stacy to attend instead.” No promise is made.

c. **Further negotiation.** The speaker might say, “I can’t give you a whole extra day on the report, but how about a half day?” At this point the speaker and listener negotiate further until both parties agree or decline.
At this point, the first phase of the commitment conversation, which ends in either the creation of a promise or not, has concluded. Now the listener, who received the request or made the offer, moves into the performance of the request or offer. The steps that may follow are:

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VI. A change in or cancellation of the promise (optional). After the promise is concluded but before the listener performs the action—in our example, attends the meeting—it is possible for either party to amend or cancel the promise. The speaker might say, for example, “I’m sorry, but the meeting has been canceled,” or the listener might say, “I forgot I have a dentist’s appointment then. May I show up to the meeting 30 minutes late?” In either case, apologies and explanations accompany the change or cancellation.

VII. The listener performs the action requested or offered. In this case, the listener attends the meeting. Does that mean that the promise is now complete? No. It is the speaker who concludes the process, having begun it in the first place, with the following steps:

VIII. The speaker measures the listener’s performance against conditions of satisfaction. Implicit in the speaker’s offer or request is the presumption that if the listener makes the promise, he or she will perform the relevant actions in concert with certain standards of performance. For example, the speaker might naturally presume that the listener will not only attend the meeting but also be attentive, take notes on behalf of the speaker, and report back to the speaker about what happened in the meeting. The speaker’s comparison between expectations and results will lead him or her to:

a. Declare completion of the promise. “Thanks for attending the meeting, and I appreciate your thorough summary of what went on,” the speaker might say. At this point the entire process ends, the promise having been kept to the satisfaction of the speaker. Alternatively, the speaker might:

b. Complain. “You showed up an hour late, and your recollection of what went on is abysmal,” a dissatisfied speaker might say. At this point the speaker may choose to engage in a recommitment conversation with the listener to clarify expectations, rectify mishaps and prevent breakdowns like this in the future.

Through commitment conversations we coordinate our actions with others, take care of our concerns and bring about the future we desire. If we are skillful in this dance of mutual commitment, we can develop a network of trusting relationships and accomplish significant results.