

Commitments That Matter

By Kathy Paauw

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On August 15 my husband and I will celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary. Someone recently asked me what the secret is to staying married to one person in an age where more than 50% of marriages end in divorce. I responded by saying that commitment and good communication have been key. (I also made a really good choice, and my husband is a prince of a guy!)

Commitments form the core of our personal and professional relationships with others. That's why it is so important to behave with integrity and sincerity when we make commitments to others. Part of the work that I do as a coach is to help my clients evaluate and refine their commitments so that they can make and keep them effectively.

Most of the people I know are over-committed they've bitten off more than they can chew! The first week of August is Simplify Your Life Week...a great opportunity to think about the commitments that matter the most to you and to let go of those that are not as important. As you reflect on your personal and professional commitments, ask yourself these questions:

Why did I make this commitment?

Your reasons and motives for making commitments change as your family, career, interests, and skills change. Loyalties shift and resources vary. This is natural, yet unless you take time to review your commitments you may continue to show up in places that are no longer a good match for you.

What values or priorities am I expressing with this commitment?

It's wise to check and see if you are serving your own values or someone else's. Language can be key here. If you hear yourself saying, I should or I gotta or I have to a lot, this is a big red flag. Check in with yourself and ask, Do I choose to?

What exactly have I promised?

Review commitments to see if you know the extent and duration of your promises. This will help you to keep commitments manageable. When you make nonspecific commitments, it is easy to expend energy and attention on a continuing basis without experiencing a sense of completion or satisfaction. Put some parameters around the commitments you make.

Do I have the resources to keep this commitment?

When you are clear about what you are promising, it will get easier to tell if you have the resources to keep the promise while tending to your other responsibilities.

What are you committed to?

When you hear yourself say, I will try to do this, ask yourself: Do I choose to DO this? There is no TRY TO. There is only DO or NOT DO. Make conscious choices around your actions, every moment of every day. When faced with an obstacle, you can consciously choose to look at the obstacle and curl up in a psychic ball saying "I can't do it! Or you can look at the obstacle, examine it from all sides and say, "Okay, this side looks pretty ominous, but this part over here I think this has possibilities, so I will do this and see what happens." In other words, although you may not be able to commit to the outcome, you can commit to your intentions and actions.

Are your commitments a reflection of your values and talents? Are your commitments helping you build the relationships you want or are they creating obstacles to building those relationships?

Give yourself time to reflect on the questions above and then renew or revise your commitments accordingly.

How often are you out of integrity with what you've committed to do?

We all have circumstances that come up that make it difficult for us to honor our commitments to ourselves and to others. When we do not honor these commitments on a regular basis, we are not living in integrity. What is integrity? The thesaurus provides these synonyms: honesty, truth, honor, reliability, uprightness.

Stephen Covey uses a wonderful metaphor to talk about integrity. I share an excerpt about building an Emotional Bank Account, taken from Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*:

We all know what a financial bank account is. We make deposits into it and build up a reserve from which we can make withdrawals when we need to. An Emotional Bank Account is a metaphor that describes the amount of trust that's been built up in a relationship. It's the feeling of safeness you have with another human being.

If I make deposits into an Emotional Bank Account with you through courtesy, kindness, honesty, and keeping my commitments to you, I build up a reserve. Your trust toward me becomes higher, and I can call upon that trust many times if I need to. I can even make mistakes and that trust level -- that emotional reserve -- will compensate for it.

But if I have a habit of showing discourtesy, disrespect, cutting you off, overreacting, ignoring you, becoming arbitrary, betraying your trust, threatening you, or playing little tin god in your life, eventually my Emotional Bank Account is overdrawn. The trust level gets very low. Then what flexibility do I have? None.

Covey describes six ways to make deposits in an Emotional Bank Account. One of those six ways is by keeping commitments. Breaking commitments represents a major withdrawal from an Emotional Bank Account. Another of the six ways is by demonstrating personal integrity, or conforming our words to reality another form of keeping commitments.

The Weakest Link

There's a new trivia game show on television called "The Weakest Link. It originated in the United Kingdom. It's a trivia game where contestants are presented with a question. If answered correctly, the entire "team" earns money. At any time, the team members can put the money accumulated by correct answers into a "bank. One incorrect answer and the team loses all their unbanked money. After each round, the "team" votes one person -- the weakest link -- off the team. The grand finale is a playoff between two remaining team members for the big bundle of money raked in through

correct answers and timely banking.

In actuality, those who serve as the weakest link in our professional or personal lives are often the most influential, as they have the potential to wreak the greatest havoc on our lives. And sometimes we, ourselves, are the weakest link.

Who are the weakest links in your life? Who do you know who:

does incomplete or sloppy work that must be done over

makes commitments (personal, professional, or to self) and doesn't keep them

slows everyone else down by procrastinating
lacks the knowledge and/or skill to do what they are supposed to do

takes on too many things at once and runs late for everything

doesn't work as a team player or pull their own weight

Based on your response to these questions you, like the controversial hostess of this trivia show, may choose to proclaim, "You are the Weakest Link...Goodbye."

Making Deposits in Your Emotional Bank Account

If, as you answered the questions above, you identified yourself as the weakest link in some of your relationships with others, you have some choices. You can continue to drain your Emotional Bank Account, or you can choose to make deposits. This is easier said than done, as we are creatures of habit, and habits can be hard to break.

There are several important steps involved in changing the habits that will enable you to make deposits in your Emotional Bank Account. I'll share an example with each step listed below:

• Acknowledge where you are out of integrity: Several months ago I promised my colleague that I would complete a project and I have not honored my commitment.

• Intention: I choose to complete this project by the end of August. (Not I will try to)

• Committed plan of action: I've blocked out three hours on Thursday morning each week to work on this project between now and the end of August. During these scheduled working sessions I will let my voice mail take messages and I will close my door and ask that I not be interrupted.

• Action: I exercise integrity and follow through with my plan, without allowing myself to get derailed by distractions. If an emergency comes up that derails me from my work, I reschedule the working session for another time that week.

• Accountability: I share my intentions with someone else and ask him/her to check with me weekly to see if I did what I said I would do.

One of the best ways I have found to build in accountability for myself around keeping commitments, is to work with a personal coach. I have had my own personal coach for several years. My coach holds me accountable to my commitments (to myself and others) without judging me. This is one of the most powerful elements of the coaching relationship. I am far more likely to follow through with my commitments and action plans when I know that my coach will ask me next week how it went! If things did not go as planned, I have an opportunity to reflect on it and identify

what got in the way so I can try something different the following week.

The Butfirst Syndrome

One of my clients sent this to me, and I thought you should be aware of this very serious condition, which may have a tremendous impact on your ability to keep commitments to yourself and others.

I'm writing you to let you know that I have recently been diagnosed with a very serious condition and there's no hope I will ever get over it. Some of your other clients may have it also. Check out the symptoms. It may be hereditary as well. The scientific world is frantically searching for a cure. This is an ailment many of us suffer from and may not as yet have been diagnosed. However, once your clients are aware of this, they may be able to discuss it with their loved ones and try to explain what really happened to them all those times they tried so hard to accomplish something and didn't.

It's called the "Butfirst Syndrome."

It's like when I decide to do the laundry I start down the hall and notice the newspaper on the table. Okay, I'm going to do the laundry, Butfirst I'm going to read the paper. Then I notice the mail on the table. Okay, I'll just put the newspaper in the recycle stack, Butfirst I'll look through that pile of mail and see if there are any bills to be paid. Now where's the checkbook? Oops! There's the empty glass from yesterday on the coffee table. I'm going to look for that checkbook, Butfirst I need to put the glass in the dishwasher. I head for the kitchen, look out the window notice my poor flowers need a drink of water. I put the glass on the counter, and darn it, there's the remote for the TV on the kitchen counter. What's it doing here? I'll just put it away. Butfirst I need to water those plants. I head for door and Aaaack!...step on the cat. The cat needs to be fed. Okay, I'll put that remote away and water the plants. Butfirst I need to feed the cat. At the end of day: The laundry isn't done, the newspapers are still on the floor, the glass is still not in the dishwasher, the bills are not paid, the checkbook is still missing, and the cat whizzed on the remote control. AND, when I try to figure out why nothing got done all day, I'm baffled, because I KNOW I WAS BUSY ALL DAY!

I realize this condition is serious....and should get help...Butfirst I think I'll read all my e-mail.

Prescription for Those Diagnosed with Butfirst Syndrome

If you suffer from Butfirst Syndrome, I offer some tools to help you stay on task. You have four possible choices with your commitments and activities. I call it the Four D's:

DO: Do it this week I've found an excellent weekly planning process that will assist you in committing to a plan of action so you can carry out your intentions around commitments you've made. I also suggest creating a tickler file system, which will remind you of important follow up at the appropriate time. The tickler file is an excellent alternative to the pile system.

DEFER: Do it another week see my Perhaps List for ideas about how to keep track of these commitments and activities that you cannot get to this week.

DELEGATE: Ask for help from someone else a Delegation Log can help you track activities you've handed off to others.

DUMP: Decide not to do it. If you've made a commitment to someone else, renegotiate the agreement before crossing it off your list.

Special Offer If you're interested in living a life that's different than the one you're living now, working with a coach might be just what you need to move you forward in the direction you want to

go. Contact me and we'll set up a time to talk. The first call is free and you are under no obligation to continue. After that, you can decide if coaching is what you really need, and if I am the right coach for you. If I am, we can talk about what our working together will look like. If I'm not, I'll refer you to a trusted colleague who might be a better fit. We get what we settle for. It's never too late -- or too early -- to settle for more. When you are ready to settle for more -- professionally or personally -- click here to request your complimentary sample coaching session. Click here to see what my clients have to say about coaching with me.

Read the December 2000 Working Woman magazine article about Kathy and her client. Click here to view Q&A about coaching.

Kathy Paauw, a certified business/personal coach and organizing/productivity consultant, specializes in helping busy executives, professionals, and entrepreneurs declutter their schedules, spaces and minds. Contact her at orgcoach@gte.net or visit her website at <http://www.orgcoach.net> and learn how you can Find ANYTHING in 5 Seconds --Guaranteed!

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