

Troubleshooting Agreements

As you immerse yourself in your daily work, you may be dealing with emergencies and problems that waste your time and hurt results. Making and maintaining Agreements does take time, but not having Agreements—or not following up on them—eventually takes even more time and energy. It's the difference between doing preventive maintenance on your car and seeing the oil light come on as you drive home in rush-hour traffic. If you can clear 15 to 45 minutes each week for making and following up on a few critical Agreements, you can save time and hassle.

Many problems in work relationships arise due to incomplete Agreements or a lack of Agreement. Think of someone who is not giving you what you expected. This series of questions can help you think through what phase of the Agreement you're in, what's going wrong and what you can do to get on track.

1. Can you list specifically what he or she is doing that's bothering you?

Be specific.

The more specific you can be with someone about what's bothering you, the more likely that person can change his or her behavior. Imagine that you videotaped the evidence. Describe what you see. Don't say, "You were rude to customers." Say, "You didn't greet customers by name; you interrupted; you didn't answer their questions; you raised your voice." Don't say, "You're irresponsible." Say, "You don't let me know when reports will be late," or "You don't put away the equipment before leaving for the day."

2. Did you get an Agreement with this person by:

Get an Agreement.

At this point you realize that you never told the person what you wanted or that you can't remember the conversation exactly. Or you thought that some things were so obvious you didn't need to go into detail. Obviously you did need to. It's time to decide if you want to make an Agreement or clarify an Agreement. You want to take care of the irritation you have with the other person.

- **stating the specific deadlines, behaviors, or results you're now not getting,**
- **explaining your need and what might be in it for the other person to do what you're asking, and**
- **discussing potential problems and resolving them?**

Establish an Agreement.

Do you want to make an Agreement? That means you'd be willing to spend from 5 minutes to an hour in a discussion with the person, plus time to follow up, for less grief in your life about this matter. If you're not willing to take these steps, then ask yourself what you could do to remove the irritation this person is causing you.

3. **Did you express recognition of the person's behavior if he or she did what you asked?**
4. **Did you tell the person if the performance wasn't what you expected and then tell again specifically what you wanted?**

Clarify an Agreement. If you're not even sure what you originally asked for, take a few minutes with the person to reestablish the important points of the Agreement.

Take the blame out. The most difficult part of this stage is to accept your anger or frustration. If you were not clear with the person, it's not his or her fault. Vent, first alone or with a sympathetic listener. Then talk with the other person specifically about what you need. Be sure to get rid of any sense of blame that might seep into your voice, your words, and your body language. It's often appropriate to say something like, "I realize I didn't tell you this before. What I'd like you to..."

Remember to Recognize.

When the person has kept the Agreement, acknowledge the contribution. You'll wear away the relationship, the other person's self-esteem, and his or her productivity if you only tell what's wrong.

Hold a Recommitment Discussion.

Some problems in keeping an Agreement don't show up until the person has been working with the Agreement. Then there may be conflicting priorities, or the person doesn't understand why it's important, or more resources are needed. Some people will say "yes" to a request in good faith; doing it is a different story. Ensure the success of your Agreement and provide support by checking in periodically and by letting the person know immediately if anything is off track. People appreciate knowing what matters, and you might save yourself time later when things could otherwise get even more off track.

Confrontation

It's the last straw. You've done everything you could and the person is not following through. You can get ideas for confronting others in the book *People Skills* by Robert Bolton. However, it's unlikely you'll reach this stage if you have established a clear agreement and followed up with Recognition and Recommitment.

Conclusion

Not making important Agreements or not managing them well negatively affects productivity, time management, and even one's outlook on the day. Once you've identified the holes in your Agreements, you have the information you need to patch the leaks not only in your Agreement, but in your time, energy and productivity.