

THE CYCLE OF COMMITMENT

Coordinating Action to Get Results

A Working Paper

Charles Feltman
Insight Coaching
www.insightcoaching.com
cfeltman@insightcoaching.com
805-784-9570

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for the ideas that have gone into this working paper:

Fernando Flores for his work in elaborating speech acts theory and, in particular, the use of requests, offers, and promises as it is presented in T. Winograd and F. Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987.

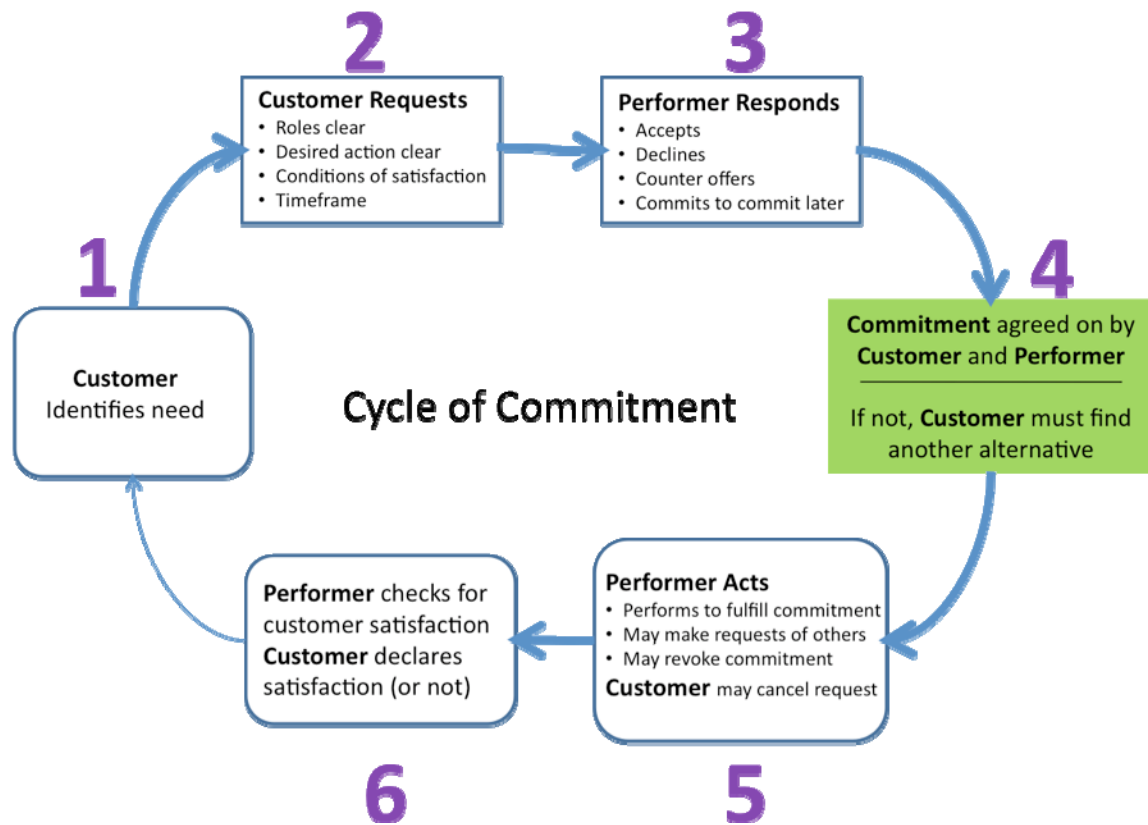
Robert Dunham for, among many other things, putting the use of requests, offers and promises in a context of critical conversations that address commitment and care in organizations.

Rafael Escheverria for his development and explication of the concept of a *promise cycle*.

Julio Olalla and the Newfield Network for eloquently teaching the key distinctions of *speech acts theory* in everyday use, and how it can be applied in coaching.

Richard LeKander and Julio Olalla for further developing the concept of a *cycle* of commitment which incorporates requests and offers, promises, declines and other declarations relevant to generating productive action through conversation. This concept, called “Cycle of the Promise”, is described in an unpublished paper entitled *Organizations, Action and Leadership* written by Richard LeKander in conversation with Julio Olalla of The Newfield Network. This is the work on which the *Cycle of Commitment* described here is based.

CYCLE OF COMMITMENT¹



The *Cycle of Commitment* outlines the essential conversations that need to happen in order to get good work done. The *Cycle* incorporates three key speech acts: requests, offers and promises. The ability to make clear, complete requests and offers, to respond appropriately, and to follow through on commitments is critical to getting work done effectively. They are all what can be called *conversations for action*. On the next several pages we discuss each of the specific moves in the *Cycle*.

¹ A number of thinkers, authors, and teachers have contributed to the understanding of requests, offers and promises as *speech acts* critical to getting good work done, maintaining trust, and increasing well-being. Key among them are Fernando Flores, Terry Winograd, Robert Dunham, Julio Olalla, Rafael Echeverria, and Richard LeKander. See *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A new foundation for design*, by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores for more on this, especially chapter 5. More can also be found at <http://www.actiontech.com>, the web site for Action Technologies, Inc.

COMPLETE REQUEST FOR ACTION

OK, now that you've written out a request you've recently made or are about to make of someone, let's take a closer look at the most effective request form. Below are the five key elements of a clear, complete request.

The Purpose of a Request

Someone becomes a customer in the *Cycle of Commitment* when he or she identifies something that is missing that he/she can't obtain alone. In order to get it the person needs someone else to do something, and that is the purpose of making requests. There are some ways of making requests that work well and some that don't. Below are the elements that make for clear, complete, direct requests that work best in most circumstances.

- **Customer: Who is asking?**
 - Is it clear who the customer is?
 - Is the customer committed to his/her request?
- **Performer: Who is being asked?**
 - Is it clear who the intended performer is?
 - Does the performer have the capacity to perform (capability, competence, resources, and commitment)?
- **Action: What do I want you to do?**
 - Is the intended action clear?
 - Will the intended action achieve what is wanted?
- **Conditions of satisfaction: How will you and I both know it's been done to my satisfaction?**
- **Timeframe: By when do I want it completed?**

Customer

Requests are best made by one individual to another. While it may seem obvious to the customer who is making the request, it isn't always that way for those listening to the request. One common example is, "We need you to write a report..." In this case who "we" is may or may not be clear, but even so the intended performer doesn't have an individual to whom he/she can respond or ask for clarifications, renegotiate the commitment with, or report completion, which can lead to confusion, delays and inaction. It is also important that the customer be committed to the request being made. Is it important to this person? Is the action necessary? If it doesn't get done is the customer willing to follow up?

Performer

Who is the intended performer? Does this person have the capacity to do what is being asked? If not, the request should be directed at someone who does. Additionally, it is important to make sure it is clear to everyone who the intended performer is. A statement like, "We need to do a study of this..." is usually spoken as a request by the person making it, and may also be heard as a request by some people. But without identifying an intended performer it is simply a statement of need.

Action

A request is in order when something is missing. The customer is the one who identifies what this is. It may be a tangible item or an action of some kind. It may be simple or complex. Whatever it is, the key question to ask is *will the intended item or action produce what is needed?*

Conditions of Satisfaction

Unless the customer makes it absolutely clear exactly what the conditions are that will satisfy him or her, then the performer is left to fill in the specifics. Leaving conditions of satisfaction up to the performer often results in the customer not getting what he/she really wants. What form/format should the deliverable be in? To whom should it be delivered? Etc.



Timeframe

Without this information it is again left up to the performer to decide when he/she does it. By the way, “ASAP” is not a timeframe. It may mean by the end of the day to you and the end of the month to your performer.

Direct vs. Indirect Requests

Direct requests have a much better chance of being fulfilled than do those that are indirect. Yet we often “soften” our requests, usually because we assess that direct requests are “impolite”, or sound “too harsh”. Below are examples of the language of direct requests, as well as the softer—and less effective—language of indirect requests.

▪ **Direct (most effective):**

- I ask that you...
- I request...
- Will you (please)...
- (Please) do (specified action)...



▪ **Indirect (confusing, unclear, often unproductive):**

- I want or I need... (This is a statement, not a request.)
- Why don't you...? (This is a question, not a request.)
- ____ needs to be done. (Again, this is a statement. Also, it is not clear who the customer or intended performer are.)

▪ **Really indirect (hence they are often not heard as requests):**

- I'm really hot in here... (Unspoken request: Will you turn down the heater?)
- It sure is noisy out there... (Unspoken request: Will you please stop talking right next to open office door?)

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

Making a complete request allows your intended performer to understand exactly what you want. With this in mind he or she can realistically evaluate whether they can actually do what you want. In other words, it allows them to make an appropriate response. Here are the four appropriate responses:

- **Commitment: Yes. I promise to do it.**
Yes means “I commit to do exactly what you asked me to do.” If the customer made a clear, complete request you should have all the information you need to realistically make this commitment. If something is missing from the request you need to ask for it.
- **Decline: No. I promise not to do it.**
No means exactly that. It lets the other person know you are not available so they can go and find someone else of whom to make their request.
- **Counteroffer: I won’t/can’t do that, but I offer this instead.**
There are many instances in the work setting where it is not necessarily politic to say “no”. For example, people rarely simply say “no” to their bosses. However, simply saying “yes” to a request that you know you can’t or aren’t likely to be able to fulfill ultimately creates bigger problems for everyone. Even if the customer is your boss, making a counter offer creates an opportunity to find something that will work for everyone. For example, you might say, “Given all of the other things I have on my plate this week I can’t get next quarter revenue projections to you by Friday. Will Monday morning work?” Or, you might take a different route: “Given all of the other things I have on my plate this week I can’t get next quarter revenue projections to you by Friday. But I could if you’re willing to let my project report wait until next week...” *Once you make a counter offer it opens negotiation between you and the customer that should ultimately result in a clear commitment (yes) or decline (no).*
- **Commit to Commit: I will let you know by...**
You may need more information before you can commit to the customer’s request. This is where you let them know and commit to getting back to them and either committing or declining *by a specified time*. Commit to commit is a good strategy for people who tend to say yes without thinking and then find themselves overcommitted.

A Note on Offers

A complete *offer* should have all of the same information as a complete request. The difference is that it comes from a potential performer who defines the action, conditions of satisfaction and timeframe. *An offer becomes a commitment when it is accepted by the customer.*

AFTER THE RESPONSE

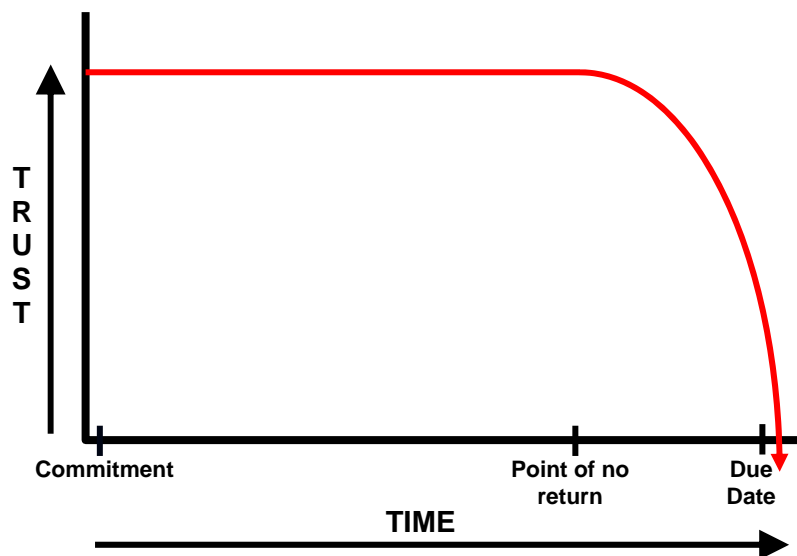
Once a commitment has been made work begins.

- Do the work
- Delegate assignments (the Performer may start new *commitment cycles* in which he/she is a customer)
- Complete the tasks

Possible actions during this time:

- Renegotiate or revoke the commitment (performer)
- Cancel the request (customer)

As a performer you may find you need to **renegotiate** or **revoke a commitment** because something changes and you can't perform the agreed upon action or meet the conditions of satisfaction, or timeframe. Revoking a commitment should be done as soon as you realize you will not be able to fulfill it. Doing so while the customer still has other options for getting what they want this maintains their trust. When you fail to do so you leave the customer in a very difficult situation. Most people will be forgiving once, even twice, but by the third time people tend to lose trust in the reliability of your commitments. The graphic below illustrates how trust is either maintained or eroded based on the timing of a renegotiation.



Reporting Completion and Declaring Satisfaction

- Reporting completion closes the cycle for the Customer
 - Without a report of completion the customer is not clear to take new actions
- Declaring satisfaction closes the cycle for the Performer
 - A simple, honest “thank you” is usually sufficient
 - It is critical to know if the Customer is **not** satisfied

PHASES OF THE CYCLE OF COMMITMENT

Phase 1 (Customer)

1. Determine what is missing: “In order to do my job well/better/at all I need a report on X.”
2. Define conditions of satisfaction: “The form that I need the report in is a summary of these three key data points plus background information.”
3. Determine who can provide what is missing.
4. Make request to performer:
 - a. Customer (requester) – important that this is clear so that the performer knows who he/she is performing for, who to negotiate with and who to go to if a modification is required.
 - b. Performer – important that this is clear, also. Unowned requests, e.g., “We need to have a report on this...” create unnecessary uncertainty.
 - c. Action requested.
 - d. Conditions of satisfaction specified – important that this is clear so the performer knows exactly what he/she is responding to.
 - e. Timeframe – by when does the customer want the action completed.

Phase 2 (Performer)

1. Respond:
 - a. Commit
 - b. Decline
 - c. Counter offer – “I can’t do what you are asking but I can do X. Will that work?”
 - d. Commit to commit – “I will get back to you with a response by X time.”
2. Negotiate (performer and customer)

Phase 3 (Performer)

1. Do the work
2. If a problem arises due to changing circumstances for the performer or requirements for the customer:
 - a. Revoke the commitment (performer)
 - b. Revoke the commitment with renegotiation (performer)
 - c. Cancel the request (customer)

Phase 4 (Performer and Customer)

3. Report completion when finished (performer).
4. Check for customer satisfaction (performer).
5. Declare satisfaction or not (customer).

You can use this as a diagnostic tool by identifying what parts of the cycle are missing in your organization.

COMPLAINT FOR ACTION

There are two kinds of complaining. In one form the complainer typically “complains” about the issue and/or the person with whom they have the issue to a third party. Another word for this is whining. As long as the person who is doing the complaining does *not* have any investment in anything changing this can be a good way to simply let off steam. However, too often this kind of complaining generates a mood of resentment or resignation that can also be toxic to the individuals concerned and to their organization as a whole.

The other type of complaint we call a *complaint for action*. Its purpose is to produce new action when a performer has failed to fulfill on a commitment. It goes like this:

- **You committed to _____ and did not fulfill that commitment.**
This should be a simple, straightforward statement of fact.
- **This caused me/us damage, specifically _____.**
This statement may include damage to the relationship with “me” or “us”, e.g., lost trust.
- **How do you see this situation?**
This is optional. By asking this question you are giving the other person an opportunity to explain the situation from his/her perspective. Ideally the other person takes this question as an opportunity to apologize and recommit. Or he/she may respond by offering excuses, blaming others, or otherwise denying responsibility. If this happens, move directly to the last part of your *complaint for action*.
- **I request that you repair the damage (to me/us and to our relationship) by doing [action and conditions of satisfaction] by [when].**
This should be a simple, direct request. It may not be appropriate to remake the original request. You may simply want to ask the person to apologize (to you and/or others) and declare that he/she will do things differently next time.

When to make a *complaint for action*:

