

## CHAPTER

## Promises

HERE IS SIMPLY NO BETTER WAY to begin a book on leadership than with a selection by Max De Pree. From the publication of *Leadership Is an Art*, the book that identified him as a key participant in the leadership conversation, to the establishment of the De Pree Leadership Center in California, De Pree's voice has been one of the most clear and compelling on the subject. He stands apart not only because of his ability to translate vision into day-to-day reality but also because of his emphasis on values—how a leader must cultivate a moral quality that transcends success of the organization to bring about success of the individual.

This chapter from *Leadership Jazz*, "A Key Called Promise," discusses what a leader must pledge to his or her followers—both the making and carrying out of promises. De Pree emphasizes that in most cases, the leader cannot be responsible for the day-to-day maintenance that keeps an organization running. What the leader must do instead is promise certain things to the followers and ensure that those promises are kept. One of the most significant

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reasons we selected this chapter is De Pree's inclusion of eleven expectations an organization should count on its leader to fulfill. Without the realization of those expectations, an organization flounders.

De Pree, now retired, was with Herman Miller for years, most recently as chairman emeritus, and has been elected to *Fortune's* National Business Hall of Fame. As the following chapter illustrates, he is able to cut through the noise and chatter with sharp-edged clarity. It's impossible to read his work and not come away with a new perspective on what leadership is all about.

# A Key Called Promise

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**Max De Pree**

*I have a key in my bosom, called Promise, that will, I am  
persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle.*

—The Pilgrim's Progress

Leadership may be good work, but it's also a tough job. There is always more to do than time seems to allow. Measuring out both time to pursue one's own responsibilities and time to respond to the needs of others can be difficult. And leaders are constantly under pressure to make promises.

Though I'm still learning things about being a leader, I can tell you at least two requirements of such a position: the need to give one's witness as a leader—to make your promises to the people who allow you to lead; and the necessity of carrying out your promises. It sounds easier than it is.

One day Pat McNeal, a scheduler in the plant whom I'd known for a good many years, called me to say that Valerie from the second shift wanted to talk to me about a very serious matter. At the time I was CEO. Not knowing me, she had asked Pat to pave the way into my office. Pat said, "I want you to know that Valerie's a very dependable person. You would be wise to listen to what she has to say."

A date was set and Valerie appeared. She began by asking me if I knew that a vice president had fired the relatively new manager of the second shift without following the prescribed procedures. I told her that no, I wasn't aware of this. She then gave me the entire story of the

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abrupt and unwarranted dismissal of not one, but two fine young managers of the second and third shifts by this vice president, who seemed to have lost his bearings.

Valerie then handed me a beautifully written petition outlining the qualifications of the second-shift manager, his performance, and his relationship with all the people on the shift. Every person on the second shift had signed.

Those of you who have had experience managing in manufacturing plants will understand the risk Valerie ran in circulating the petition and in coming to me. The careful investigation that followed proved Valerie and her co-workers entirely correct and demonstrated that Valerie was serving Herman Miller (our company) well by protesting the firings. Valerie—not her superior in the hierarchy—was honoring corporate values and policies. She had put me and other senior managers in the position of living up to policies the company had clearly promised. Valerie was helping the leaders of the company to connect voice and touch.

Many of us privately make promises. We promise ourselves to lose weight, work harder, or finish a book. If we don't keep this kind of promise, we can usually find a reason, sometimes even a good reason. But followers can't afford leaders who make casual promises. Someone is likely to take them seriously. Leaders make public promises. They put themselves on the line to the people they lead. An enormous chasm separates the private world, where we often smile indulgently at broken promises, from the public one, where unkept promises do great harm. Leaders constantly look out across the distance. For no leader has the luxury of making a promise in a vacuum.

At no time is the gap between individual needs and organizational needs more painfully obvious than in times of cutbacks or difficult business conditions. Leaders must balance sensitively the needs of people and of the institution. A leader's promises come under critical examination at these times. A leader who backs away from her promises under duress irreparably damages the organization and plants the seeds of suspicion among her followers.

What would happen if the President of the United States were to visit an inner-city Chicago elementary school, tell the teachers and administration that she was publicly taking accountability for improving that school, and promise that she would hold the administration

and teachers accountable? And, the President would continue, "I will visit this school exactly one year from now to see what progress has been made. Call me for help." Does anyone doubt that the quality of education in the school would rise?

There is great power in the public promise of a true leader, power to strengthen and enable people. One of the great dangers to organizations arises when a leader's private and public promises contradict each other. Then the expectations of followers are liable to go beyond the reality delivered. Especially in lively, exciting institutions and corporations, when the private and public worlds of the leaders become confounded or contradictory, the mix-up can be deadly. At this point, we begin to question the leader's integrity.

Another of the great problems of leadership is what exactly to promise. The clarity and appropriateness of a leader's promises bear directly on the effectiveness and maturity of the institution and the performance of the people in it. What should a leader take from the private and personal bouts of concentrated thinking about the institution's future and make public as a promise?

The best leaders promise only what's worth defending.

With this in mind, before looking at what a leader may promise, I would like to discuss a few givens essential when thinking about leadership.

It's important to understand that good work means something a little different these days. In today's workplace, where the great majority of people are well prepared and thoroughly motivated, individual involvement through an open, participative structure or system of management most often elicits good performance. Every vital organization thrives because it depends more on commitment and enthusiasm than on the letter of the contract.

Because of the variety of gifts and skills that people bring to the workplace, the need for good people, and their willingness to move, we should treat the great majority of people as volunteers. They don't have to stay in one place. They don't have to work for one company or for one leader. They follow someone only when she deserves it. Thus leaders and followers don't sit on parallel lines, always close but never meeting. Leaders and followers are all parts of a circle.

Whether formally or informally, it's important to recognize that practically everything we accomplish happens through teamwork. We

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are not on our own. Everyone works within a loop of social accountabilities—a family, a congregation, a business. Ours is an arm-in-arm accountability. The highest-risk leader is the one who thinks she works alone.

It's important to understand that leadership is a posture of indebtedness. The process of leading is the process of fulfilling commitments made both to persons and to the organization. A leader's promises are her commitments. Keeping these promises and the way in which they are kept are parts of the mystery and the art of leadership. Knowing what not to do is fully as important as knowing what to do.

Followers can really determine how successful a leader will be. And so I would like to propose some ways of thinking about followership. What are the rights and needs of followers? Remember to think of followers as volunteers. Remember, too, that the goals of the organization are best met when the goals of people in the organization are met at the same time. These two sets of goals are seldom the same. While teaching at night school, I used to ask my classes, "Why do you go to work?" No one ever answered, "To make profit for the company."

Any follower has a right to ask many things of her leader. Here are several questions that leaders should expect to hear. The answers to these questions, you see, are some of the promises leaders will make.

- What may I expect from you?
- Can I achieve my own goals by following you?
- Will I reach my potential by working with you?
- Can I entrust my future to you?
- Have you bothered to prepare yourself for leadership?
- Are you ready to be ruthlessly honest?
- Do you have the self-confidence and trust to let me do my job?
- What do you believe?

Some time ago, shortly after the board of directors had elected Ed Simon president and chief operating officer of Herman Miller, I was out in one of our plants. A longtime worker stopped me and wanted to talk about the reasons for, and the implications of, this important decision. He had a number of well-thought-out questions, and I could

tell that he had been waiting for me to come by. Without thinking, I started to answer some of his questions. I was foolish enough to think that the chairman of the board knew all the answers! He interrupted me. "I don't want to hear you answer these questions, I need to hear Ed's answers. I already know that Ed is our president, but what I need to know is, *who is Ed?*" And he wasn't asking what Ed looked like.

This person needed to know what kind of a leader he was following and what this new leader would promise.

What a leader promises to the institution can be developed by thinking in a certain way about the needs of the institution. Just as individuals have a right to expect certain things of a leader, an institution (as a corporate body of many groups of people) expects and demands certain things from its leaders. I will list a few to stimulate your thinking.

(You'll notice that I haven't listed the promises leaders should make. I can't tell you that. The promises that come from a leader tell the story of her mettle. How those promises are carried out reveals the position a leader will occupy in the history of the organization.)

*The organization expects the leader to define and express both in writing and, especially, through behavior the beliefs and values of the institution.* This may not be easy, but like many disciplines, it's essential. Writing down what an institution values makes everyone come clean. It can also make people uncomfortable. The safety of vaguely known beliefs will disappear pretty fast.

*To carry out its work, the organization needs from a leader a clear statement of its vision and its strategy.* Of course, a leader may not be the only author of these, but she is primarily accountable for expressing them and making them understood.

*A leader is accountable for the design of the business.* A business or institutional structure, the bones and muscle of any organization, needs always to be kept in sync with the strategy and aimed at the future. The design of the organization should never be gerrymandered to serve the politicians or the bureaucracy of the insiders.

*A leader is responsible for lean and simple statements of policy consistent with beliefs and values, vision and strategy.* Policy gives practical meaning to values. Policies must actively enable people whose job it is to carry them out. I'm not talking about rules here. Leaders who live by rules rather than by principles are no more than dogs in mangers.

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*Equity is the special province of a leader.* There is more than the financial side of equity, and I do not mean control. A leader is responsible for equity in the assignment of all resources, tangible and intangible, in relation to agreed-on priorities. I hope that you will allow me to include in the meaning of equity the chance to advance in the organization and the chance to reach one's potential. I would also put in this definition communication, recognition, and reward. Any organization accrues to itself these three kinds of equity. It is incumbent on a leader to protect them.

*A leader focuses not on her own image as leader, but on the tone of the body of the institution.* Followers, not leaders, accomplish the work of the organization. We need to be concerned, therefore, with how the followers deal with change. How do they handle a customer's need for good service and good quality? How do the followers deal with conflict? How do they measure and respond to their results? These are questions that will help us evaluate the tone of the body; these are the ways in which the work of a leader comes under scrutiny. Just how lithe is your organization?

Appearance follows substance; the message subordinates the medium. A leader gets good results by leading, not by appearing to lead. The Marquis de Custine, a French traveler, was crossing with a group of Russian nobles from Sweden to St. Petersburg in the nineteenth century. The Russians were discussing the burdens of attending at the Czar's court, among which was the obligation to listen politely to all sorts of trivial and boring conversation. They were trying to determine the best way of appearing to listen, since we all admire attentiveness. The Frenchman made a simple observation. "The best way of appearing to listen," he said, "is to listen."

*A leader ensures that priorities are set, that they are steadfastly communicated and adhered to in practice.* This can be accomplished only if the leader halts the endless negotiation of the politicians in the group, the negotiators' waltz, as I sometimes call it. The participative process stimulates contrary opinion, as it should, but no organization can survive endless negotiation. At some point, public acceptance of a direction must appear.

*A leader ensures that the planning for the organization at all levels receives the necessary direction and approvals.* The benefits of a good plan are three-fold. It sets a clear direction. It makes the necessary objec-



tives and goals visible and understandable. It serves as a road map for all the people in the organization who need to know where and with whom to make a connection.

*A leader reviews and assesses results primarily in three areas: key appointments and promotions, results compared to the plan, the connections to key publics.* Promotions, key appointments, and succession planning are the most crucial elements in the organization's future. These activities are a leader's true domain. The organization has a right to understand the criteria used in these decisions, and each one must be examined carefully.

One of the many pacts of love that a leader upholds is to make the organization accountable for results compared to the plan. Not to be accountable for results is to be seriously out of touch with reality. Only leaders can stand up to the organization and hold it to its goals and to its required performance.

Institutions must never be permitted to operate in isolation. It is a matter of survival that we stay in touch with reality by opening ourselves to key groups: students and faculty, followers and customers, constituents and stockholders. Perhaps only success is more fragile in institutional life than the condition of being truly in touch with what's real.

*Leaders are accountable for the continuous renewal of the organization.* Renewal, I think, results directly when a leader understands and communicates opportunities, constraints, and reality. The understanding without communication is futile; communication without understanding is fruitless. Leaders need a solid understanding, and they owe pellucid explanation. We also need to remember that the unexamined message is not worth giving. The leader who opens her communication to question and debate brings about a much more promising result. If you believe this, it's easy to see that video reports are not communications.

Renewal also requires that leaders be alive in a special way to innovation and be hospitable to the creative person. This brings an ability to solve problems, to deal constructively with change, and to enable and encourage continual personal growth.

*A leader ought never to embarrass followers.* What is it exactly that embarrasses one's followers? Just ask them.

Leaders can only do so much. In very small organizations, leaders can sometimes have a hand in everything. This soon changes. In

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larger organizations, leaders simply can't do the work that moves the group day to day. Nor should they. Leaders remain responsible, perhaps more so than anyone else, for making the future promising and making promises for the future.

Businesses and institutions, like nature, abhor a vacuum. A leader who makes no promises leaves a vacuum soon to be filled by promises made by other people for her or by politicians trying to manipulate the organization. The best leaders make their promises under the scrutiny of their followers. Then they keep them. This is one way to connect voice and touch.

### Reflecting on the *Promises of My Leadership*

1. My "Promises" report card would look as follows:
  - I am aware that I am making promises to those under my stewardship.
  - I have maintained a "promises made—promises kept" philosophy.
  - I am helping those on my team take promises seriously.
  - I am keeping my unwritten, nonpublic, small promises as faithfully as I keep my big, high-profile, costly promises.
2. What are some promises I have made to my followers? How did I succeed or fail in carrying them out, and what were the results?
3. De Pree lists eleven things an organization has a right to expect from its leader: beliefs and values, vision and strategy, design, policy, equity, tone, priorities, planning, review and assessment, renewal, and no embarrassment. In which of these areas have I excelled as a leader? Which need some more work?
4. Who is a leader I have watched make and keep promises well?