



Promises

A Speech Act

"When [Mrs. Mallard and her baby ducklings] reached the pond and swam across to the little island, there was Mr. Mallard waiting for them, just as he had promised."

~Make Way for Ducklings, by Robert McCloskey

To make a promise is a profound act, and we swim in a sea of them every day. Promises make and break reputations. They power businesses and organizations. Within each promise lies the possibility and vulnerability of trust, and the hope of a desire fulfilled. Therein also lies a key to our leadership challenge: to be responsible for our promises, to become skillful at negotiating and re-negotiating them, and to manage our reactions. Because trust and hope are intrinsic to the nature of promises, when promises are broken, the costs are high.

So how do we manage these precious resources? How do we relate to our daily promises in ways that inform and strengthen our integrity, our trustworthiness, and consequently, our relationships?

Integrity is not about keeping all of our promises all the time. It is about what we say and do, and how we BE, when we break our promises. How do you BE when you break a promise? Do you get defensive? Do you hide out? Do you blame someone else? Do you apologize?

Things change. Life alters our path and we need to re-align our promises to match current reality. With that said, *how* we go about the re-alignment process is the key to maintaining trust in relationship and being in integrity with ourselves.

Somatic Practice

Connect to your body. Then think about Mr. Mallard and the baby ducklings in the quote above. What gets evoked in you? You may think: "Nice, a father who keeps his promises." You may notice you feel a sense of relaxation. Your heart opens. You may think, "Ahh that is so great."

Read the sentence again, maybe even out loud. What do you notice in your body? What is your automatic narrative that pops up when you hear that Mr. Mallard kept his promise to be there when he said he would be?

Noticing your reactions will offer a direct inlet to your own relationship with promises. When you observe the feelings evoked during a moment when promises are being made and broken, you can begin to sense where you feel solid about your word, or whether you need to re-negotiate your promise to fit new circumstances. You will recognize the impact of broken promises others have made you, and be able to discern how to best to manage your reactions.

Assess Your Promises, a Leaders' Inventory

Sink into your body as you read the following questions and observe your relationship to promises:

- What does the word "promise" evoke for you? Are you cynical about it? Are you trusting?
- What is a promise?
- Which promises do you make that you know you won't keep?
- What are your reasons for not keeping them?
- From whom do you accept promises when you know they won't be kept? Which promises are they? What is the impact on you?
- What promises are you currently living in that you are now breaking?
- What promises do you need to revoke or re-negotiate to get back into integrity with yourself and the person you promised?

The Speech Acts: *the Declaration, the Request, the Promise, the Assertion and the Assessment* are at the crux of our communication with one another. They are the primary currency of all organizations, all teams, all families, all countries. Aware or not, we use The Speech Acts – the name Fernando Flores used to distinguish the language moves we humans make every day to form conversations, and our world. And these conversations lead to actions that would not have been possible prior to speaking about them. It is well worth the time and attention to learn how to Master the Art of the Conversation.

Becoming masterful at managing your promises will dramatically improve your effectiveness, solidify your relationships, and deepen your honor and dignity.

