

Building Higher Trust 92 Honor Commitments

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



It sounds so simple to say, “honor commitments if you want to build trust.” In today’s environment, most leaders are over-committed. This condition can lead to mistakes and omissions, which lowers trust.

Following up on commitments is essential, but sometimes neglected by busy leaders. It is easy with good intention to say, “I’ll get back to you on this.” Then, in the chaos of more critical issues, you forget to do it.

Don’t let yourself off the hook

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. Here are five tips that can improve your performance in this area.

How to follow up on commitments effectively:

1. 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 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.
2. Keep an action item list. Whatever form, a 3"x5" card or a phone, get the item down along with a promised time frame. 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.” The person feels honored that you are considering the issue strongly enough to document it.
3. If you delegate the issue to another person for follow-up, make sure they follow two rules. Start 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. In some cases, you should circle back to the person with a note or call. "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.

4. In a staff meeting, you can say something like, "If I ask you to act as my agent, be sure to do it. I expect you will keep working on it until you resolve the situation satisfactorily for the employee. If you can't resolve their concern, get back to me. Don't let it drop."
5. Use handwritten notes or texts to people. A brief note, along with a "thank you for bringing this up," will be appreciated. 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 best to deal face-to-face.

Closure on action items is not only for 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.

You may think a week to unveil a new organization is reasonable. For some people it feels like, "he promised to do something about that but never got back to us."

Conclusion

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 some 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 concerns. It is a common courtesy that many leaders neglect.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations