

Trust-Powered Leadership

Four promises fuel diversity and inclusion.



by Chuck Shelton

TRUST-POWERED LEADERSHIP delivers results: people follow, achieve, and stay with leaders they trust, and customers loyally buy from trusted companies. And in an increasingly diverse and global economy, trust may be in short supply.

My influence increases rapidly when I define and demonstrate the skills of trust building among my diverse colleagues and customers. As a white male leader, I've concluded that *diversity* and *inclusion* are for me, too. *Diversity* involves all the differences that distinguish us from one another, and *inclusion* opens the door to each person's full and unique contribution.

Ethicist Lewis Smedes defines *trust* as "the making and keeping of promises over time." A promise is a vow that creates expectation, opportunity, and accountability. It requires a confident, forward-thinking attitude, as a promise seeks to shape the future. Trust can't be manufactured—it only can be crafted promise by promise. And it can be decimated by the breaking of a single commitment. If integrity is the congruence between *what we believe* and *what we do*, our promises connect our aspirations to our actions. Trust holds *relationships* and *organizations* together.

Four Priority Promises

At the heart of durable leadership in diverse relationships are promises—some made and kept, others broken. Successful leaders and companies deliver on their promises to customers and employees. Trust-powered leaders develop the discipline of promises.

As a leader, you need to make and keep four priority promises:

Promise 1: I will lead by making promises that matter. A manager makes many promises to employees, ranging from expectations that emerge in onboarding, through the mutual accountability of a respectful end to employment.

The promise of *hiring* is a promise of *inclusion* and *involvement*: "Come work here. We'll compensate you fairly, and you can contribute and serve our customers." When we recruit people, we

commit to ensure that their success will add to our own. We want them to *deliver on the promise* they show in selection.

The promise of *delegation* creates expectation and accountability. Effective delegation requires that you know people personally and assign challenging work to deepen their development. Delegation is a form of promise making where *we trust others to get the job done*.

The promise of *promotion* is also an oath of opportunity, in which an organization promises that, "as a valued employee, you will have the chance to develop your skills and advance into new positions based on your performance." Every enterprise promises at least the *potential* for promotion. It's a promise your people expect you to keep.

Promise 2: I will lead by keeping the promises I make. Make promises you can keep, and then deliver. Be realistic



and honest, evaluating what it will take to keep a promise before you make it. In *making a promise*, you frame the future: "Here's what will happen." *Promise keeping* determines your credibility and sets performance precedents.

Exercise due diligence in establishing and evaluating performance objectives with your boss and direct reports. These goals represent key promises and directly shape expectations and accountability. High performers understand and accept the criteria by which their success will be measured. For your part, deliver effective feedback, and provide formal reviews quarterly—you can choose to evaluate performance more often than required. Stay current with your promises about performance.

Hold yourself accountable for your promises. Honor your commitments, and expect all employees to do the same.

Promise 3: I will lead by making and keeping promises that evoke reciprocity.

Trust is a two-way street. Colleagues unleash the *power of collaboration* when they also make and keep promises with you. As you deliver on your promises as a leader, you can expect employees to invest their best in return.

One key leadership skill promotes reciprocity. *Deliver feedback fearlessly*: specific, timely, actionable input that catches people doing things right, and courageous conversation to drive improvement. Deliver praise and correction with care and focus, and your folks will reciprocate by meeting and exceeding their performance objectives.

Promise 4: When I break a leadership promise, I'll spend relational capital wisely, and invest in conflict resolution. Relational capital is the goodwill you accumulate by keeping prior promises. Such trust on account is crucial, since across your career, you'll break enough promises to fuel rounds of the blame game.

When a promise fails, you draw against the trust in your relationships. So, admit directly that the promise will not be kept. Don't try to hide a broken promise, or misrepresent a promise to match the brokenness. Look for ways to make it right. When you handle broken promises honestly and creatively, you will pay a lower price for the conflict that accompanies promise breaking.

For a leader who does not attend to the discipline of promises, relationships with diverse colleagues can spark a hostile work environment, drive talent away, and fan the flame of litigation. All customers watch to see if a company honors the promises implied in its advertising, through *product quality*, *service*, and *community reputation*.

The goal here is *high performing conflict*. Equip your team to take skilled initiative with mistakes, disagreements, prejudice, and the fights that emerge due to differences of opinion, belief, and identity. The sting of broken promises then produces more creative and confident relationships, and your unit resolves conflict more efficiently.

As a leader, *you are your own promise*. Joseph Olchefske said: "You need people to know who you are every day." Inventory the promises in play with those you manage. Evaluate the way you make, keep, and break promises. Amp up your leadership by evoking relationships of trust. Employees will follow you and lead out on their own, and customers will return. Cultivate your personal brand as a leader who makes and keeps promises. LE

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ACTION: Build trust by keeping promises.