

The Community of Ethics

A short note on keeping our word

We make promises or commitments to others and to ourselves. God has given us the freedom to make promises. The question is: Do we keep them? Or are we promise breakers?

The question every civil servant should ask himself is whether he has a fragmented personality; whether one side of his personality acts true to what he says and the other side fails to keep his word.

We do not realize that such trivial promises like making an appointment with a friend or a colleague or promising to finish a job by a fixed time are indicative of the real worth of an individual. People often dismiss minor promises as insignificant. We promise a friend to call back, but don't call back; we don't repay a small loan that's outstanding; or we forget to keep a rendezvous. Maybe it just doesn't seem important to keep a secret after making a promise. But failing to take the minor promises seriously, we run the risk of destroying trust and damaging our reputation. Failing to keep these small promises gives the appearance of being disorganized and irresponsible.

On the other hand, we can build trust by demonstrating that we keep our word even on seemingly inconsequential things. Perhaps even more important, when people realize that we consistently keep smaller promises, they will reasonably believe that we can keep our word on important things. This will actually help us build an enviable reputation for dependability, reliability and trustworthiness.

I am reminded of a civil servant, who worked closely with me in the state government, who always responded with 'Sir, treat it done' whenever I asked him to do something. What was remarkable about him was that the job was actually done without delay.

If we keep the promises as our normal self expression, we have a wholesome personality. The problems arise if we do not keep them habitually; and to make matters worse, overlook our failure to keep them. It is particularly important for a civil servant because he is always in the glare of general public. His promises mean a lot to the citizens. To possess a wholesome personality for him is perhaps as important as being honest and efficient.

Many of our civil servants are diffident of saying 'no' to anybody. They do not want to be seen as being unkind or unsympathetic. As a practice, they promise to help without thinking whether they would actually be able to help. They are content to being like 'Hanuman' in the temple outside the court premises who does not say 'no' to any litigant.

A conscious civil servant should also ask himself whether he is self-deluded i.e. whether he thinks that he is true to his word. Most of the time, we have an immaculate perception of ourselves. There is nothing wrong with generally holding a healthy assessment of our capabilities and character, but at critical times, one should be honest with oneself.

In our life (and in our work place), we make a lot of promises. Most of these promises are made for a good reason. It is often to get a job done or to please someone. But the promise made is not always kept. Some of the reasons we don't keep our word include:

- We don't realize that we've made or implied a promise
- We even do not remember what we have said because it was said without conscious thinking
- We get diverted by something else considered more important
- We do not make an effort to fulfil the promise when we realize that keeping our word is harder than we expected
- We never meant to keep the word as it was given merely to please the other person
- Sometimes we make promises which we do not have the legitimate authority to fulfil

When we fail to keep a promise the other person thinks that we don't value him. He thinks that we consider someone or something more important than him. This can result in an attrition of trust in our relationship. In fact, this is a common trait in our civil servants. Most of them tend to give assurances to citizens which they have no intention of pursuing. However, some exceptional civil servants are careful to make promises, and after making a promise to make efforts to fulfil it. They are remembered by people even after their leaving their place of posting.

Not keeping our word has serious implications. We may get away with letting someone down once or twice. But the consequences can be deep and enduring if we continue to go back on our promises, whether or not it's intentional. People may grow dissatisfied with our leadership, and lose respect for us.

On a personal level, if we are aware of the fact that we do not value our word, we might lose respect for *ourselves*. Eventually, it can harm our self-esteem, confidence, and experience of life. And, when we feel shame or guilt, we could start to suffer from stress or a crisis of confidence. We might let *ourselves* down, too.

Therefore, we have to be careful while committing to do something. We should be aware that once we make a commitment, we create an expectation. Every promise raises anticipation in somebody's mind. So, it is prudent to never make a promise we are not sure to keep. Promises should be like edicts set in stone.

A test every civil servant should take:

- How often do I make agreements with myself?
- How many of those agreements do I keep?
- Do I trust myself to keep my word?
- Do I always mean yes when I say it?
- Am I comfortable saying no?
- Am I direct with my no?
- Can others depend on me to keep my word?
- In what situations am I most prone to fib, or to withhold or "bend" the truth?
- Am I prone to gossip or to self-critical statements?
- Do I "walk my talk,"

Let us examine the promise we make. The benefits that we intend to draw from making a promise are earning the admiration of someone, earning the gratitude of someone or looking good in the eyes of someone. On the other hand, the costs of fulfilling that promise include the effort needed and the deprivation of doing something else.

We unconsciously make a cost-benefit analysis in our mind in respect of every promise. And when we infer that the cost of fulfilling the promise is greater than the assumed benefit, we decide to break the promise.

Therefore, it would be wiser to do the cost-benefit exercise before (and not after) making the promise. We should not make promises impulsively. It is better to stop and think whether we have the resources to do what we are going to undertake.

Secondly, we should think carefully about our motives for agreeing to a request. Do we really want to help out, or are we saying "yes" just because it would please someone? Also, we should ponder over whether there is something else we should focus on

If someone asks for a favour, it can be painful to turn it down, or to admit that we don't have the ability to do something. But, it's always better to admit inability rather than to giving false hope. It is possible to be direct, respectful and empathic by giving a diplomatic response.

Sometimes we believe that in the event of failing to keep our word, we can give an explanation or make an excuse to prevent any possible damage. It is better to avoid

falling back on subterfuges like these. They put our honesty, dependability and reputation on the line.

Sometimes despite our best efforts, we fail to honour our word. Even so, it's important to recognize that we have let someone down, and to apologize. People will appreciate it, and they'll give us the benefit of the doubt next time. Whenever we will not be keeping our word, just as soon as we become aware that we will not be keeping our word, we should tell everyone impacted.

Keeping your word is one of the keys of the Ethics of Public Service (EPS). If you keep your word; you don't leave any mess behind. Further, it becomes your identity. If you do not keep your word, people do not know where you stand.

For ordinary people, promises are made to be broken. For leaders, it is the essence of leadership. Some people still make promises and keep them. They make the life around them more stable and beautiful.

In sum, if you honour your word:

You live without fear for your selfhood that is who you are as a person

There is no fear of losing the admiration of others

You do not have to be perfect; you act with confidence

In most organizations, keeping your word exists as a virtue rather than as a necessary condition for performance

Therefore, if you choose to be a person of character, you have no choice when it comes time to honour your word

Endpoint: In a very real sense you are your word.