

Sign of the times – To what extent can we keep our word?

In a troubled context where the economic and political news brings, every week, fresh stories of proven lies, and ‘forgotten’ commitments, a short piece about giving our word seems to me to be welcome, even if it won’t get to the bottom of the subject.

Keeping your word, what does that mean?

First let’s see what that implies:

- Knowing what I’m saying at the moment I say it, being there (the existence of the subject at a given moment)
- Remembering later what I said (continuity of the subject)
- Remembering whom I said it to (the other has a sustainable existence for me)
- Feeling as if I owe some allegiance to this memory (which is therefore active, like a goad)

Thus there are three major pillars to ‘keeping our word’:

- Awareness and presence to oneself (unity and congruence with self).
- Awareness of otherness and presence to each individual being (ipseity).
- Relationship to time: awareness of being together over time.

One’s word seems therefore to be like a symbolic thread, able to contain the identity of the speaker over time but also to maintain a relationship between he/she who made the promise and he/she who heard it. Once made, it cannot be ignored. Given, it cannot be taken back.

Is keeping one’s word in a role or a function different?

In his play “Lucrece Borgia”, Victor Hugo offers a fine joust about the value of a King’s word.

(This passage is like a “mise en abyme” in that it is for very bad reasons that Don Alphonse seems so upstanding and worthy).

(Act II, Part 1, Scene IV)

Dona Lucrezia: But really, my Alphonse, you have no reason to wish the death of this man.

Don Alphonse: And the word I gave you? A King’s oath is sacred.

Dona Lucrezia: That is a fine thing to tell the people. But between you and me, Alphonse, we know what it is. The Holy Father promised Zizimi’s life to Charles VIII of France and His Holiness still put Zizimi to death. On his word, Monsieur de Valentinois made himself a hostage to the same Charles VIII, and Monsieur de Valentinois escaped from the French camp as soon as he could. You yourself promised to give Sienna back to the Petrucci. You did not do so, nor did you feel obliged. Ha! The history of countries is made of this. Neither Kings nor nations will ever be able to live by the rigid oaths we swear. Between us, Alphonse, a sworn word is only a necessity when there is no other kind.

Don Alphonse: Still, Dona Lucrezia, an oath ...

Two opposing ideas confront each other:

According to Don Alphonse, giving one’s word creates an obligation. The words spoken are symbolically written in stone. Honour is at stake of course, but more than that, there is a notion of the sacred. As if giving one’s word committed not only the speaker to his interlocutor (the other) but also to a kind of transcendence (the Other). This is all the more true in that his role is important and goes hand in hand with great dignity.

According to Dona Lucrezia, on the other hand, keeping one’s word is a notion which is unworthy of the powerful. This is *realpolitik*: keeping one’s word would be too much of a constraint for the position! Having such a notion would be like being bound hand and foot. This is too lowly for a King! Pragmatism means disavowing words spoken and forgetting them once spoken, if need be. The throne cannot and must not be put in a cage.

“Promises engage only those who believe them”, it is said. This has a bitter resonance in our modern democracies where certain people (politicians or not) seem not to be bound by the notion of commitment, by giving their word.

But is it even possible to keep one’s word without being excessively rigid?

Because we have to admit, Donna Lucrezia, despite her cynism, does have a point: the world changes. The conditions which made us say or even promise something may evolve just afterwards. In the flow of events which constantly reshape the context, how can we remain loyal to our commitments, and to those who believed us, without walling ourselves in, without getting bogged down, without contradicting what events make us believe, today?

☞ See over

Perhaps simply by referring to the word I gave and explaining how and why my position has changed. That is, by not forgetting that there used to be another position. But also, of course, by taking care not to commit myself too lightly, too hastily, without measuring the possible consequences of my word over time. Then my word can live, evolve, while remaining sincere and powerful (having an effect), because it is a *referent*, over time.

What does this have to do with business, work and management?

Business is not immune to the grasp of doublespeak, waffle and forked tongues. And this, despite the fact that the perverse effects of this formidable practice are well known. Even while organisations declare the value they give to trust, mistrust spreads. Everyone knows the rules of this game:

- The speaker knows he's not committing himself and can switch to other ideas or other actions as soon as he wishes, without ever having to account for changing position nor accompany others on this changing word.
- The listeners know that words are not consistent: an empty shell, where you hope to hear the shore at best ...

In these conditions, it's difficult to get anything moving, to summon motivation or arouse the enthusiasm needed to meet daily challenges, let alone the great entrepreneurial projects and the '2035 visions'. Yet, isn't this the main purpose of leaders and managers: speak to impart meaning and lead staff into action?

And coaching in all that?

Coaching opens a space where leaders and managers can use their coaching session to practice exercising their word.

Through talking to the coach, the client commits to a process where he can measure the meaning of his own words and hold himself to them, as if to Ariane's thread which leads to the centre of the labyrinth, where his challenge awaits him (his personal minotaur!), but also helps him to come back, changed and strengthened.

During the coaching, the client is in no way obliged to keep his word to the coach; but each negligence, every time a commitment or a decision is forgotten or postponed, sends the client back to face himself. What is he really choosing? Which direction does he really want to commit to and go in, step by step, alone and with his teams?

The main role of the coach is to be a careful and sensitive witness to this questioning and confusion, by pushing back this simple question: are you prepared to follow your word wherever it takes you?

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Why co-host team coaching?

In these times of hardship, clients can be tempted to trim certain budgets by contesting the need for co-hosting of a seminar or a team coaching. Consultant-coaches may have a symmetrical temptation to try to justify co-hosting with objective, preferably quantitative, arguments: "Above x people in the team, you need 2 coaches".

But this type of argument reduces the true added value of co-hosting. It is important to co-host any type of work with a team, for the following reasons:

- Firstly, to avoid the position of omnipotence, to avoid the coach fixing on a single interpretation of the team's situation and problems, as if there was only one truth. (Since the difficulty of handling various points of view within teams is exactly one of the problems frequently met in teams.)
- But also to provide the team with a model of the ability to cooperate and show how each person's place and role must continually be adjusted.

Special thanks to Ian KING for translation.

Have a great summer!

See you in September for new assignments!