Securing Reliable Promises on Projects
A Guide to Developing A New Practice

By Hal Macomber[1], Project Reformer

Introduction

Routinely, projects are late, over-budget, or fail in some way to satisfy the client. And all this in *spite* of the training and tools deployed on projects. However, there is a practice for increasing the reliability of completion of project tasks. This practice is the securing of *reliable promises*. Why do we say "to secure a promise" rather than "to make a promise"? First, it is a practical matter. There is a much better chance of training the few who manage projects than the many who perform on projects. Second, the requestor is the one more interested in having his or her request completed.

Most of us are so interested in getting our requests satisfied that we latch on to the first utterances of a would-be performer, thinking we got the promise we were looking for. All too often we receive just the opposite. The individual is trying **not** to promise, but doing a very bad job even of that. Learning to secure reliable promises is strictly an act of self-interest. This guide will take you through an approach for securing reliable promises on your project.[2]

Structure of a Promise

A promise is made in response to a request. In the absence of a request, a promise can also be made in the form of an *offer*. Either way, our everyday promises generally take the form:

> *I (the performer) will deliver "X" for you (the customer)*
> *by a specific time in the future.*

In response to the common request, "Please do "X" for me," we often shorten our reply to single-word responses like "Yes," or "Sure." Under these kind of "every day" promising circumstances, the conditions required for completing the promise are often so well understood that they slip into the background (or into

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[2] For a further discussion of the impact of reliable promises on the results of projects see the author's paper with Greg Howell, *Linguistic Action: Contributing to the Theory of Lean Construction,* (2003).

the silence of assumption). For instance, you might go to your favorite coffee shop and say, "The usual." What you get is what is usual for you – a double cappuccino with skim milk and powdered cinnamon on top of the froth. The next person in line might order their 'usual,' getting (and being satisfied with) something entirely different. In fact, the "promising conversation" may have slipped so far into the silence of assumption that the performer may not even bother to speak his or her promise to you – let alone exactly what you want - instead just going directly to work preparing your coffee. In the same way, your spouse's request, "Take out the garbage" which (at first look) appears to be missing a key part of its anatomy -- the time (due date) for completion -- turns out, on second inspection, to contain the time specification, ***now***. Depending on what is usual and customary, that request may also include in its assumptive silences, "And don't forget to empty the wastebaskets."

On projects, however, promises take a slightly different form. First, work is usually referred to as "tasks." Common practice is to assign a task to a project team member, who generally "accepts" the task. Due to the non-repetitive nature of this kind of work, *conditions for satisfaction* may need to be made explicit. The requestor may request that the team-member perform the task to some organizational standard for that type of task. The requestor may go so far as to ask that a certain protocol or procedure be followed, which may also include providing documentation that the task has been completed to the declared standard.

According to certain well-respected work in linguistics[3] only five coherent replies can be provided to any request.

1. The promise, "Yes."
2. The promise, "No."
3. The promise that the speaker will promise later, i.e., the ubiquitous parental "We'll see..."
4. The request for more information about what's been asked - with the (only implied) commitment to promise when the speaker has the information.
5. A counteroffer to the request.

And when is an accepted task a promise? When it has been listened to as a promise. Which leads us, given all of the above, into a fertile field of possible breakdowns...

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[3] Speech Acts, Searle, John R., Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Five Characteristics of a *Reliable Promise*

Why distinguish between the usual sort of project promise and a *reliable promise*?[4] First of all, on a project we often don't have much basis for assessing the reliability of any performer for fulfilling whatever he or she promises us. Project performers are often strangers.   Second, given the lack of reliability in the project environment, we make securing a reliable promise into a separate category as a result of our particular concern for the **fulfillment** of any promise made to us.

In offering a distinction between an ordinary project promise and a reliable promise, we create a different way to engage with the promissor while in the act of securing a promise that can be fulfilled.

The following five points are the additional characteritics of a *reliable promise*:

1. The conditions of satisfaction are clear to both performer and customer.
2. The performer (promissor) is assessed as competent to perform or has access to that competence and other wherewithal (materials, tools, instructions, etc).
3. The performer has estimated the time to perform the action for completing the promise and has allocated (blocked) that capacity on the schedule (calendar).
4. The performer is sincere in making the promise. In the moment the promise is made, the performer is not having a private, unspoken conversation which contradicts fulfillment.
5. Regardless of what the future holds, the performer will make good on the promise - particularly if the promise cannot be performed, taking responsibility for whatever consequences may ensue.

Of course, we are not claiming that a promise will be performed just because we term it, "reliable." Many things may get in the way of successful completion. The distinction "*reliable promise*" is simply a handle for people having conversations of a certain style and intent. Those conversations could be characterized as purposeful, deliberate, serious, and open.

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[4] Fernando Flores introduced the distinction of a reliable promise as a way to give focus in commitment conversations.

The Kinds of Conversations That Result in Reliable Promises

Most project tasks arise from an assessment that something is missing that required for work to move ahead or for the project to succeed. As a result of that assessment, someone, often the project manager, makes a request. If the performer takes the request seriously, it is likely that he does so because the request was stated in the context of the goals or promise(s) of the project. In other words, when the conversation does not include the context that gave birth to both the assessment and the request, the likelihood of that request being fulfilled dive-bombs. *Explaining why always matters.*

Another aspect to encouraging successful "promising" conversations is to keep in mind that very often, the group setting produces even better approaches than those that were planned. There is always more than one way to do a project. Further, it is important to remember that no matter how much you think you know, you will learn more as the project proceeds. If you invite people to not just accept the tasks as defined but to propose alternative approaches, people will feel more valued and the project will be better for it. *Stay open to alternatives.*

A third aspect to engaging in successful "promising" conversations arises from the fact that giving people the freedom to promise yes, no, or to negotiate produces autonomy and therefore increases people's commitment to the result. A sincere "no" is usually better than a half-hearted "ok." You know exactly what to do with the no – ask someone else. What do you do with a half-hearted "ok?" You can worry, or investigate, or not have time to investigate and then worry about that. Make it your practice to:

Remove fear from promising conversations.

Selected Practices for Supporting the Fulfillment of Promises

Project Manager (Customer):
- Use the characteristics of a reliable promise as a checklist as you listen to project people make promises to one another.
- Stay interested and involved in the performer during the completion of the task. Be available; check in on progress; offer help when needed; remind the performer that you are looking forward to completion.
- Review outstanding promises at project review meetings. Start with those promises that have come due. Proceed on with the upcoming promises. Use a reasonable time horizon – one or two weeks.
- Invite others who are present during a promising conversation to inquire for clarification on the requests and promises as they are made.

Promissor (Performer):
- Use the characteristics of a reliable promise as a checklist whenever you consider promising on the project.
- Give yourself permission to negotiate, ask questions, and say, "No" when you can't see how you can responsibly fulfill a promise.
- Stay open to your customer's comments and questions. Remember you both are interested in success.

Other Interested Parties:
- Ask questions.
- Express your opinions.
- Offer suggestions and alternatives.

Declaring Complete on Promises

Work not being ready for starting and finishing is one of the top reasons for planned work not being performed on time and to the specification required. We strongly suggest that project managers interested in eliciting reliable promises set a standard on the project requiring people to formally declare complete to their customer on all promises that release work for others, on any items on the critical path, and on promises for all make-ready tasks for constrained[5] resources. Saying, "I'm done," keeps the project moving along. It provides the customer with the opportunity to assess that the conditions have been met, or (in those cases where they haven't been met) it allows rework to be performed, keeping the project on schedule.

Producing the New Behavior on Your Project

Start with yourself. You will recognize reliable promises when you are able to make reliable promises. Set a goal for yourself to observe your own promising for its reliability. Find a coach to work with you. Keep a notebook for two to three weeks of every promise you make. (Remember, when you decline you are promising, "No.") Make note of each element of a reliable promise. Do this when you make the promise if that is practical. Otherwise, take time at the end of a conversation or meeting to update your notebook. Review your notes at the end of each day to see what you are learning and to provide focus for the following day. Review your progress with your coach at least weekly.

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[5] A resource constraint is where progress of the project depends on the availability of the resource. Often resources are simultaneously required for multiple tasks.

Once you are making progress making reliable promises, begin interacting with the promising of others. Your principal actions will be listening and inquiring. Be sympathetic; avoid being heard as making accusations. When unsure if the performer understands your conditions of satisfaction ask, "Let's review what this will look like when complete." If you have a doubt about the performer's competence ask, "Have you done this before?" or, "Could you use some help?" Other questions you might want to ask are, "Where will you find time in your busy schedule?" to check for capacity. And, "Do you really want to take this on?" to investigate sincerity.

Take an optimistic stance in regard to the performers on the project. Most people will not start off with the skill for making reliable promises. Give them a chance to build this competence. Guide them as they go. Recognize and encourage people for their effort as well as their successes. Remember to keep your attention on the promising; performance will follow.

Use a measurement approach to support your improvement efforts. Calculate the percent of each week's p̲lan/p̲romising that was c̲omplete (PPC). Give credit only to those tasks (promises) that are 100% complete by the date promised. Divide the total tasks completed by the total tasks planned for completion. Although accounting may be interested in recording work that is 95% complete (for calculating work-in-process or billing), only 100% complete work releases work to others.[6] For each planned task that is not completed as promised, record the reason for the variance using the following list of reasons. Use these reasons to investigate areas for improvement.

1. Lacked the skill or know-how for completing the promise
2. Prerequisite work of others was incomplete
3. My prerequisite work was incomplete
4. Poor estimate of capacity
5. Capacity reallocated to other work
6. Some aspect of wherewithal was missing (tools, equipment, materials, etc)
7. Misunderstanding of the conditions of satisfaction or acceptance criteria
8. Misunderstanding of the promise date
9. External factor (weather, sickness, loss of power, etc.)
10. Failure to revoke or re-promise

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[6] We get what we measure. Percent of Plan/Promises Complete (PPC) is a method devised by the Lean Construction Institute for measuring the reliability of the planning (promising) conversations. It is most often used in the context of weekly work planning conversations sometimes referred to as "project reviews" or simply "team meetings." In these conversations, work is planned (promised) by the people who will fulfill the promises. The conversations take the form of reviewing the current week's performance and then (re)planning the next two weeks. On many projects promises are made long before the two-week horizon. This two-week review allows people to confirm their own planning. Remember, on projects we are most interested in the completion of work that releases work for others. The intent of the PPC measurement is to look for a pattern of improvement through time. Under no circumstances do you want to reward or punish behavior based on the measurement. It would lead to systematic under-promising that would result in high PPC but stifle project progress. Use PPC to focus your attention on improving.

Closing

Don't settle for early success in making and securing reliable promises. You are apt to recognize the elements of reliable promising in your own promising rather quickly.   Seeing those elements in others' promising requires an additional behavior: confirming one's competence in securing reliable promises requires a shift in one's attention away from one's own concerns onto the concerns of the promissor. We know of this as listening. You will notice that to be effective at *listening* you must learn to listen for something in addition to what is being said; you must listen also for what is not being said.

Be patient with yourself. It may take quite some time to learn how to focus your attention in promising conversations on the other person's speaking rather than on the incessant chattering of the voice in your head. Make a commitment to yourself to continue developing practices for securing reliable promises until that time comes when you notice listening in this new way has become your automatic way (your habit) of engaging with promissors.