



crucial



The Ten Secrets to Managing Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior

1. Master the “Hazardous Half Minute”

Most confrontations fail in the first thirty seconds. You step up to a problem, set the wrong tone, and everything falls apart from that moment on. Here’s how a discussion quickly degenerates into a debacle. You see a problem, assume the worst about the person who caused the problem and become upset or even disgusted. So, *even before you open your mouth*, you set the wrong tone. You’ve held court in your head, found the other person guilty, and the verdict shows on your face. It comes up in your tone of voice. It’s part of your very demeanor. You’re feeling superior and justified in your anger. You speak harshly or insultingly or patronizingly. The other person reacts to your harsh judgment and from that moment on the discussion is doomed. As tempers flare, not only will you not solve the problem, you’ll actually harm the relationship.

So what’s a person to do to survive the Hazardous Half Minute? Give others the benefit of the doubt. Sure, they’ve let you down—but who knows why? Maybe they have a good reason. You don’t know why they did what they did, so why assume the worst and set the wrong tone? If the other person is at fault, you’ll have plenty of time to deal with the problem later; just don’t treat everyone as if they’re the worst offender. Instead, prepare yourself by not holding court. Ask yourself why a reasonable, rational, and decent person would do what they did. Work on yourself before you open your mouth. Turn the Hazardous Half Minute into a good start.

2. Follow the Admonition of Joe Friday (“The facts ma’am”)

When someone lets you down, you’re likely to come up with an explanation—inside your own head, all by yourself. Say the other person isn’t helping out with the tasks that neither of you like to do. At first, you figure he just forgot. So you say something. He still doesn’t help out so now you think he’s purposefully avoiding the jobs—letting you carry your unfair share. You conclude that he’s acting selfish. You conclude that he’s purposefully making his life better at your expense. You conclude that he doesn’t care about you. In fact, there’s a good chance he actually takes pleasure in causing you pain.

So, what do you share with the other person? You don’t start with the stuff you made up in your own head—that’s for sure.

Your conclusions or stories may be right, but they're certainly controversial and very likely to cause the other person to become defensive. "Jim, I couldn't help but notice that you're a selfish blighter who enjoys making me suffer. Can we talk?" Sure enough, Jim becomes angry.

No matter what you've told yourself, follow the admonition of detective Joe Friday from *Dragnet*—stick to the facts. They're the least controversial and offensive. Describe what you expected along with what you observed. "This is the second time you've left the tasks we both dislike to me, even though we've talked about it." Then, if you want to share a conclusion, do so in a tentative way. "I'm beginning to wonder if you're doing so on purpose. Is that what's going on, or am I missing something here?" Start with your facts, then, if it's really starting to bother you, tentatively share your conclusions.

3. Keep the Spotlight off Yourself and on the Problem

When others fail to keep a promise, you yourself are at risk. In fact, the worse the other person's behavior, the more selfish and despicable the action, the guiltier they are of a serious problem, they more *you* are at risk. That's because as the stakes rise, as the infraction causes greater and greater consequences, you're likely to become increasingly emotional. And when this happens, you're likely to become stupid. Here's how this happens. The minute adrenaline drips into your bloodstream (your bodily response to danger), blood rushes out of your brain and into your arms and legs—so you can take flight or pick a fight. Dumbed down by the shift in blood, you're on your worst behavior.

And then guess what happens. If the other person does something wrong, and you lay into them with accusations or insults (that's what your blood-starved brain thinks is just the right thing to do) you've given up the moral high road. In fact, your reaction may be more offensive than the original infraction. The other person didn't meet a deadline (perhaps she forgot) and you purposefully and willfully insult her.

Within a business context, this means that the spotlight that should be aiming full force on the original problem, has now shifted to you. If others are watching, eyes are now on you. You're the new problem. You're using insulting language. You're making threats. You're acting all self righteous and justified in your abusive behavior and you're not. You're not justified.

You're never justified in treating others with disrespect. Imagine an employee walking away from the interaction straight to legal or personnel and the first words out of her mouth are (taken from a real example) he cursed at me. He called me stupid and lazy. He threatened my job and I wasn't even given a verbal warning. You'll note the subject of each of these sentences is you. You're the one who overreacted and is now the subject of investigation. The original problem is overshadowed by your response. You've inadvertently turned the spotlight on yourself.

So, what's a person to do? Don't tell yourself the ugly stories. Don't allow yourself to get angry in the first place. If you do become upset, don't talk about the problem until you've calmed down. If you make the mistake of talking while still under the deadly influence of adrenaline, you will have to live with consequences of your dumbed-down decision-making ability and the hangover that follows.

4. Pick the Issue You Really Care About

Rarely does a problem exist all by itself. Problems come in bundles. For instance, your teenage son comes home an hour past curfew. What's the problem you're going to discuss? Being late? Maybe. But what if this is the third time your son has been late and he swore on his nose ring that he'd be on time. Now you have a problem with trust. It's not merely being late; it's also a matter of not keeping his word. You don't know if he'll do what he says next time and this is a far greater issue. You're talking to him about the loss of trust and he becomes unacceptably disrespectful. He crosses the line from smart pants to insubordination to a personal attack. This is a new and bigger problem and deserves your attention.

What's a person to do? Stop, ask yourself how many problems are involved in the interaction, and slowly unbundle the problem

package. Then, as you decide which of the issues to deal with, simply ask: What do I want? Use this question to help you keep focused on the core issue. Don't talk about minor points and other minnows when you have bigger fish to fry.

5. Avoid Ground Hog Day

Let's look at a common mistake with unbundling a problem. A colleague agrees to help edit a paper that you're writing and have it back to you by noon. You return from lunch only to find no edited paper. When you ask your friend, he explains that he forgot and gets right on it. A day passes, you give him a similar assignment and he fails to deliver once again only this time he explains that something bigger and more important came up. Of course, he didn't tell you and now you're left in the lurch.

In this case, don't live the life of Phil Connors in the popular movie *Groundhog Day*. He's forced to live the same day over and over again because he can never get it right. If you return to the original problem (you didn't edit the paper) the second and third time it comes up, you're doing the same miserable thing as Phil.

So, what's a person to do? The second time an issue arises, you're facing a pattern. Now it's hard to trust the other person. They haven't kept a promise. Worse still, they believe that as long as they have a good reason or story for not delivering on their promise, they're off the hook. To them success equals failure plus a good story. Talk about this issue. Yes, they still need to edit the paper, but more importantly, they need to keep their word—or if they run into a problem, to notify you about the challenge so you can jointly come up with a new plan. Avoid Groundhog Day, move from a single instance to the pattern.

6. Fight Your Natural Proclivity—Diagnose Motivation *and* Ability

After you've described the problem to the other person, stop and listen. Fight the human tendency to assume that all problems are a function of nothing more than human motivation. For instance, when researchers set up a scenario where a woman cuts in front of people in line at the grocery store, the research subjects explain that she cut in line because she didn't care. She was in a hurry and figured that it would be okay for her to cut in front, after all, she faces important personal challenges. She willfully cut in.

Rarely, if ever, do subjects argue that the person was trying to keep track of her three young children and didn't realize that she had crowded in line—which was what was really going on in the contrived scenario.

When people fail to deliver on a promise, it's often because they run into an ability barrier. Someone forgot to get the word to them. They ran out of material, called you to let you know, and you were out of the office so they left you an e-mail.

Of course, people are often unmotivated as well. The task is boring or noxious or competes with a hired priority job so they don't want to do it. Motivation can be a problem as well.

So, what's a person to do? Listen for both elements. Fight your natural proclivity to assume that the other person isn't motivated. Stop and ask what happened. Then listen to both possible causal forces. Are they unable? Are they unmotivated? And yes, both elements can be present. People can't do what you ask nor do they want to—so check for both.

7. Avoid Power Like the Plague

Let's assume that the other person didn't do what he promised because he didn't want to do it. He had other things he preferred to do and did them. That's right; he willfully chose not to do what you asked. He's not motivated—just like you figured all along.

What's a person to do? Well, you can always discipline or threaten the other person. If you have power, that is. Bosses can always start the person down the road to termination. Parents can insist on a time out or they can always take away the keys away. When you're in a position of power you can always use it to get what you want or at least to try to get what you want.

But power kills. When you move to threats or taking away advantages or resources, you drive a wedge in your relationship. Besides, you don't want people to do what you're asking them to do, just to make yourself happy. You have legitimate reasons

for asking them to complete the task. These reasons should be the compelling motivational force. The test or leadership is not what people do in your presence, but what they do in your absence. If people are acting out of fear, when you remove the fear, they revert to their old behavior.

Once again, what's a person to do? Explain the natural consequences associated with the task. If the person is unaware of why the task is important, explain the consequences of noncompliance. If necessary, make the invisible visible. Talk about what happens to the job, to other employees, to the customer, to quality, to profits, and to anything else that matters. Explain how others are beginning to view the other person. Allow the voice of reason to take over the role of motivator, never try to motivate with power—it only causes new problems. And yes, if nothing works, you can always discipline, but only as a last resort. Don't start with power, do everything you can to avoid having to use it.

8. Don't Be Afraid to Make It Easy

Now, let's return to the other causal force. The person isn't able to do what's been asked. A motivational speech just won't. They aren't going to do it for the Gipper because they can't. Now what?

It's true, if the task is mere difficult but not impossible, then you can try to motivate the other person. After all, they can do it. But over the long haul, it makes way more sense to simply make the task easier. There' is no great honor in continually finding ways to motivate people to complete tasks that are noxious or painful. Certainly not if you can find a way to remove the pain. People seek pleasure and avoid pain. It's not a sign or weakness; it's a sign or intelligence.

So, what's a person to do? This is actually the easiest part of problem solving. Simply ask the other person what it'll take to remove the barrier. If the other person doesn't know, jointly brainstorm methods to remove the barrier. If necessary, kick the problem up hill to people have access to more resources or authority.

9. Don't Get Easily Sidetracked

We all learned as children that if your parents are taking you task, you might just be able to get off the hook by deflecting your parents' attention to a different issue. Thus, we learned to say things like: "I'm not the only one, Marcy did it twice." Or, "I wouldn't have done it if you hadn't been gone all the time (oh yes, the ever-favorite guilt trip.) Our goal, of course, was to take the problem solver down a path that ends on something other than having to change our behavior. Naturally, as adults, we do the same thing and so do the people around us.

So, what's a person to do? Watch out for possible distractions and side trips. Be flexible enough to recognize new problems as they arise, and if necessary chose to deal with them. But put a marker on the original problem and then return to it after you've resolved the new problem. If the new problem is merely a deflection and not worthy or your attention, don't get deflected. Stay focused.

10. End Well

Once you've been able to discuss the issue (motivating with natural consequences and making it easy where necessary), you'll eventually come to a resolution and it'll be time to take action. Make it clear who is supposed to do what and by when. Remember there is no "we" when you're assigning tasks. I do this, you do that. "We" never does anything. Also, if you don't put a deadline on the proscribed activity, you have set no actual goal, just given a direction and you may be waiting forever. Set a time, even if it's just a time to check for how well the task is going and then to set a deadline.

Need help stepping up to your crucial confrontations?

**Call Southam Consulting (740) 453-4547 or
Visit us online at <http://southamconsulting.net>.**