

Broken Promises and Moves for Taking Care

Language to help us move from suffering to choice

Choice Begins with Awareness: Clear Language Helps

There are things we avoid thinking about, because to do so would make us responsible for the state in which we find ourselves! When we fail to behave as the responsible people we consider ourselves to be, we often make up a story about what's happening. It keeps us from seeing what's really going on, and where we can improve.

When we fail to keep our promises to friends or customers, it's not uncommon to find we are overcommitted. We develop language that allows us to skate around responsibility for it, endorsing it or avoiding the reality of having taken on more than we logically can do. Overcommitment narratives we find ourselves in may include:

Blindness

this is not a narrative about being overcommitted, but a state of not knowing that you are overcommitted; you don't discover you were blind until some breakdown shows up that reveals the situation.

Heroic

this is the narrative that you will take on doing more because it is needed; the danger is that you don't set boundaries, particularly the boundary of fulfilling the promise or not, you take on more and more, and you wind up a dead hero.

Hopeful

you are clear you are overcommitted, and you don't know how you will get it all done, but you live in hope that with hard work it will all work out in the end.

Fantasy

you reject all facts, indications, and the assessments of others that you cannot fulfill, and hold on to your story that you will without any grounding; this can be mistaken for faith.

Resigned

you assess and feel that you cannot avoid being overcommitted, you know you will not fulfill, but have some story of why you cannot say so, or that it will make no difference; you allow your resignation to keep you and your customer in a public story that it will happen, when your private story is that it will not, usually due to some justifying narrative.

Cynical

you have a story that overcommitment is unavoidable due to the power, policies, decisions, and actions of others, that they will always keep things that way, and you are resentful of them for doing so – you assess that they deserve the negative results that will occur and that no action you take to avoid overcommitment will have any effect.

Criminal

you know you cannot fulfill when you make the commitment, and you knowingly keep the customer in the interpretation you will fulfill when you have no commitment to fulfill.


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Moves Available, to Return to Taking Care of What We Care About

When we know what we care about, who our key customer is, and what our customer cares about, we are equipped with the motivation to "win the game" in creative ways. Rather than staying stuck in our narratives about why we can't or shouldn't deliver, we can take responsibility and hold the conversations required to achieve success, in whatever form we agree upon.

For a team to be effective, they must know that they are free to make all of the following moves, or at least to make clear requests that lead to things like "change the game" and "change the team", (these often require collaboration with other parts of the organisation).

IMMEDIATE MOVES

Decline
Defer
Delegate
Clarify priorities
Counteroffer
Transfer
Renegotiate
Revoke

INCREASE CAPACITY

Get help
Request resources
Get new talent
Redesign work
Redesign roles
Improve processes
Build competencies

MAKE A WINNING GAME

Change the game
Change the team
Change the strategy
Create alliances