

Promise Management: An Integral Part of Organisational Improvement

by Alan Sieler

Introduction

In previous papers we suggested that the critical dimension of organisational activity is the coordination of action; that is, the essence of the effective functioning of any organisation revolves around coordinating the diverse and specialised work roles of many individuals. Without the effective integration of their work efforts, the operation of a business is severely retarded.

In these papers we emphasised that the integration of the specialised efforts of knowledge workers occurs through **human interaction**, not only face-to-face interaction, but also through technology (telephone, videoconferencing, fax, e-mail etc). It was claimed that the basic unit of this interaction is **conversation**, and that any organisation can be regarded as a network of conversations and relationships. The quality of conversations and relationships has a major impact on how effectively organisational coordination of action occurs.

Human interaction occurs through language, both spoken and unspoken. Organisations are fundamentally linguistic structures, designed, maintained and expanded through language in the form of conversation and relationships. Organisational survival and growth revolves around the effective use of language, or **conversational proficiency**, to produce desired outcomes.

It is important also to regard an organisation as a **network of commitments**. Within their specialised roles, individuals need and rely on each others' specialist knowledge and skills. Through continually providing service to each other, they enhance their own and others' individual and team performances. Making and managing commitments is central to providing effective service (to both internal and external customers). Inadequate and unreliable service is enormously costly, for both productivity and corporate image.

Utilising the work of Fernando Flores on commitments, and Rafael Echeverria's development of the notion of the "promise cycle", in this paper we focus on the linguistic phenomenon of **promising** as the essential means of making and managing commitments. The conceptual model of *The Promise Cycle* is introduced as a means of understanding and applying **essential linguistic considerations** for being continually effective in generating, making and managing commitments. This results in substantial improvements in:

- individual performance
- team performance,
- product and service delivery,
- organisational productivity,
- customer satisfaction (both internal and external), and
- corporate image.

Language and Communication

The effective use of language to communicate clearly is the foundation of the promise cycle. Before outlining the elements of the promise cycle it is worthwhile offering particular interpretations of "*What is communication?*" and "*What is language?*"

The traditional definition of communication, which still permeates our thinking, is that communication is the transmission of information: that fact that something has been sent or transmitted is commonly regarded as communication. This sets up a common fallacy in our thinking that goes something along the lines "*If I say it (or write it) then I have communicated my message*". We argue that this assumption is fraught with danger and is insufficient to facilitate coordination of action, and a different interpretation of communication is required.

We prefer the interpretation that communication has occurred when

- there is a mutual understanding, or shared meaning, of what has been spoken (and or written), and
- this understanding results in the action necessary to produced desired results for all parties involved in the interaction.

The results are a measure of the conversational proficiency of those parties: did their conversations generate a mutual understanding which resulted in the effective coordination of action and the satisfactory completion of what was required?

Language, both verbal and nonverbal, is required for communication to occur, but one of the things we overlook is "*What is language?*" In previous papers we have suggested that language is much more than speaking - that it also includes listening and emotions. In fact, in this interpretation of language, listening is regarded as the predominant factor in communication. Listening is an active process in which we continually engage in our own internal conversations, and these conversations are indicative of how we are making sense, and developing our understanding of the actions of others - both their spoken words and their unspoken gestures. Listening is about making meaning, and is always an interpretation by an individual of what is occurring at the time.

Communication is about speaking and listening to each other in ways that generate a mutual understanding (shared meaning) of circumstances. If this mutual understanding is not in place, any future action will be base on different assumptions and expectations of what is to occur. Nothing has been communicated unless the speaking results in the action necessary to produce desirable results. Language (spoken and unspoken) is the medium which enables conversations to occur, and it is only through language and conversation that we can coordinate action with each other. When speaking and listening is such that a mutual understanding has been reached, then linguistic actions have been coordinated, and these actions are the foundation for the satisfactory performance of specific tasks.

Promising

A fundamental and indispensable means by which we communicate with each other, and effectively coordinate action, is through the **universal linguistic action of promising**. Becoming an astute observer of how promising impacts on the effective coordination of action is vital for improving organisational communication, and consequently productivity and performance.

What is a promising? A promise is the means by which we make commitments to each other and commitments are the actions we agree to take in order to cooperate with each other. Why do we do this in the workplace? Any specialist role can be thought of as taking care of organisational concerns, which means the action which continually needs to be taken for the effective functioning of the organisation. Satisfactory performance in a role does not occur in isolation from the work of others: their assistance is indispensable.

Promises are the linguistic means by which organisational personnel work together to not only satisfy each others' requirements, but also to contribute towards **delighting customers and shareholders**. In

addition, proficiency in generating and managing commitments is an important factor in performance appraisal and career advancement.

Promises and commitments are also at the heart of effective team work. They allow us to coordinate actions with others, and in the words of Rafael Echeverria:

"Through coordinating action we integrate into a single process various competencies that it would be hard to find in an individual and thereby succeed in getting several people to work together in the pursuit of a common objective."

The making and managing of promises is an indispensable foundation for the development of a high performance team. The relevance of being both an astute observer and a skilled practitioner for building this foundation cannot be overstated. By its very nature teamwork requires the coordination of action and cooperative efforts of individuals who can make specialised and unique contributions. This can only happen through conversations and the building of respectful relationships, and this occurs through specific actions in language. One of these fundamental linguistic actions is promising.

We usually associate a promise with "*promising to be good*" or "*promising to clean up our room*" or "*promising to be home on time*". In other words, our common association with the word promise is when it is intentionally used in a statement made to someone else, and this statement is a commitment to some future action.

Linguistically a promise is much more than simply using the word "*promise*" in a sentence. A promise is the final link in a chain of linguistic actions, and as a final link it needs to be preceded by other linguistic actions. A promise can occur in two ways, being initiated either through an *offer* or a *request*. Let's briefly consider the first of these linguistic actions, making an offer.

The linguistic action of offering occurs when, without being asked, one person assesses that they could take some action to assist someone else and they present themselves to do so. In other words, Person A observes that Person B "could do with a hand" and that their help will "lighten the load" of B; A puts himself or herself forward to engage in some action that will add qualitative and/or quantitative value to B's situation. When B accepts A's offer, a promise has been made, and A has committed him/herself to take the action and B has made a commitment to allow A to take the specified action.

OFFER + ACCEPTANCE = PROMISE

Examples of offers in everyday life are: standing up for an elderly person on public transport, assisting someone by carrying a heavy package, taking on tasks to lighten a heavy workload, making a cup of coffee, and paying for lunch. Whilst not the theme of this paper it is interesting to note that the linguistic action of offering (specifically, being perceived as a strong and solid offer) is at the heart of building a successful professional career.

Whilst not denying the value of making offers, in this paper we will concentrate on the role of requests in the promise cycle.

Requests and Promises

We make a request when we require someone to "give us a hand" or to help us out with some task, and we ask for their assistance. In the workplace we require the assistance of others who have the specialist

knowledge and skills we do not possess, and we cannot complete our own work without their assistance. Therefore, we frequently call on their assistance by making a request.

It is interesting to note that their assistance does not magically materialise without us making a request: people are not mind readers who automatically know the assistance we require! If they did they would make more offers to us. This is why we say that **a request is a linguistic action**. The action of making the request, if it is effective, generates the desired response and future action from others. One of the issues we will consider later in this paper is the critical importance of being effective in making requests, for without an effective request the promise cycle is not enacted.

Competence in observing and making effective requests is an integral feature of the effective coordination of action and the effective operation of teams within a workplace. A request is the first link in the linguistic chain of making a promise.

As was seen in the example of making an offer, a promise always involves more than one person. A promise is a combination of two linguistic actions, each one made by a different person. The first action is requesting ("*Can you do such and such for me?*"), and the second action is known as **a declaration of acceptance** ("*Sure thing, that won't be a problem for me to get that done*"). The act of accepting is like two individual interlocking little fingers with each other and secures the joint linguistic actions as a promise.

REQUEST + ACCEPTANCE = PROMISE

Making Effective Requests

The critical importance of being proficient in making effective requests cannot be overstated. The quality and reliability of the performance of future action for us by others will be heavily influenced by how effectively we make requests in the first place.

The potential for miscommunication in the seemingly straightforward task of asking for assistance and having our requirements satisfactorily met is enormous.

It is worth reiterating that a promise is only in place when a request has been accepted. This would seem to be straightforward and make it easy to generate commitments that result in highly effective coordination of action. If we focus on communication only as speaking and the transmission of information, this would be the case.

However, life is not as simple as that, for "*the transmission of information orientation*" to communication omits including the pivotal role of listening in communication. The major issue to be dealt with around promises and commitments is: **does the person who has accepted the request ("*requestee*") have the same understanding (*i.e. share the same meaning*) of what they agreed to do with the person making the request ("*requestor*")?**

The issue of mutual understanding and shared meaning is central to making effective requests. When this is absent it is like two people from different cultures trying to communicate with each other. Words always have the potential to be ambiguous: even though two people may use the same words, previous experiences can result them in associating different meanings to the same words. Or, worse still, the person making the request may make assumptions of what is required without specifically spelling them out, and these assumptions are not shared by the "*requestee*".

Within any workplace there is, and has to be, a high degree of shared understanding of what is required when someone makes a request. Without this understanding it would be a very cumbersome process to make requests and secure commitments. However, great care needs to be continually taken about assuming the ongoing existence of this understanding.

In the current business environment in which it is imperative to continually adapt to many changes, requiring people to take on increasingly diversified roles, work longer hours to meet these requirements, resulting in a greater possibility of them feeling stressed in the process, it is easy to assume the existence of shared understanding. Making requests on the basis of this assumption can be the source of frustration and interpersonal tension, with possible negative repercussions for future conversations, relationships and effective coordination of action.

As a rule of thumb it is suggested that if you are either the initiator or recipient of a request do not assume automatically that both of you know what you are talking about. This fundamental consideration cannot be overstated.

There are other key considerations to ensure that there is shared understanding of what is being asked for. In all of these the underlying theme is be wary of assuming that what is self-evident for you will also be self-evident for others.

- For the requestor, something is missing: there is a requirement for something to be done and when this occurs it will enable other tasks to be accomplished; before making the request, clarity about the requirement is essential. For example, "*We cannot proceed to fill these containers until we know that the laboratory has done the testing, but we are being held up from doing this quicker because of the delay in getting the lab results*".
- An effective request also needs to specify the action necessary to fulfil the request; again this may be self-evident in many situations, but be wary of assuming an existing understanding of this. Continuing the above example, "*The lab results need to be phoned through to us on Extension 4562 as soon as they are available*"
- The successful fulfilling of the request requires more than some piece of action; this action needs to be of a certain quality; it is vital that both parties share the same understanding of the standards required for the satisfactory fulfilment of the request. "*We need the person conducting the test to let us know on the phone whether we can go ahead with filling and also to e-mail them so we have a precise record.*"
- All requests have a time frame associated with them; unless the desirable time for completion is spelled out and agreed upon, the requestor and requestee will be working from different assumptions on the temporal aspect of completion. "*We are not getting the results of the lab test until two hours after it has been done, and so that we can meet our production schedule it is vital for us to have the results as soon as they become available.*"

Other important considerations that need to be taken into account are: the timing of the request and how it is expressed. Is the requestee in a receptive frame of mind, do the words of the request need to be carefully chosen to take into account sensitivities of the requestee, and what sort of tone is the request made in? Even if the words seem fine, the associated nonverbal behaviour may impact on the other person's listening in a negative way.

Now all of the above may sound somewhat clinical. They are not meant to imply that we have a checklist we look at every time we make a request, nor that any request that is made takes no account of the relationship between the two people.

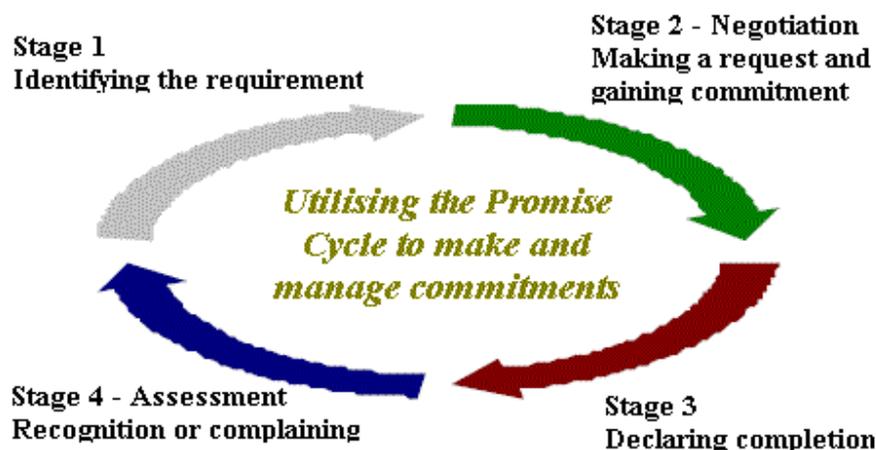
There is always an interpersonal dimension in requesting, and seeking to gain the cooperation of others requires taking into account their circumstances and how they are most likely to respond favourably to the request. If one or more of the above considerations are absent in the request, there is a strong

chance that misunderstanding and dissatisfaction may occur, and this will hinder people both individual and team performance, as well as the functioning of the organisation. Ignoring these considerations can result in a high proportion of "*requests which go nowhere*". When this occurs frequently, relationships in the workplace become strained, people find each other unreliable and may begin speak negatively behind each others' backs, with a consequent erosion of morale and negative impact on productivity.

In this section the emphasis has been on the responsibility of the requestor. However, it is also important not to overlook the responsibility of the requestee. With an awareness of the above key considerations involved in making effective requests, he or she also has a responsibility to ensure clarity about what they are being asked to do. Communication, as the coordination of action, is always a two way process.

Why the Term "Promise Cycle"?

The linguistic actions of requesting, accepting and promising are the process by which people make commitments to perform specific actions for each other. Whilst the central feature of the promise cycle is being able to make effective requests, which secure genuine and willing commitment, this is but one component of a larger process. This larger process can be regarded as the making and managing of commitments, which has an important bearing on the development of trust and positive morale.



There are four stages in the cycle of making and managing of a promise. As can be seen in the diagram, **Stage 1** is the identification of the requirement: a problem has been identified because something is missing and some action is required to deal with what is missing. This may range from the breakdown of a pump, inadequate monitoring of a meter, to the need for a specific set of figures for the completion of a report. When the person who identifies the problem decides that they cannot rectify the situation on their own, the stage has been set for the making of a request.

As outlined above in the section on requests and promises, **Stage 2** is being effective in making requests that generate a shared understanding of what is being asked for and in gaining the sincere and willing cooperation of the "*requestee*". It is important to be clear that asking does not simply guarantee a "yes". That is why this is called a negotiation stage, as the requestee may want to put forward another possibility about how to deal with the problematic situation.

Stage 3 occurs when the requestee reports back that they have completed what was asked for. This can be as straightforward as "*I've put that report on your desk*" or "*That pump should be going OK now, so let me know if you have any problems.*" or "*I've e-mailed those figures you asked for*". The person acting upon the request is keeping the requestor "*in the loop*" with their progress.

It is in this stage that the promise is *managed*, and an important distinction needs to be made between keeping and managing commitments. Circumstances may result in the requestee not being able to meet their commitment. Managing the commitment involves going back to the requestor and renegotiating the commitment (i.e., going back to Stage 2) as soon as he or she is aware that changed circumstances will impinge on their original agreement about what would be done and by when.

When completion is declared, the person fulfilling the request is taking care of their relationship with the requestor. This creates the possibility of receiving recognition, especially in the form of a "*thank you*" or other expressions of appreciation for their efforts.

In **Stage 4** the requestor makes a judgement, often unconsciously, about the satisfactory completion of their request. A "*thank you*" is in order when the assessment is positive. A **complaint** is justified when the quality and/or timing of what was agreed to has not occurred.

If the assessment of the requestee's action is positive, it is all too easy for the requestor to simply take for granted the efforts of the requestee and not close the promise cycle with an acknowledgment of what has been done. The value of this stage for morale, simple though it may be, is easily overlooked. The impact of simply saying thanks and giving a physical or metaphorical pat on the back is a powerful force in human motivation.

It is important to note that a complaint is different to expressing a negative assessment. The latter occurs when there was not a shared understanding about the commitment in the first place. A complaint can only be justifiably made when there was an agreed commitment in the first place. Making vague requests that do not generate a commitment based on shared understanding does not provide the basis for legitimately complaining.

In making a justifiable complaint the requestor restates the original agreement in order to confirm that there was a shared understanding in the first place. When that has been confirmed the requestor firmly, but without alienating the other party, points to the specific negative consequences that have resulted from this commitment not being met (eg, the requestor not being able to meet his or her commitments with others). All this marks a return to Stage 1 of the cycle, as a problem and associated requirement has been identified. The original request is then restated, asking the requestee to recommit themselves to fulfil the original agreement (Stage 2).

Why is Promising so Important?

Simply because the linguistic action of promising is at the heart of the coordination of action that is so vital for the effective and efficient functioning of any business. If organisational personnel are not able to make and manage commitments with each other, and their external suppliers and customers, they cannot be relied on. Our ability to make and manage commitments generates the expectations others have of us, and expectations are indications of *identity*.

Identity is the image others have of us, hence the expression "*image is everything*". This image is generated from how others observe our actions, especially the quality and reliability of our actions in effectively cooperating with others and supporting them. The same applies for an organisation: the actions of its employees (even if they are not directly interacting with external customers) will be an important factor in the public identity of a company; in other words, its image in the market. The myriad of actions performed daily by organisational personnel, especially around the making and managing of commitments, play a pivotal role in the organisation's reputation.

In times of increasing international competitiveness the development of a reputation for being able to deliver a quality product and/or service on time, with a guarantee of "*after sales*" support, to both internal and external customers, is indispensable.

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