



The Unspoken Commitment - Our 500th MT Cast

Our guidance on your obligation to proactively communicate when your projects or tasks are at risk in some way.

Many of us sit quietly when one of our projects is causing us to worry. We can see some things that may go wrong in the next few days. We realize that our plan required a resource that is no longer available. We messed up the schedule. We *know* we're going to miss an upcoming deadline, even if we don't have to report it as missed, yet.

But sitting quietly in these situations is unprofessional. We're obligated to communicate candidly about our responsibilities. *Remaining silent is the equivalent of making an unspoken commitment that we are not at risk.*

Outline

1. **Silence is Confirmation of Previous Commitments**
2. **Reasonable Expectations of Delay or Failure *Require* Communication**
3. **Candor Doesn't Require Self-Immolation**

Shownotes

1. **Silence is Confirmation of Previous Commitments.**

Despite what most of us want to believe, keeping silent about an upcoming miss isn't "dodging a bullet". When we stay silent, we're not "getting lucky" because "the spotlight didn't fall on us this time." What many of us have lost as our organizations have coarsened is that silence, to the organization, means, *my previous commitments and communications*

about this work are still valid right now. Silence is confirmation of positive status previously committed.

How many times have you told one of your directs, *why didn't you tell me?* When you know they knew, you expect a heads up, a courtesy call, a change in status notice - *something*. If you expect it from your directs, reciprocity demands you give it to your boss.

If you don't give it to your boss, you have no defense (other than your character) against your boss's suspicion that you were *actively hiding* the risk. That's more than a missed deadline - that's an integrity fail.

Put differently, failing to communicate a potential miss is a sin of omission. Too many professionals have mistakenly defined failures as things they themselves caused to happen. But one's actions are not *all* a professional is responsible for. We're also responsible for the *outcomes* that occur as a result of things we did *and didn't* do. As the military version of this goes, *A commander is responsible for everything his unit does or fails to do.* Any result that happens in an area for which you are responsible, *you did that.* And so, because not communicating is a choice leading to an outcome, you're responsible.

2. Reasonable Expectations of Delay or Failure *Require* Communication.

So, it's inappropriate to remain silent when you know you're going to miss. We are obligated as professionals to let others in the firm know about the risk we have seen.

Here's what to do and say.

If your organization has a system for reporting project status (like RAG reports, or stoplights, or verbal round robin meetings), obviously, that's the place to communicate a miss or risk. When your work or project falls clearly into a category your organization recognizes or propagates, as you understand it, that's where it goes, *regardless of the embarrassment or loss of professional reputation.*

That said, there's nothing wrong with reporting Yellow or Red, or expressing predicted risks verbally, and then describing actions to mitigate the problem.

Here's the right way: *Folks, I'm reporting yellow on the conference cost reduction project. Sorry for the delays. Here's what I'm doing, and I'm confident we will be back on track in two weeks.*

What too many managers do today is say to themselves, *yes, technically it's yellow but because of the things I could brief on that I'm doing to mitigate, it's safe to say we will be green by the deadlines, so therefore I will report green now*. This is sophistry. Far better to be conservative and downgrade your status, versus being seen as misleading to avoid consequences.

You also don't get to invent a reason that is technically accurate but misleading for why a project would be green versus yellow or yellow versus red. Any time you have to torture the language to prove your point, it's your point that's the problem, not the language.

But let's also be fair: there are hundreds of definitions out there for what green *means* and what red *is*. Whether a project is "clearly" or "substantially" at risk *is* a judgement call, and different people could make different decisions. And, yes, there are hundreds of ways of sharing verbally, often poorly understood and therefore often misused (and that often intentionally.)

So, when in doubt, follow the best distilled guidance on reporting status: if there is any doubt about status, report the lower, less desirable one. This passes the NYT headline test: *before you do something, ask yourself whether or not you'd want everyone to read about it tomorrow as a headline in the New York Times*. It also helps you avoid one of the worst reporting gaffes there is: going from green one reporting period to red the next, without ever mentioning yellow or any risks at all. THAT is ALWAYS embarrassing (or should be). Generally, reporting concerns earlier, at easier to fix levels of worry is better.

It may be helpful to remember why this communication can't be professionally omitted. Communication becomes a necessary part of any organization once the organization grows from 1 to 2 employees. Think about a cobbler who works alone. He works on one pair of shoes at a time, and he does all the work. There is no interpersonal communication required to provide value to his customers.

But, the cobbler succeeds and grows. He comes to believe that there is enough demand for his work to allow him to pay an apprentice to assist him. It will cost him the apprentice's wages, but he believes the additional work he will be able to accomplish with two pairs of hands will be worth more than the cost.

Unfortunately, the cobbler has learned over the years to not be a talkative man. He enjoys

the solitude of his work. So, he continues to do what has, in part, made him successful, and doesn't talk to the apprentice. Frustratingly, his plans for growth fail, because of the inefficiencies created by the lack of communication about work in progress. Has the apprentice finished the vamp? Has the sole been double-tacked? How long was the leather treated? He doesn't ask, and doesn't know, and repeats much work, eliminating the value that the apprentice might have added...will still incurring the costs.

Working in an organization allows for significant magnification of human effort through specialization of labor. But that magnification doesn't happen only because there are more people. **It happens because there are more people *who communicate about the work to create the output.***

Communication is the first necessary skill of organizational professionalism. Failing to communicate is denying one's first responsibility.

3. Candor Doesn't Require Self-Immolation.

There is a caveat to our requirement to communicate. There is the rare manager who punishes the communication of bad news, and less than ideal status. She creates a culture where no one will be candid about risks, because the professional approach will be punished.

This is wrong. And unprofessional. But you may remember that there is a rule in professional life that your honesty cannot be used against you.* If there is a longstanding pattern in your organization of giving "soft" status reports (which is to say, overstating status in a positive way), out of fear of retribution, we understand the temptation to follow the crowd.

Manager Tools recommends you test the waters carefully, to see if the fears of your colleagues are justified. Decide whether or not you get punished for honest reporting. Talk to your colleagues to chart a course. And if the boss continues his perfidy, protect yourself and adapt to the culture, or get your resume and network ready.

And be careful you're not that kind of boss to your directs when they report.

- ◦ Lest there be any confusion one's honesty being used against you: If I report being late, because I am late, and then get fired for repeated failure to meet deadlines,

that's not an instance of having my honesty used against me (because i duly reported all of my lateness.) I'm being fired for not doing my job. Often when one tells the truth about a mistake, the rumors fly that he got fired for being honest, when in fact he got fired for the mistake, and his honesty didn't save him. We're not recommending you be honest to save yourself. We're recommending you be honest because it's the right thing to do. Hopefully you already know our well-kept stance on delivering results, too.

Wrap Up

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it's easier and safer for us to not admit we are behind or have planned poorly. But that's making a choice to put yourself above the organization. If everybody does that too much, we get what we have today - enormous dysfunction. The right call is to be candid, and admit a coming risk or failure. Yep - you might get in trouble. But you might in the future too, for failing - and also for concealing what you had to know. *That* failure will haunt you for a long time.