

MAKE PROMISES, NOT GOALS

By Bill Mills



cal powers that, having once stated something as “a goal,” gets management off your back until the goal is due and then somehow absolves the goal setter of accountability by saying “We didn’t hit our goal, so we’ve set a new one.”

Goals have degenerated into hopes and guesses and best-case scenarios if the Lord is willing and the creek don’t rise. Even SMART goals are getting dumb. To pass the SMART criteria of Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound, people set smaller and smaller goals that look SMART but sub-optimize the true capacity of the people and teams making them.

I’d like to see us ask our people for promises, not goals.

A few years back I was facilitating a strategic planning session and one of the division leaders told the group that his division would hit a stretch goal of \$5 million next year. I asked him if that was a promise. He laughed and said, “My mom taught me not to make a promise I can’t keep,” and the room went silent.

I asked him for a promise he could keep and after some painful soul searching he told the group he could promise \$3 million in sales which was what his division had done the prior year. The next morning, he came back to the group and asked to amend his promise. He said he fully expected to produce \$3 million but the most he could promise was more like \$2.5 million in sales.

As disappointing as this story may sound, it is actually a success story. Almost every manager I know would prefer to hear a *no* they can count on, over a *yes* they can’t.

I can’t tell you how many stories I’ve heard about sales people who can’t hit their weekly goal for cold calls. As a manager, you want

to know what you can count on and that requires promises. When people look you in the eye and say, “I promise,” something shifts. We don’t need to oversee people who keep their word. They don’t have to endure someone micro-managing them. Two adults making and keeping agreements is a beautiful thing.

But what about the person making the promises? If I go around making promises to my family, my boss, my church and my friends won’t I get over-committed? Just the opposite will happen. Since I only make promises I’m committed to keep, I stop making promises once I’m at capacity. I say no to requests that conflict with my promises to my children and spouse. I say no without guilt because if I say yes that is when I run the risk of over committing and I start letting people down. When I only make promises I’m prepared to keep I’m not stressed out and I don’t feel guilty for not making more. I also enjoy the pleasure that comes from keeping my word and for being known as someone you can count on. I become trustworthy.

Hope has never been a satisfying strategy. Whether you are the manager or performer, trading goals for promises will serve you well.

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Growing up in the late ’60s and early ’70s, I distinctly remember the Vietnam War, flower power and love beads. The country was crackling with tension. It seemed like tectonic plates were colliding and everyone was seeking stable ground. Now, almost 50 years later, we find ourselves in a similar search for something we can count on.

In business, we’ve learned to seek stability in Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAGs) and quarterly objectives. Unfortunately, we hear a lot more about companies missing their targets than exceeding them and that, I think, is because we’ve allowed people to treat goals like hopes.

The statement, “My department goal is to have all the new equipment installed and everyone trained by September,” might just as well be stated, “My hope for my department is to have ...”

For some reason, intelligent men and women will listen to a team member sign up for completely unrealistic goals, look each other in the eye and say, “OK, then!” The word goal has somehow developed magi-