

### **Broken Promises: Convenience or Compromised Credibility?**

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*See blog for detailed input from those polled.*

“Promises are like babies: easy to make, but hard to deliver.” It’s not easy to keep one’s word. Situations change. Personal sacrifices must be made to fulfill obligations – but to what extent?

Over the past few years, I’ve seen some extraordinary commitments made and kept. A top executive refused a tempting offer to speak to a prominent group in Palm Springs because he had already accepted an engagement with a humble group of business professionals in Tulsa. Never mind that the other appointment might have yielded a game of golf with some lucrative potential clients. Worth more than cash, this CEO’s word was “gold”.

Sadly, this exemplary behavior is an exception rather than a rule. Lately, I’ve witnessed a growing tendency to weigh commitments by the amount of inconvenience involved in keeping them. The days of honoring a simple handshake have vanished.

Nobody intends to be dishonest by deliberately making promises that they know they cannot keep. But, the maddening pace of business today is fueled by unexpected dilemmas as well as demanding bosses and clients. In this environment, even the best intentions can get squashed. Missed deadlines or not showing up for a committee meeting are treated more casually these days - and without an appreciation for those being inconvenienced by the broken promise. And, yet the Ethics Resource Center discovered in their research that simply “keeping promises and commitments” are among the top three most essential elements of promoting an ethical culture. In a white paper submitted to the Society for Human Resources’ website, an ERC research analyst stated that “People want to know that people are being held accountable, and they expect promises and commitments to be met.”

Breaking promises is the first toehold on that slippery downhill slope leading us toward unethical behavior. But, you’re probably shaking your head now – believing that there are surely situations when it is acceptable to break one’s promises without compromising one’s credibility. So, I polled a few people to get their perspective on the topic. Here’s what they told me:

From Cindy Fairchild, Vice President of Human Resources for Express Personnel: “We can often find ourselves in a situation one day in which we may have circumstances that cause us to take a step back and reevaluate the value/benefit to both parties. Outside of that, we should do everything within our power to keep our word. By doing so, we maintain a personal code of conduct that tells others we can be counted on, even when the going gets tough.”

Father Mark Wallace, the leader of the only church ever to belong to OkEthics, offered this insight: “We all walk according to the light we have been given.” In other

words, if an individual makes a commitment and issues come to light later that compromise the individual's personal values, he should be released from keeping the promise.

Most of the individuals I asked tended to echo this sentiment, including Valir Health's CEO, Garyl Geist. "Relationships can easily be compromised if you break your word, so it must be kept with few exceptions. The exceptions to this rule would be situations causing harm or injustice to someone."

John Burnett of the Character First Institute mused that, in our current litigious climate, business leaders are required to give more than just their word. "Today, I have to have a lawyer, you have to have a lawyer and then we have to have another lawyer to check up on the lawyers."

If faced with the delicate matter of compromising one's word, Mr. Burnett suggests that it requires "clear communication with the others impacted by the decision...one should appeal the release from one's word with all due respect and sensitivity to the completeness of the situation. And, if others simply do not understand, one may need to stay in the commitment for the sake of one's own good character and reputation, unless it is a violation of moral principle or legality."

Always to be counted on for her good common sense, wise counselor Myrna Latham of McAfee Taft offered this: "Before making a commitment, it is important to think about potential obstacles that may threaten your ability to follow through. Don't make promises that you know you are unlikely to keep."

To summarize, keeping promises is the best course of action, but there can be rare mitigating circumstances that require thoughtful judgment. More often than not, it's best to heed some parting advice from Norman Vincent Peale: "Promises are like crying babies in a theater – they should be carried out at once."

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