

# Tool #1: Do What You Say You'll Do

*You are what you do, not what you say you'll do.*

—C.G. Jung

This first tool is probably the simplest to describe. When I interviewed Brian Cook, the CEO of the Geelong Football Club, I asked him if there was one thing that emerging leaders could do that would make a difference to the way they lead. His answer was as simple as it was powerful:

*Do What You Say You'll Do!*

Sounds obvious, yes?

There are several reasons why this is so important. It builds your credibility with your team and the wider organisation and stakeholders. Even more importantly, it builds trust, of which credibility is a component. We'll go into building trust in more detail in a later section, but as an entrée to it, the CIPD/ University of Bath report *Experiencing Trustworthy Leadership* has this to say:

*What matters in generating trust amongst followers are the everyday actions and behaviours of leaders that demonstrate their essential ability,*

*benevolence, integrity and predictability— drivers of trustworthiness. People do not gauge trustworthiness on the basis of what they are told about the individual competence of a leader— they gauge trustworthiness on ... that person's leadership actions and practice in the workplace...*<sup>28</sup>



## TAKE A MOMENT .....

Think about the leaders discussed in the previous sections. Think about the ones who were great, and the ones who were not so great. For the ones who came up on the negative side of the scale, it's likely that a lack of trust or credibility was somewhere in the mix.

Think about how your team or stakeholders perceive you at present. Would they say that you deliver on your promises? Would they say that you get back to them with answers? Would they say that you “Do What You Say You’ll Do”? And if the answer to those questions is no, then consider why. Is it forgetfulness? Is it not knowing the right answers? Is it not wanting to offend or upset someone? Or are there factors outside your control, and you use that as an excuse for not going back to the person you’ve made a promise to?

I’ve laboured the point a bit because this is *such* a vital tool.

## DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU'LL DO

And it's something that every single one of us can learn and implement immediately, irrespective of our innate personality style and characteristics.

### **Implementing: Do What You Say You'll Do**

Doing what you say you are going to do *does not* mean giving everyone what he or she wants or agreeing with what everyone says. Of course, there will be times when it's impossible to give people what they want. Employees might want information on whether the company is being sold, and even if you are privy to that information, you cannot share it. There may be times when employees want you to investigate the possibility of a pay rise and the answer comes back as "no".

Doing what you say you are going to do *does not* preclude such situations. It simply means that you have a way to deal with them that doesn't break the trust and confidence of your team in you.

Here are four steps you can take to Do What You Say You'll Do:

1. Be very careful about what you actually commit to doing. As already discussed, there will be things that you simply won't be able to do, despite your absolute best intentions. Be mindful of this. Can you only commit to being able to ask a question on behalf of the person? If so, tell the person that this is what you will do. Make sure that, as far as possible, you only commit to doing things that you have a good chance of delivering on. If you know you aren't going to be able to deliver, *do not* commit to doing it!

2. Check the understanding with the person: what did they “hear” that you would do, and by when?
3. Keep a record of what you promise and to whom. Don't rely on your memory— write it down. What did you say you would do, for whom and by when?
4. Deliver on your commitments. Even if the answer is “I've checked and we're no further forward”, it's critical that you come back to the person— proactively, not when they approach you—to update them.

While these four steps may at first seem a little artificial or forced, as with everything they'll become easier with practice.

### **Saying Sorry and Moving Forward**

What about times when you think you'll be able to deliver on something, but the reality is that it isn't possible? In these instances, there's something very powerful about an apology: acknowledge what you said you would do, and acknowledge you didn't (or couldn't) deliver.

Of course, doing this over and over again in itself breaks trust and dilutes credibility, but most people have a built-in “reasonableness” factor—they know when someone genuinely has made a mistake and that it's a one-off, not their general pattern of behaviour.

But what if you have been a serial under-deliverer to your team or stakeholders, for reasons either within your control or not? There are two approaches you can take here, depending on the team and stakeholders, the environment and who you are.

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- You can be upfront and say, “I know I’ve let you down by not delivering, or not doing what I said I would. I want to let you know that from here on it will be different. I need your help to keep me on track and accountable.”  
or
- You can just start doing things differently and let your actions speak louder than words.

The advantage to the first approach is that you’re letting people know that you know you could do better, and that you’re prepared to give it a go. But if you take this approach, be prepared for people to hold you to account and be harsher if you make mistakes.

The advantage to the second approach is that it’s less dramatic—you can just get on and do things without any dramatic proclamations. The disadvantage is that sometimes, despite changing your ways, you can be tarred with your old brush—and people need to know that you’ve changed, which means being overt about it to some extent.

Which approach you take depends on your reading of the lay of the land, so spend some time thinking about that before you dive in. It also helps for you to think about why you’ve been under-delivering. If it’s because you find giving feedback hard or because you commit to too much, read on—we’ll address these issues in a later section.



## TAKE A MOMENT .....

Now, give it a go. Write down all the commitments you've made. Are there things that are outstanding? Are there people you avoid in the corridor because you were meant to get back to them? Write it all down. Then make a plan for how you're going to address what's on the list and how you're going to approach going forward.

And practice. Be prepared that it won't always work out perfectly. Building new approaches to leadership is like building any other new habit, skill or attribute—it takes time and practice, and the ability to be gentle on yourself when it doesn't go according to plan. A little bit of courage won't go astray here either!



## STICKY MESSAGES :: A VERY SHORT RECAP

- Doing what you say you are going to do builds trust and credibility with your team or stakeholders.
- This doesn't mean always giving people what they want or agreeing with them.
- It does mean being careful and clear about what you commit to, checking understanding, keeping a record and then delivering.
- Even if you've been a serial under-deliverer, this is one tool that it's never too late to start using. Just begin from today and watch what happens.



## RESOURCES

There are plenty of great resources on [www.dowhatyousay.com.au](http://www.dowhatyousay.com.au) including the *Experiencing Trustworthy Leadership* report from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the University of Bath.