

# **The Cycle of the Promise**

## **The Art and Practice of Building a High Trust Brand – for Yourself and for your Organization**

Companies that generate a high level of trust are the big winners in today's economy. These high trust organizations have a well developed capacity to sustain a culture of innovation, commitment, and results – even when times are tough. High performing companies maintain trust with customers, investors and employees. In the non-profit sector, achieving your purpose and generating support is based on trusting relationships with employees, volunteers, clients, funding agencies, and donors.

Trust is something that is built and maintained through the promises we make, and the actions we take to fulfill those promises. We trust a person or an organization that delivers on its promise to us.

The entire world of business may be seen to be a world of promise-making, promise-keeping, and promise-managing. We make a promise to deliver a good or service, in a certain way, at a certain price, under certain other conditions. We then put the capacity together – and maintain it over time – to actually deliver on that promise. We learn, innovate and adapt so that we can make new and more powerful offers and promises to our customers.

The value of our brand is based on how well we fulfill our promise. According to Scott Bedbury, noted as the brand maven behind both Nike and Starbucks, brands are no longer tangible. If a brand is any 'thing' it is a result of a synaptic process in the brain. It's the sum total of all experiences that everyone has with us – good, bad and ugly. This "brand karma" defines future possibilities for the company, and therefore market value. Similarly, your own personal brand, within your work and outside of it, is the sum total of how others experience you. It influences the trust that others feel in you, their willingness to take risks on you and coordinate action with you.

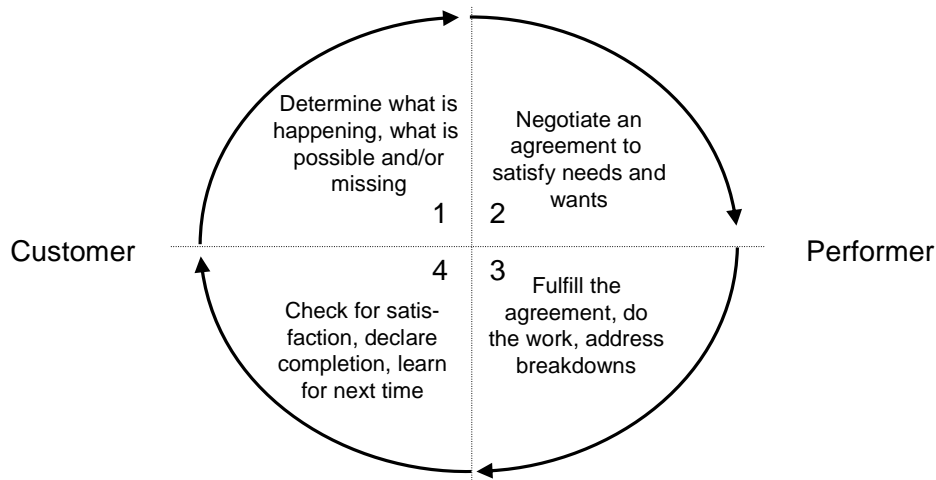
Organizational performance is measured by how well we satisfy our promises to the external stakeholders that matter to us – clients, investors, donors – as well as how well we organize our internal capabilities to deliver, by putting the right infrastructure in place,



developing and managing effective processes, and motivating and rewarding employees.

Various kinds of individual and collective performance management systems, such as performance evaluations and Balanced Scorecards, measure how well we do this. Underneath these formal systems, however, we believe that there needs to be what we term a “culture of commitment”. According to a recent Harvard Business Review article, in a world characterized by complex and far-flung business relationships, “companies can no longer rely on their internal organizational structures and processes to push strategic work forward. What *really* drives successful execution? **Promises:** employees’ personal pledges to satisfy concerns of stakeholders within and outside an organization. And when strategy implementation falters, poorly crafted promises are usually the culprits.”

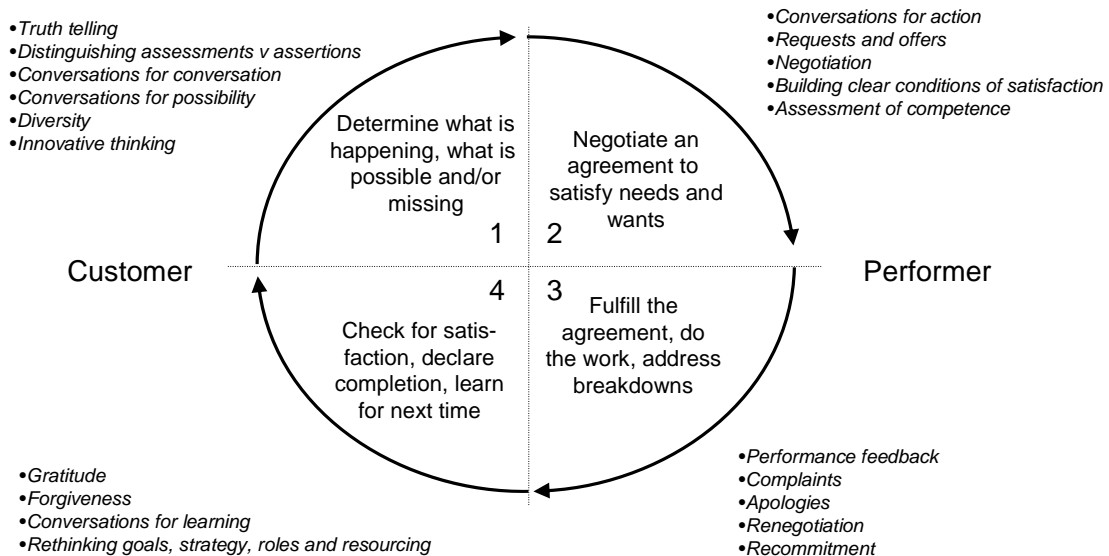
We work to improve commitment through a framework called the “Cycle of the Promise”.



The Cycle of the Promise is a cycle of conversations. With practice we have found that work teams can develop the conversational skills necessary to build a higher level of commitment. The cycle begins with a “meeting of the minds” about what is actually going on, what is important, and what might be done. Then, there must be an agreement – who will do what, by when, with what resources. Third, in performing according to the agreement, inevitably there are issues of

competing priorities, resourcing issues, competency gaps, and other surprises. How these are dealt with, through a healthy process of feedback and renegotiation is critical to success. Finally, the cycle ends with an acknowledgment of completion, thanks, forgiveness, and learning.

Issues of promise-management and trust are universal and, seen this way, an area where we can all improve. We believe that, since this is a cycle of conversations, people can learn to have more effective conversations, at every stage of the cycle.



We offer training and coaching, at an individual and team level, based on the skills that help us build and maintain healthy conversations around the cycle.

In the first quadrant, we look at the common social habits that inhibit us from saying what's really on our minds, speaking our own truth, appreciating the views of others, and being willing to imagine new possibilities.

Second, we learn about how to make complete, well understood requests or offers to each other, with clear conditions of satisfaction. We can react to a complete offer or request by agreeing, saying no, or

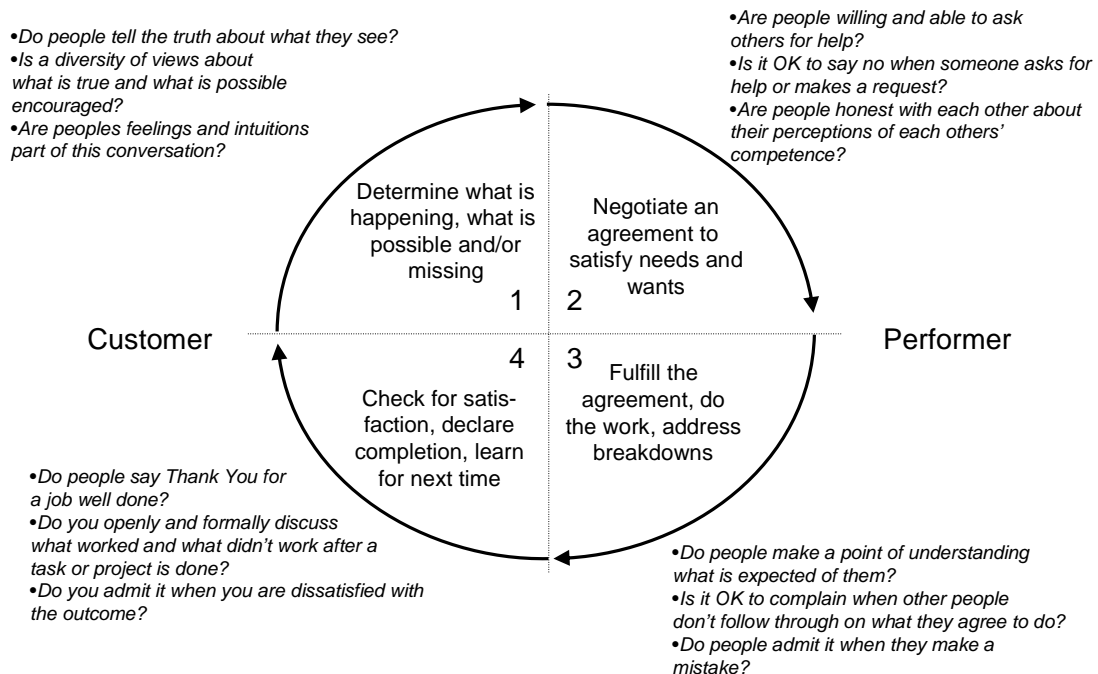


making a counter-offer. This leads to better agreements that minimize misunderstandings later on.

The third quadrant addresses what happens when we get to work on fulfilling our end of the agreement. Inevitably, the situation changes. We don't have the right resources. Circumstances change. Competing priorities arise. Being able to give and receive feedback, make healthy complaints, renegotiate and recommit are critical to moving forward.

Finally, in the end we acknowledge completion of the task, whether we are satisfied with the outcome or not. This can be as simple as remembering to say "Thank you". In more difficult circumstances, we may need to forgive, let go, learn and move on. In any case, it's important to take the time to evaluate what happened, as part of a cycle of continuous learning and improvement.

What's the level of trust and "promise management" in your organization? We use a simple assessment tool, based on the questions below, to help you look at what you are doing well and where you might improve.



Organizational culture is something that we carry in the stories that we tell ourselves and each other about “how things are done around here”. These stories tell us the founding myths of the organization, how people get ahead, how people fail, what’s encouraged and what’s discouraged or forbidden, what’s OK to talk about and what’s undiscussable. How does your organization encourage or discourage trust? Ask yourself the questions above, about others, and about yourself. High performing individuals and organizations tend to answer YES to these questions.

### Acknowledgements

*We are deeply indebted to the work of others who have gone before, particularly the work of John Searle, Fernando Flores, and Julio Olalla, who developed this view of the power of language, promises and trust, and applied it to the practical work of business. Thank you!*