

# PROMISES ...

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Getting your team to deliver.

***Can you remember a time, not so long ago, when bosses would ask their staff to do something, and the staff member would bend over backwards to make sure it was done – pronto!***

***Is it rose tinted glasses or was business really more straight forward a few years ago? Do we now live in a business world where promises (plans, strategies, deadlines) have lost their value and urgency?***

The short answer is that YES, things are different now. People juggle competing priorities daily. Jobs are less defined than they used to be. The recession has led to job cuts and outstanding projects being absorbed by already overworked teams. Demands and expectations from CEOs are often unreasonable and unrealistic. Time management is something everybody talks about, but the sheer force of information overload is making even the best time managers struggle to prioritise.

However, as a business leader, if you are conscious of the changed landscape and what drives people to achieve their goals, than you can make positive changes in your business to ensure that everybody delivers and gets what they need.

### **Why is our environment different now?**

#### **Breaking promises... everybody's doing it:**

Where lying or misrepresentations were once a sackable offence, or at the very least severely frowned upon, the little white lies and exaggerations that are endemic in every organisation has made making and then breaking promises too easy. Exaggerations, omissions and plain old lies on CVs only mirror the misrepresentations by organisations of the job roles they are recruiting for. Politicians, Bankers, Hospitals – all institutions we could once trust, no longer make promises that hold water or that they are held accountable for. So when promises do not eventuate into action in the business environment, it is now

considered an inevitable result of a less disciplined culture.

#### **Competing priorities and too much information:**

The data tsunami continues to build at a time when companies are trying to get even more out of their workers. In 2012, we are drowning in information. Not just the volume of information but the different sources that produce it and the formats and channels where information is consumed. We now expect 'knowledge workers' to read vast amounts of reference material, but to keep up with trends, write and respond to emails and their attachments, include them 'for information only' in hundreds of interactions throughout the day. It is estimated that each person consumes the equivalent of 12 - 36GB of data per worker per day, resulting in a chronic disruption of our collective attention spans.

In "Death by Information Overload," the Harvard Business Review observed "The flood of information that swamps us daily seems to produce more pain than gain. Current research suggests that the surging volume of available information—and its interruption of people's work—can adversely affect not only personal well-being but also decision making, innovation, and productivity."

And once interrupted, it can take a substantial amount of time to refocus. As much as 25 minutes (*according to research by Basex*). The innovations company ?WHAT IF! talks about the great management disabler of our age as the 'bar coding' of our day, so called because if we look at our diary for any day, it is usually sliced up into small sections of time to fit as many meetings, discussion and projects in as possible. The problem is that this makes us a lot less effective because it takes time to build up momentum and re-focus on the original task after we have answered a few emails or attended a meeting. An estimated 20 to 30 minutes in fact, by which time we are usually just running off to another meeting or attending to the next crisis, ensuring that we never get round to completing very much at all.

And emails present the biggest challenge to being productive. We abuse the email system by using it to cover ourselves and inform everybody about what is going on *just in case*. A 'for-information' email or being carbon copied in on a circular email simply

creates more information, more noise and more distraction from an already over-stuffed day. And business leaders can be the worst culprits, sending emails to all the management team, diminishing the attention they have for those jobs that are truly important and relevant to their roles. Information overload can make people feel anxious and powerless and ultimately reduce creativity.

**Is it any wonder that in this environment of excessive information, competing priorities and unrealistic expectations, a project that was promised in good faith somehow drops down the to-do list in favour of the fire-fighting that calls much more loudly.**

### What do we know about people and engagement?

**Chasing delivery of a project pulls it into focus again, but does nothing to ensure it can be delivered. But understanding what may be driving your staff at a psychological level, may unlock some strategies to keep a project on track.**

Firstly, let's agree that nobody gets up in the morning wanting to do a really bad job at work or disappoint their colleagues and boss. If you believe that people wilfully fail to deliver, than you need to understand a bit more about what drives people at work and in life, for they are the same thing.

Let's take a basic psychological model such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, stating that a person's needs drive their behaviour. The model suggests that needs such as safety and health must be met before a person can focus on needs such as self-actualization. The corporate world has largely focussed on incentives and creating reasons to alter behaviour to meet self actualisation needs. But the core needs that must be met first are often not addressed or even understood as being affected by the work environment. For an employee, unfulfilled needs can lead to job dissatisfaction, frustration and ultimate failure to achieve.

In more recent years, social neuroscience has recognised that our motivation driving social behaviour is governed by the principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward (Gordon, 2000). Importantly, the neural processes used are the same

as the networks used for primary survival needs (Lieberman and Eisenberger, 2008). In simple terms, social needs are treated in the same way as the need for food and water, so the 'approach reward and avoid threat' response is actually hard wired as a survival instinct and not in fact a choice of how one behaves.

Modifying the work environment to promote an APPROACH response and minimise AVOID responses can greatly improve perception and problem solving, decision-making, stress management, collaboration and motivation, resulting in effective engagement. This is a state of being willing to do difficult things, to take risks, to think deeply about issues and develop new solutions. An approach state is a positive state, complete with increased dopamine levels. There is a large and growing body of research which indicates that people experiencing positive emotions solve more non-linear problems that require insight (Jung-Beeman, 2007), collaborate better and perform better overall.

Taking a behavioural model such as the **SCARF** model, Rock, D. (2008) can help us understand the core issues that drive engagement at work. The SCARF model involves five domains of human social experience: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

**Status:** It is easy to accidentally threaten someone's sense of status by giving advice or instructions, or simply suggesting they are slightly ineffective at a task. Leaders can change behaviour by reinforcing good outcomes and building status with positive feedback. When a project has not been delivered on time, sharing your disappointment is the least constructive way to get what you want. Praise, positive feedback and understanding competing priorities will be more productive than threatening ultimatums.

**Certainty:** Even small amounts of uncertainty can generate an 'error' response resulting in very little progress until the uncertainty is resolved. Uncertainties, like not knowing a manager's expectations or whether a project is vital to the business or just requested on a whim, can stall progress.

Meeting expectations generates an increase in dopamine levels in the brain, a reward response. However, the ever increasing to-do list creates a moving goalpost that increases uncertainty dramatically. As people build business plans, strategies, or map out an organization's structure, they feel increasing levels of clarity about how an organization might better function in the future. Breaking a complex project down into small steps does the same. Establishing clear expectations of what might happen in any situation, as well as expectations of specific outcomes all increase the reward from certainty, making implicit concepts more explicit, such as agreeing clear objectives at the start of any project.

**Autonomy** provides a sense of control over events. A reduction in autonomy, for example when being micro managed, can generate a strong threat response. When one senses a lack of control, the experience is of a lack of agency, or an inability to influence outcomes. The statement 'Here's two options that could work' will elicit a better response than 'Here's what you have to do now'.

**Relatedness** is a sense of safety with others, of friend rather than foe. To increase the reward response from relatedness, the key is to find ways to increase safe connections between people. Some examples include setting up clearly defined buddy systems, mentoring or coaching programs, or small action learning groups.

**Fairness** is a perception of fair exchanges between people. People who perceive others as unfair don't feel empathy for their pain. The threat from perceived unfairness can be decreased by increasing transparency, and increasing the level of communication and involvement about business issues. Sharing the reasons why a project is urgent, establishing realistic expectations and objectives can all help the timely delivery of the project.

**The SCARF model helps explain how modifying your management style can be so effective at facilitating change, and points to ways of improving its delivery.**

## What specifically can you do to help people deliver on their promises?

### Control information

Most companies are better at giving employees access to masses of information than at training them how to use it. The truth is that people are not necessarily more productive now but in fact more distracted, and therefore more busy and stressed. Organisations are beginning to deal with data overload, finding ways to manage emails and encouraging priority management techniques.

But businesses leaders need to take a more responsible and head-on approach and address some ingrained cultural issues making the data mountain worse.

As McKinsey and Company observed in the article Data to Dollars: "For all the data flowing through companies, executives often struggle to find the information they need to make sound decisions. Potentially valuable content is frequently trapped in organizational silos, lost in transit from one system to another, bypassed by inadequately tuned data collection systems, or presented in user-unfriendly formats. Although wired with layers of information gathering technology, organizations still find it difficult to deliver the right data to the right people". Businesses that continue to grow and prosper will be those organizations that best use information and knowledge to drive innovation, competitive advantage, enhanced productivity and better decision making.

For example, if your organisation has an email culture of keeping everybody informed and in the loop, it is worth reviewing why and what benefit this creates. If you aren't sending them information that they need, you shouldn't be sending it. Your team need any information that will help them do their jobs well. That may require a little more work on your part. Instead of drowning them with information, try dissecting lengthy documents and providing only the relevant parts to the appropriate team members. This will keep them abreast of any information they need without requiring that they dig through unnecessary pages.

## Understand drivers

The SCARF model provides one framework for building self-awareness and awareness of others. You can apply any model, as long as you work towards finding personalized strategies to effectively use these brain insights, to manage more effectively. As a leader, you should aim to inspire your team, helping your staff to grow stronger not only as professionals, but also as individuals. In return they will go above and beyond for the business and deliver the excellent level of service you are aiming for.

Specifically in setting a project, you might want to consider the following:

1. You may know exactly how you want the project done and subsequently provide too much direction and not enough positive feedback affecting the status response.
2. Perhaps you don't provide a solid brief with clear expectations, impacting the certainty response. If a project is important to you, respect your staff by briefing them effectively with objectives, expectations and deadlines.
3. If you are not getting what you want, you might try to micro manage, which ultimately impacts their autonomy response. Finding ways to solve obstacles together when challenges appear insurmountable can increase autonomy.
4. Bosses are sometimes so hands-off, expecting delivery of a perfect project with no personal involvement, that it impacts the relatedness response. Being an interested coach is far more effective than being a detached boss.
5. You may create a negative fairness response by not being transparent enough about a project or requesting an impossible deadline. Understanding competing priorities and helping to re-prioritise projects as well as being open about why you need the project completed by a particular date, will create a positive fairness response.

**You know yourself that when you work with somebody who makes you feel better about yourself, provides clear expectations, lets you make decisions, trusts you and is fair, you will work harder for them as you feel intrinsically rewarded by the relationship itself. Spending time around a leader like this activates an approach response and opens up people's thinking, allowing others to see information they wouldn't see in an avoid state.**

## Manage your own expectations and help others manage theirs

Managers should be realistic and not expect their team to perform miracles. Have some empathy and help realign their expectations as well as your own: If you or your team are making more commitments than you can keep, ask yourself what is your motivation behind the promise? Sometimes we do something purely out of good intentions. Other times it is for what we will receive. We might believe that we need to say "yes" to get what we want or to ensure someone will like us. We tell people what we believe they want to hear so they're happy. But this can lead to disappointment all round.

Research in marketing psychology provides interesting insight into why we are so disappointed and take it very personally when somebody does not deliver what they promised. The effect known as "negative expectancy disconfirmation" demonstrates that we have a bias toward being more angry when a promise fails to perform than to be happy when it lives up to its claims. What's worse, as shown by Canadian team Peter Darke and colleagues (2009), once we have been disappointed, we often expect to be disappointed again and do not trust further promises.

**If you are like most people, you make commitments to others all the time. But how often do you keep your promises? It is impossible to follow through on every single one you make in life, but how many you break and how you handle it when you or others do, is key to getting what you need.**

**There are many reasons why people fail to deliver and it is rarely a wilful choice. Helping others in any way you can, rather than folding your arms and watching them fail, elevates you to the role of a truly inspirational leader.**