



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

You Can Count on Me

How many people do you know that will do exactly what they say? How many people do you know who have said they were going to do something and then did the opposite or didn't do it at all?

Dependability as a personal trait seems to be rapidly deteriorating. When you engage people in one-on-one conversations, they will almost always tell you, "You can count on me."

Well, can you? How many people in your personal circle of friends would you classify as being dependable? Now for the tricky question - how dependable are you? Do you always walk your talk? This is a tough one for us to handle because it has an element of ambiguity to it. Most of us, when we promise to do something, have the best of intentions. Invariably, when something goes wrong it prevents us from bringing closure to our promises. We have a way of rationalizing it by blaming it on someone else or a change of circumstances.

It makes no difference what causes us to fail to fulfill our promises; they are still breaches of a verbal contract that goes into the making up of our relationship with other people. I'll bet you there is not a single living soul on the face of the earth who has not broken a promise. We all do it and we will probably all do it in the future.

The reason for focusing on this column is to discuss it as a pattern of behavior. The minute broken promises are strung together like strings on a pearl it can have a tremendous impact on our reputation and our overall credibility.

There are a couple of strategies we can engage in that will help us cope with this phenomenon. It will not totally eliminate the problem but at least it will help us protect the level of trust and bonding we have with those we wish to be regarded with good favor.

Three golden rules of dependability are 1) walk your talk, 2) make your word your bond, 3) if you break a promise then build a bridge.

Walking your talk means doing what you say you are going to do. You have to believe that every word that comes out of your mouth is a reflection of your intentions and every one of your intentions is a commitment to behave in that fashion.

I'm always amazed at the number of people who are not paying attention to what they say because it commits them to courses of action that they either do not have the resources to follow or do not have the moral commitment to implement. You hear the term walk your talk used more in a negative sense than you do a positive one. In other words, it is not uncommon to hear someone say, "He doesn't walk



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his talk.” Not unlike another human behavior of wanting to hear one’s own voice as sweet music, one has to be very careful that their brain is engaged when their mouth is moving. There are a whole host of inappropriate things for people to say that erodes their credibility in this area. A few random samples, though, are idle promises and idle threats, criticism, gossiping, verbal abuse of others, and of course, the granddaddy of all, outright lying.

The best description of walking your talk that I can give is simply that you are consistent in what you say and do. If you truly feel opposed to something and want to see it eliminated, be willing to go the extra mile to try to see it eliminated. If you are in support of something and you want to see it happen, be willing to go the extra 10% to see it implemented. The cardinal sin in this arena is to talk loudly but fail to carry a stick.

The manifestation of anyone’s good word is the extension of a handshake when you make a promise. The clasping of hands has been a symbol for centuries of an agreement between people to act upon the topic of discussion. You don’t have to shake hands with someone to have made a contract. What we’re talking about here is to feel an obligation to follow-up on anything that you promised to do for another person. If you promise to send them something, then send it to them. If you promised to make a phone call, then make a phone call. You indicated you would complete a project within a certain time frame, and then finish it within the time frame.

Verbal contracts, in many ways, are even more binding than written ones. For we all know, we can be held accountable for what we put down in black and white. Fulfilling a verbal contract is an exhibition of commitment without coercion. Following up on these types of commitments probably does more to build a person’s reputation as being competent and dependable as any other single behavior.

Lastly, we have to face the reality that every once in awhile you have to break a promise. When that happens, there is a tendency to want to avoid contact with the individual or to fake some other form of excuse. A broken promise does not mean a broken relationship. It does put the onus on you to do something about it. So, if you have to break a promise to someone they should be the first one to find out about it. There is nothing inherently wrong with calling someone up and starting the conversation with, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to let you down.” For the most part, people appreciate being told about it up front. It gives them an opportunity to regroup, reanalyze, and in some cases, solicit assistance from some other location.

Generally, they don’t get upset with you for the courtesy. Instead, you may actually get an opportunity to help them find an alternative solution. Building a bridge with someone who you have let down can be a bonding relationship.



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These three rules of dependability if followed closely will allow you to do several things to improve your reputation as a person who can be counted on. In the first place, if you're very careful about what you are saying to people you won't create false expectation and promise things you cannot deliver. It means people will trust that what you bring up as a course of action is exactly what you intend to do and then they can begin to base their behavior on you.

I once had a slogan mounted on a plaque that was given to me that said, "If you always do what you always say you're going to do, then I can build a kingdom around you - but if you only do what you say you're going to do part of the time, you're just another problem to me!" Walking your talk allows other people to count on you and therefore, you, they, the team, everyone, tends to improve.

Fulfilling promises is nothing more than bringing closure to things. If followed to its natural extension it merely means that things will get done. It is one of the most effective time management tools you've ever utilized. The individuals who see you bringing closure in many cases will feel a reciprocal responsibility and the synergy between the two results in a lot more being achieved.

Lastly, building a bridge based on broken promises often causes us to reconsider what it is we commit to up front. It forces a more realistic appraisal of what you are capable of accomplishing and is a stabilizing influence in our working relationship with others.

Over the years, I have seen individuals break all three of these rules. As a matter of fact, I know I've broken them myself from time to time. I am very conscious of the fact that a person's reputation does wax and wane over the years. As an individual moves up in the rank hierarchy of the fire service, their ability to be counted on by others is a trait that is highly desirable. If you practice these skills when you are interacting with smaller groups of people, it is likely you will continue with a behavior as your circle of influence expands.

As I was preparing this column I was reminded of a quotation by Samuel Goldwyn, "The hardest part of this business is sincerity - and once you learn how to fake that the rest is easy!" The hardest part of our relationships with others is dependability and you can't fake that. What you are is what you do and what you do becomes what you are. This column was aimed at raising the level of consciousness about dependability. Over the next couple of columns, I'm going to be looking at a few of the other traits that make for successful chief officers - and that's a promise!