THE CYCLE OF COMMITMENT

Coordinating Action to Get Results

A Trust at Work® Paper

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Robert Dunham for, among many other things, putting the use of requests, offers and promises as a "conversation for action" in a context of a network of different types of conversations that are necessary for organizations and the individuals in them to thrive in all kinds of conditions.

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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 This concept, called "Cycle of the Promise", is described in an unpublished paper entitled *Organizations, Action and Leadership* written by Richard LeKander in conversation with Julio Olalla of The Newfield Network.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 work is the primary basis for the *Cycle of Commitment* described in the paper you are reading at this moment.

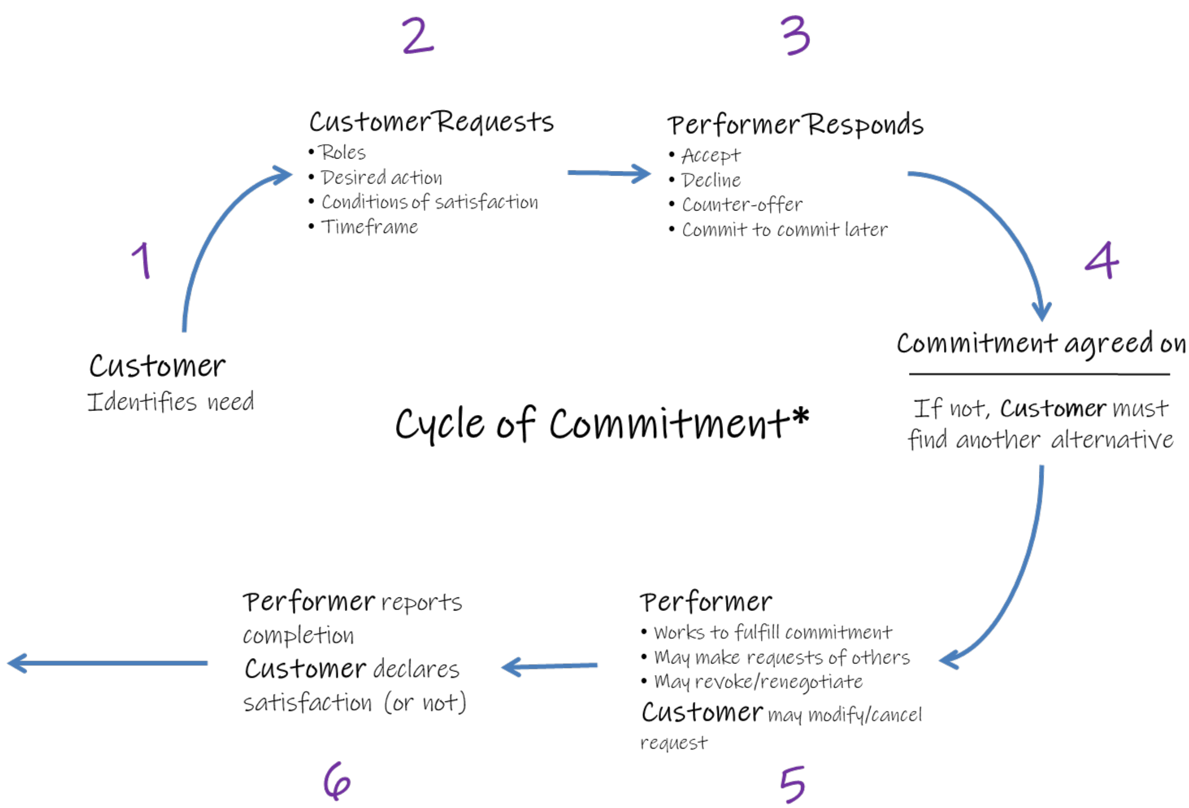
A Note About Context

The cycle of commitment is a set of conversational moves intended to generate and coordinate action between people so they can quickly and effectively get work done. When people who work together use the commitment cycle language consistently it significantly increases the chance that they make strong commitments they will keep. As such it can be a powerful tool.

However, when the cycle of commitment is divorced from a shared purpose and vision, and taken out of the context of the larger network of conversations that are necessary for an organization to function it loses a great deal of its value. These include conversations to explore possibilities, make good decisions, learn, and develop resilient relationships. Without an understanding and appreciation of this using the commitment cycle simply to generate action can result in people making good commitments to do the wrong things.

To be effective in supporting good results conversations for action and commitment need to live in larger context of nested commitments – between individuals, teams, departments, etc. – all of which are ideally built on a strong foundation of trust, shared purpose and vision.

CYCLE OF COMMITMENT[1]



The *Cycle of Commitment* outlines the essential conversations, sometimes referred to as *conversations for action*, that need to happen 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*.

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* Graphic © Insight Coaching 2018. The Cycle of Commitment depicted above is based on the original work of Fernando Flores. It has been adapted and expanded on by numerous people, including Julio Olalla, Robert Dunham, Raphael Echeveria, and Richard LeKander. A number of thinkers, writers 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.

MAKING REQUESTS FOR *ACTION*

First you make a request,
then actions take place and work gets done.

Seems simple, right?

OK, let's try it. Before you read any further, in the space below write out a request. You can use a request you have recently made or one that you need to make in the near future. Either way, write it out just as you did or would make it to the other person.

Now read the section below on Complete Requests for Action. How well does your request line up with the elements of a clear, complete request described?

COMPLETE REQUEST FOR *ACTION*

Now that you have 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 six 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 do or obtain alone. To get it done the Customer needs someone else to do something. A request initiates a conversation that also includes a response and ultimately a commitment for specific, agreed on action(s). The purpose of request is for the Customer to give the intended Performer all the information he/she needs to make a *response* that will lead to a ***strong commitment***. There are some ways of making requests that work well and some that don't. Below are six elements that make up clear, complete, direct requests that work best in most circumstances.

- **Customer: Who is asking?**
  - Is the Customer clear on what he/she is asking for?
  - 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 clearly stated?
  - Will the intended action, if performed, get what is wanted/needed?
- **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? (Hint: asap is not a due date.)**
- **Context:** In many cases it helps if the Performer understands why the request is being made. What purpose will it serve if he/she does what is being asked? If that is obvious this element is not necessary. But it's important to understand that what is obvious to the Customer is not always obvious to the Performer.

Customer
Requests are best made by one individual to another. It may be obvious to the Customer who is making the request but it is not always true for the Performer. One common example goes like this: "We need you to look into this…" In this case who "we" is may not be clear. The Cycle works best when the Performer has a specific individual as their Customer. Then the Performer knows who he/she can go to for clarifications, to renegotiate the commitment if necessary, and report completion. When this information is missing it can lead to confusion, delay and inaction.

It is important that the Customer is knows what he or she is going to ask for, and why. It is also important that the Customer is committed to the request he or she is making. Is the requested action necessary? How critical is the due date? If the Performer agrees but the commitment is not fulfilled is the Customer willing to hold the Performer accountable? (More on this later.)

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 saying it. But without identifying an intended Performer who will do the study it is simply a statement of need.

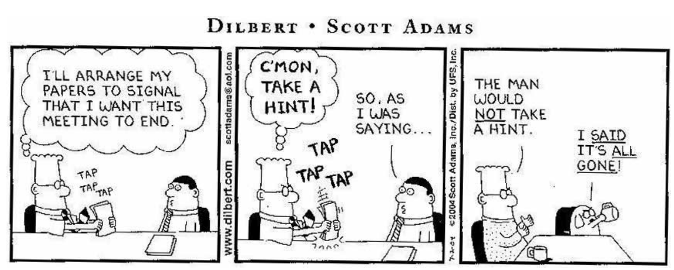
Action
Ultimately, we make requests to get some specific result or deliverable. The Customer is the one who specifies what this is. It may be simple or complex. Achieving it may require the Performer to take one action or multiple different actions. It may be necessary for the Performer to make requests of others to get it done. Whatever it is, a key question to ask is *will the intended action(s) 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 does the Customer want the deliverable come in? To whom should it be delivered? How? 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.

Context
Sometimes it is useful to provide the intended Performer with context for the request so they understand why it is being made. This can be as simple as: “To make our process more efficient I ask that you….” It may be more complex, e.g., “I’m asking you to do this because the executive committee has told me our team’s presentations need to be shorter and less detailed.”

<u>Direct vs. Indirect Requests</u>
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”.



It is also important to be understand there are different cultural norms and practices in play. There is a continuum of differing norms around who can make requests of whom, how direct those requests can be, and how people can/should respond to requests based on their roles.

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 (can be 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):**
  - It's 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 outside my office door?)

Possible Responses

Making a clear, complete request allows the intended Performer to understand exactly what the Customer wants. With this in mind he or she can realistically evaluate if and to what extent they can actually do what is being asked for. In other words, it allows the intended Performer 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 has 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 it is up to you to ask for clarification. The alternative is that you make up the missing information. If you get it right all is well. If you are wrong it can lead to problems.

- **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 can offer _____ instead.**
  There are many instances in the work setting where it is not appropriate to simply say "no". For example, people rarely say "no" to their bosses or senior management. 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 counteroffer 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..." ***A counteroffer opens a negotiation between you and the Customer that should ultimately result in a clear commitment (yes) both parties agree on, or to a 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

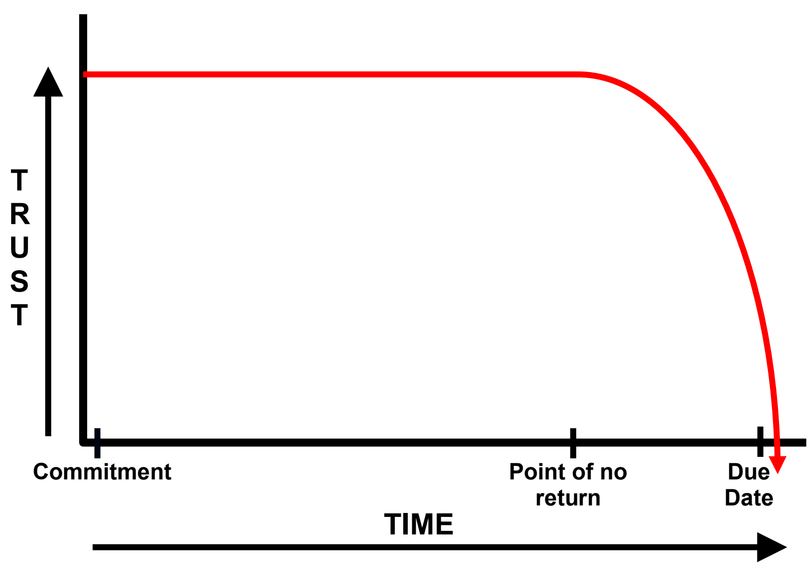
Once a commitment has been made work begins.

- 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 if necessary (Performer and Customer)
3. Commit or decline (if decline the Customer is free to find another possible Performer)

Phase 3 (Performer and Customer)

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.

MAKE A COMPLAINT

Yes, that's right. In the space below, write out a complaint you have related to a situation where someone did not fulfill the commitment they made. It could be they didn't get it done on time, didn't do the task to your agreed on conditions of satisfaction, or both. Write it as if you are talking directly to the person you have the complaint about or who could do something about the problem.

After writing out your complaint read through the next section. To what extend do you think your complaint would result in a change in the situation, behavior, and outcome?

Complaint for Action

There are two kinds of complaining. One form is the ***passive complaint*** – the individual typically "complains" about the issue or the person with whom they have an issue to a third party. As long as the person who is doing the passive complaining does *not* have an 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 become toxic to the individuals concerned and to their organization as a whole.

The other type is a ***complaint for action***. Its purpose is to change the situation, to produce new action when a Performer has failed to fulfill on a commitment. It can go something like this:

- **You committed to _____________ and did not fulfill that commitment.**
  This should be a simple, straightforward statement of fact. *You committed to completing a detailed manufacturing capacity report for today's team meeting but you didn't have it for us.*
- **The negative consequence is ____________________________________.**
  This should be a simple statement of the damage caused to you and others, e.g., the team. It may include damage to the relationship with "me" or "us", e.g., lost trust. *This meant the team can't tell Sales how much product they will have available to ship this quarter. Several key customers have been waiting for this information and they will be very unhappy that we can't provide it.*
- **How do you see this situation?**
  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 take responsibility and recommit. It is also possible 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 <u>[action and conditions of satisfaction]</u> by <u>[when]</u>.**
  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 in the future. *Please get the report to us by the end of the day today so we can reconvene the team and get something to Sales by tomorrow morning. Also, will you please draft an email to the regional sales managers telling them our new deadline?*

When to make a *complaint for action*: