

# Chapter 7

## SECTION 4.

### PROMISES, COMMITMENTS, AGREEMENTS

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*The woods are lovely, dark and deep  
But I have promises to keep  
And miles to go before I sleep  
And miles to go before I sleep*<sup>1</sup>

Robert Frost  
*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

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Perhaps more than any other action we take or move we make, the way that we deal with *promises* (or *commitments* or *agreements*) has a profound impact on our relationships and our results, in our business and personal domains. For those of us who are not hermits, promises are pervasive and are found in virtually every aspect of our lives. Promises, commitments, agreements... whichever term we use, the claim is this: *They are directly connected to our relationships, our public identity, our*

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*effectiveness, and our personal well-being.* They are directly connected to a great many of the results we produce for ourselves in the world.

Have you noticed that promises are pervasive? They're everywhere! Remember, human life for the vast majority of us is all about coordination of action with others. For those of us who have jobs, who go to school, raise kids and have friends and families, carpool and do volunteer work, travel and do things with others, promises are everywhere. Every time someone says Yes to any request, a promise is created. Our whole social fabric and structure, our whole economic network, are held together by promises—promises between businesses and organizations, as well as those between individuals. What does it say on the bottom of your credit card slip? For most, it's something to the order of "I agree to pay." Somebody promised to do X work for Y pay; somebody promised me a seat on the plane in return for certain dollars and under certain conditions; somebody promised to turn my cable on between 10 and 2; somebody promised to pick somebody else up at 7:00; or to have the Jones file completed by due date; or to take input A and perform action B on it before sending it as output C to the next department; or to serve as president of the club or coordinate the carpool schedule. Promises and agreements and commitments underlie *everything* that we do with others. They are the *most basic* level, the "actual action" that we use in very different ways, as we do what we do in the world.

And this is so close, we sometimes miss it. But once we begin to see it more clearly, a whole new world of possibilities opens up to us. Let's continue with a story.

In this story, I'm a single guy, living in Nashville a few years back, and I decide to attend a conference. This conference was about leadership and communication and was in Knoxville. At the conference I meet a young lady named Betsy, who is also single and a consultant and seminar leader. We talk for awhile about seminars and flipcharts and sessions we like or don't like at the conference, and eventually the conversation turns to more personal things. We talk about our families and schools, what we're into outside of work, hobbies and interests, and so on. After awhile I think to myself "Hey, we've been talking over an hour. I'm kinda liking this person!" I find out that she lives in Knoxville, and I get up the courage to ask her out. I say "I'm sometimes in Knoxville for business. Would it be okay if you and I had dinner together the next time I'm in town?" She says okay, and gives me her name and phone number.

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This is on Sunday, as the conference is winding down. Back in my office the next Tuesday, I think “Hmmm... I think I may need to go to Knoxville this weekend” and give Betsy a call. We set a date for 7:00 pm Saturday night for me to pick her up for dinner, and she gives me directions. I say “hooray” (to myself), I write the directions down and continue on with my week.

Saturday arrives, and I’m pretty busy. I’ve got a bit of work to complete before leaving, and some unexpected emails arrived that required a response before Monday morning. I know that it takes about 3 hours to get to Knoxville, our date is for 7:00 pm, so that puts me at 4:00 for departure. But I’ll need some extra time, so I should really leave around 3:30 or 3:45 or so, just to give myself a bit of a cushion. I’m busy right up until 3:30, finish up quickly, and get on the road a bit before 3:45.

I’m cruising on I-40 east toward Knoxville, when about halfway there I notice a little green sign on the edge of the highway. It reads “Welcome to Eastern Standard Time.” Without any hesitation whatsoever the following conversation occurs in my head: “Oh shit!” (Notice—evidence of a breakdown.) Well, I just lost an hour. I speed up, thinking that maybe I can make up most, if not all, of the lost time. I get to the outskirts of Knoxville, reach into my pocket for the directions to her house, and they’re not there. In my hurried departure, I left them at home on the counter. I also realize I’ve forgotten to recharge my cell phone battery, which is dead. I remember vaguely the directions and the address, something like 4545 Whispering Pines or Whispering Winds. And also hey, I’m a guy—I don’t have to ask for directions! Like all men, I’m pretty sure I have a built-in internal navigation system that allows me to get to my destination without the unnecessary hassle of asking someone else for directions. Anyhow, after driving around and around for awhile, not finding her house, I look down at my watch and it reads 7:40. Our date, remember, was for 7:00.

Let’s switch the scene to her, at her house. What’s going on with her? What are some of the internal conversations going on for her? What is she telling herself at this moment? Some possibilities may be:

- “He’s not coming—he stood me up.”
- “What a loser he is.”
- “What a loser I am.”
- “He better have a good excuse.”