

Leadership Barometer 121 Follow Up on Commitments

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In today's environment, most leaders are over-committed, which can lead to mistakes and omissions. Following up on commitments is essential, but sometimes neglected by busy leaders. It is so easy to say to someone, "I'll get back to you on this," and then forget it in the crunch of critical work or other distractions.

You may rationalize and say, "Well, it wasn't really a promise and they know how busy I am. This is only a minor issue anyway." That kind of thinking will harpoon your trust-building efforts. If building trust is all about consistency, nothing is more basic than doing what you say.

Whenever you make a commitment, **no matter how small**, make sure you do it.

Tips on following up effectively:

When you promise something, put a time frame on it. Rather than "I'll get back to you," say "I'll get back to you on this by the end of tomorrow. If I get derailed and you don't hear from me by then, please give me a call." The person knows you really do intend to answer their question.

Keep an action item list. Whatever form, whether a 3"x5" card in your pocket or a text message to yourself, get the item written down along with a time frame to answer.

It helps to write it in front of the person with the concern. You can say, "Just a second - let me jot that down so I don't forget to get back to you."

The person feels honored that you are considering the issue strongly enough to document it and will tell others about the exchange during the next break.

It is dangerous to have someone else follow up for you, but it can be done if you are careful. If you delegate the issue to another person for follow-up, make sure they preface their response with, "Bob asked me to get back to you on this question."

Also, make sure your agent confirms with you when it is done. Cross it off your list when your agent tells you it is closed, **not** when you delegate it to him.

In some cases, you should circle back to the person with a note or call saying, "I asked Mike to get back to you on your concern about the slippery floors. Did you

hear from him, and was his response satisfactory?” Doing that gives you the opportunity to jack up any agents that shirk their duty.

In a staff meeting, you can say something like, “I have been following up when I ask some of you to get back to employees on their concerns. Some of them have complained that their concern is downplayed. When I ask you to act as my agent, I expect you will keep working on it until the situation is resolved satisfactorily to the employee. If you can’t resolve their concern, get back to me. Do not let it drop.”

Use handwritten notes to people. A brief note, along with a “thank you for bringing this up,” will be prized by the individual and shared with others.

Be careful to use a tangible note only when the response is positive and difficult to misinterpret. Otherwise, you may find your note tacked to the break room bulletin board next to a Dilbert cartoon. For difficult issues, it is always better to deal face-to-face.

Closure on action items is not confined to personal discussions. The same logic holds when you promise something to a group. If you say, “I will make a decision on overtime by noon,” make sure they hear from you on that schedule. It is important to state a deadline or things tend to stretch out.

If, for any reason, you will be late with a promised action, make sure you get back to the person and explain the delay. You may think a week to unveil a new organization is reasonable, but for some people, it feels like, “he promised to do something about that but never got back to us.”

The best approach is to set a personal expectation that you will always be prompt and helpful with getting back to people. Think of it as a **personal trademark** that will set you apart from most other leaders.

This is not to say that you need to resolve every issue in the originally expected time frame. That would be impossible. Just do not leave people hanging wondering why you are not addressing their concern. It is a common courtesy that many leaders neglect.

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