

## **How to break a promise and repair a relationship**

By Lora Cecca Lyons for *Westwood Press* and *Medfield Press* - March 6, 2008

Ever been in any of these situations?

- You rearrange your morning to meet a repairperson at your home only to discover that it's now the end of the day and you haven't heard nor seen this person.
- You are collaborating on a group project but everyone seems to disappear leaving it up to you to do the bulk of the work.
- You arranged a gathering where those who don't show up never told you they couldn't come.

When any of this happens to me, I feel frustrated, upset and disconnected from the other party. A typical response I may say is: "If you knew ahead of time, why didn't you tell me right away?" In most instances, a simple update and explanation would have helped prevent or soften the blow of consequences and feelings associated with a broken agreement. So, why do some of us avoid coming clean on needing to break a commitment?

Perhaps we feel shame or embarrassment; because in essence, a commitment is a promise. Many of us were raised with the belief that good people don't break promises. Yet, it happens to the best of us. We give our word on fulfilling a commitment then something unexpected happens that deters us from following through. For example, we may get sick and stay home, our computer crashes losing a report or a project with higher priority lands on our desk. When this happens, we are forced to deal with the circumstances along with having to face the reactions of the other party with whom we made the promise.

Another possibility for the lack of communication: we make assumptions. We might guess that the other person knows that something else has come up and is taking precedence. Also, there are times we may not place the same degree of urgency or importance that the other person has on the agreement.

Nonetheless, we have choices. You can ignore your promise and go on knowingly, consciously betraying your word while the other party is still counting on you. Do this often enough, and trust will become an issue. Or you can approach the other party and be open and honest about what's happening. This move can help cultivate trust between both parties which may also strengthen the relationship.

Here are steps on how to open communication and build a trusting relationship:

- Be aware of when you are making a promise to someone. Make a note of all the ones you make including when you said you'd complete them. This helps ensure that you and the other person share the same understanding of the agreement.
- If you can't keep the commitment, let the other party know immediately about the issue, work through a suitable new agreement and offer to clean up any mess produced from the breakdown.
- If you question the person's ability to follow through, be clear on what you are both agreeing to. You can also ask this person to check in with you at a certain point and to tell you immediately if something comes up that may delay or override your agreement.

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