

Prescription for Action: Getting and Maintaining Agreements

Agreements are like New Year's Resolutions. They're important to you—enough so that you make them. You're intent on following them up. But then, something happens. You might not even know when it's happening, or what it is that happened. But you finally realize that you have abandoned what was important to you, and then it's difficult to bring the Agreement or resolution back to life.

What happened? Neglect. Through neglect your Agreement died. This kind of neglect is not active; you certainly didn't mean to ignore the Agreement. The neglect is passive. You were looking the other way for too long, and the Agreement not only lost its initial momentum, but it stopped completely.

Agreements need attention if they are to survive. Most of the time, they will not run on their own. A physicist at an Ivy League University continually receives letters describing new ideas for perpetual motion machines. Although most of the machines will keep running for a long time, they all require a push. Agreements are like these machines, they need an occasional push. With Agreements, following up is the push.

Agreements fail for many reasons:

- You don't ask for the Agreement.
- You don't get commitment.
- You don't spell out the Agreement.
- The other person doesn't follow through.
- The other person does follow through, but you don't notice.
- A change in the company complicates the Agreement.

This article explains why Agreements die and gives you a prescription for bringing them back to life.

You Don't Ask

When others don't do things as you want them to, you often think, "Darn it, there they go again." But you hesitate to say anything about it. You're not sure how to bring it up. You're not sure how they'll react. Or you know how they'll react and you don't want to deal with it now, or later. You end up letting it slide again and again.

The longer and more times that you hesitate, the harder it is to say anything at all, and the more effort you'll expend if you finally do muster the strength to say what you need to. Each time you don't bring it up, it's like you're wrapping the issue in another layer of silence. Speaking about it means breaking through multiple layers of silence. You may find that when you do bring up the issue, it's like an explosion. Pity the unsuspecting recipient of your pent-up frustration. It's undeserved.

Given that the outcome of waiting is likely to be extremely damaging to either you or the relationship, just say something. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be elegant. It doesn't even have

to make sense at first. Break your silence before it wraps you up again. As soon as you make a space for yourself to talk about the issue, you'll find the right words to say. And they don't have to be the "right words." They'll be close enough.

Since these Agreements happen after-the-fact, that is, after something negative has already occurred, the other person might react defensively. You can minimize the other person's defensiveness by acknowledging, "We haven't talked about this before..." or "I haven't mentioned this to you before..." or "You couldn't have known because I never told you..." You may have to say this a few times before it sinks in, but it will smooth the way for the rest of the Agreement discussion.

You Didn't Get Commitment

You think you've asked for an Agreement but the other person hasn't heard it that way. You need to ask yourself: Did I make time to talk about this with the other person? Too often we mention things in passing. Sometimes it needs to be formal. It's not that other people don't care about your needs. Mostly, if they care about you they care about what you need. The problem is that they have too much on their plates—just as you do—and things that get mentioned in passing might not

register as something that is important. So if you think you've mentioned an Agreement to the other person in passing but things aren't happening the way you'd like, prepare to have an Agreement discussion. That way, your intent is unmistakable. It doesn't have to be a long drawn out process. But when you devote a conversation to one thing, the other person will "get" that you're serious.

Sometimes you can have a focused conversation with someone about what you'd like them to do, but you're a fast persuasive talker and the other person is slower-paced and likes to think before speaking or committing. You may well think the conversation is over but the other person hasn't said, "I do." If you find that you're not getting commitment, you need to ask for it. Don't ask, "Will you or won't you?" You want to hear what the person thinks about the Agreement. They themselves may not be thinking in terms of yes or no. More likely they're thinking, "Hmmm, how would that work?" If you want your Agreement to run smoothly, you want to know what the other person is thinking. So ask them. "How do you see this working?" or "How does this sound to you?" or "What do you think?" And then listen. Their talking it through, and your listening, clarifying and problem solving, will build the commitment you want. By the end of the conversation, they will be saying, "I do."

You Don't Spell It Out

Well, you made an Agreement and got what you wanted, sort of. What the other person gave you is what you asked for but not what you had in mind. You wanted a report but you didn't want 10 pages of report. You asked for customer involvement, but the way they did it created a customer problem. The devil is in the details, the expression goes. The success of

your Agreement is in the details as well. Unless you've made this same Agreement before with this person, it's hard to anticipate what you do and don't need to cover. Something that may be obvious to you may be unheard of for the other person. On the other hand, the other person may be well aware of exactly what you want and what to do. They might feel that you're a little patronizing for going into detail.

If you're getting what you asked for but not what you wanted, take some time to spell out the Agreement. There are several ways to do this.

1. Visualize the outcome of what you're asking. What are the most important, satisfying details that you see in your own mind? Make sure that you discuss those details.
2. Ask the other person to summarize the Agreement or plan of action. As you hear the rephrasing of your request, you can often catch misunderstandings early.
3. Follow up with a friendly memo or email summarizing the Agreement. The tone is not, "You better or else" but "Thanks for our discussion; here's what I'm taking away from that meeting." Even if your memory is flawless, the other person may really not remember specifically what you asked for. The more people are asked to do, the more distracted they are, and the harder it becomes to remember specifics clearly.
4. Provide or refer to examples of what you want. Discuss those examples: what you like and what you don't like. Ask the other person to do the same.

5. Do what you're asking for once with them. Then they can see exactly what you want.
6. Give feedback early on in the process, if possible. Clarify what you want and what you don't want.

The Other Person Doesn't Follow Through

Let's say you've asked for what you wanted, you spelled it out, and you got commitment. The Agreement, however, is not happening. You've done all you could, and the other person is not keeping up his or her end of the Agreement. What now? It's time for a recommitment discussion. You need to have another meeting with the person. In this meeting, you are not accusing the other person of not following through. You are simply stating the facts: "What we agreed to was... and what's happening is..." You can follow that statement with an invitation to talk, "Can you tell me what's going on?" Or just remain silent and see what the other person says. Until the person really gets it, you may need to get commitment, clarify more details, or re-explain why the Agreement is important.

The Other Person Does Follow Through, But You Don't Notice

Taking other people for granted is no big deal in the short term. It's nice when you can. But in the long run, it will erode your relationships. People have too much going on to get you what you need and not receive any acknowledgement in return. If you expect people to do what you ask without a word of thanks, or noticing what kind of effort they put in, you'll find that your place on their list of priorities falls lower and lower.

When you do take the time to acknowledge people for their work, be specific.

They spent the time getting the details right for you. Make them feel it was worth their effort by noticing the details. When you do, you're letting people know that you notice the little things. They'll be more likely to continue to attend to details in the future.

If you're thinking, "So they did what I asked. It's their job! Why should I thank them?" think again. You're not asking for the bare minimum from people. You want their best work. Take time to tell them what's going well. In the process you may hear about ways to do the work better: to be more cost effective, more efficient, to produce higher quality, to save time, to involve the customer or other important constituents. If you want the best from others, it starts with recognition.

Change in the Company Affects the Agreement

You have an Agreement with someone, and everything works beautifully. And then, for no apparent reason, the Agreement completely breaks down. You don't know why, and you're starting to get mad. Before you get mad, check in with the person. It could be that a change in the company has shot a hole in your Agreement. Reorganization happens constantly in most people's work environment. Even if your team, group or department is stable, you probably work with someone who's being affected by a reorganization.

"Why don't they just tell me they can't meet the Agreement anymore," you fume, "instead of letting me figure it out myself?" The people you had Agreements with are probably not being rude or disrespectful. They're likely in shock. Their whole world has been turned on its head and they're trying to figure out which way is up. The ways that they used to get things

done don't work anymore. Everything they took for granted, they now have to beg for. Your Agreement is now a lot more work. And they don't have time.

It's time to reconnect about the Agreement. You can still start by simply saying, "We agreed to... and what's happening is... Can you tell me what's going on?" Listen deeply, then return to the Agreement. You may want to modify parts of the Agreement, or help the person talk through solutions to potential problems. And, you can build into the Agreement, "If anything changes that makes you unable to keep this Agreement, you'll let me know within (a specific time frame)."

Conclusion

Agreements are vital to your success at work. Unfortunately they do require attention and maintenance to keep running smoothly. But the attention you give to your Agreements, and the people who keep them, benefits everyone in the long run. First, the work gets done, and done well. Second, the other people will feel that the work they do for you is appreciated and valued. Third, you are building relationships that you can count on to get the job done now, and in the future.