# Breaking the Habit of a Company and its Employees to Over Promise

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**Abstract:** Businesses, especially service companies, often over promise to win clients, yet this damages trust and harms reputation. This action research investigates why overpromising persists in the case study of Estatoora, a consulting firm. The goal is to develop practical solutions to align promises with deliverable results for improved client satisfaction. Using commitment drift, first and second-person inquiry methods were used over two action research cycles. Results showed that misaligned core values and inadequate mentoring contributed to overpromising. Interventions focused on values-based mentoring and a new conceptual framework to diminish performance gaps. This research offers transferable insights for businesses seeking ethical, sustainable success.

**Key Words:** overpromising; commitment drift; action research; core values; mentoring

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Estatoora, a consulting firm offering business and technology solutions, seeks to transform its own practices. Overpromising has become habitual, negatively impacting client experiences. This research aims to develop practical solutions that improve client satisfaction, promote ethical business practices, and contribute to the broader understanding of business ethics and customer relationship management.

### 1.1 Purpose and rationale

This study aims to first uncover the underlying factors within Estatoora that contribute to overpromising, going beyond surface-level process issues. This aligns with the concept of "commitment drift," where critical promises are forgotten or broken (Doty, 2015; Lessig, 2013). Second is to create interventions that not only improve our track record of delivering on promises, but also instill an ethical commitment to keeping our word to clients. The "right-thing-to-do" principle suggests that promises driven by an ethical approach lead to more harmonious outcomes (Charness & Dufwenberg, 2006).

Lastly, this study aims to offer insights to other businesses, especially service-oriented companies, seeking to build sustainable success through honest and reliable practices. Existing gap models of service quality highlight the damaging impact of a disconnect between promises and customer experience (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2018). This research is motivated by a belief that true, long-term growth depends on aligning our actions with Estatoora's core values. It also reflects an understanding that business ethics are not merely a matter of policy, but require ongoing cultivation within an organization's culture.

### 1.2 Context

The company comprises administrative teams (Finance and HR), a customer-facing team (Sales and Marketing), and execution teams (Production and Tech). As the CEO, I lead the organization aiming to foster a client-centric and innovative mindset.

While good intentions drive Estatoora's growth goals, a pattern of overpromising has emerged

as the sales pressure increases. This disconnect between commitments made to clients and delivered results reveals a misalignment with our core values:

Ethics: Overpromising can be viewed as a form of institutional misalignment where individuals disregard economic consequences for better short-term gain (Lessig, 2013).

Service with Passion: Genuinely serving client needs requires setting realistic expectations, not overextending our capabilities.

Think Positive: Overpromising creates both internal and client-side stress, undermining a positive mindset essential for problem-solving.

Aggressive: Long-term client relationships, not just quick wins, embody a truly aggressive approach to business growth.

This action research seeks to address not just operational inefficiencies, but the deeper cultural roots of overpromising hindering Estatoora's potential (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an iterative Action Research (AR) methodology to address the issue of overpromising at Estatoora. Following Coghlan's model (2019), the research progressed through the pre-step, context and purpose, constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action phases. Collaboration was a cornerstone of this AR approach, with the researcher working alongside employees as both participants and co-creators of solutions.

### 2.1 Data Collection and Triangulation

This study incorporated various data sources and methods to gain a holistic view and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Hence the utilization of first and second person inquiry. In first person inquiry, the researcher, often an "insider" within the organization or system being studied, focuses on their own actions, thoughts, and underlying assumptions. It emphasizes self-reflection to uncover how personal biases might shape the research process and interpretation of data. We utilized the ORJI framework (Observation, Reaction, Judgement, and Intervention) for structured self-reflection, acknowledging the potential impact of any personal biases or assumptions on the research (Schein, 1999).

Meanwhile, second person inquiry involves collaborative dialogue and inquiry with others within the system being studied. The researcher aims to understand diverse perspectives, collectively identify challenges, and co-create solutions with stakeholders. In this study, an open and collaborative communication with employees was prioritized through the Four Parts of Speech which consist of Framing, Advocating, Illustrating, and Inquiring (Fisher et al., 2000). The Four Parts of Speech can facilitate the collection of diverse insights into employees' understanding of core values and the challenges they face in fulfilling promises.

Crucially, employees were active contributors to the research process. They provided feedback and were involved in solution generation, and their perspectives played a key role in evaluating the effectiveness of implemented changes. Finally, project feedback forms were used to gather ongoing metrics of customer satisfaction, providing insight into the real-world impact of efforts to reduce overpromising.

### 2.2 Change Management Framework

The Burke-Litwin Change Model (Burke & Litwin, 1992) informed the initial analysis, identifying factors hindering change. However, as limitations became apparent, Systems Thinking (Senge & Sterman, 1992) was applied. The Iceberg Model helped us identify underlying structural and behavioral causes of overpromising. This shift allowed us to address the root of the problem, not just surface-level symptoms.

### 2.3 Stakeholder Involvement

As the insider-researcher, I established a collaborative microcosm group with key department heads (Sales, Production, Tech). We held microcosm meetings for data analysis, solution brainstorming, and progress monitoring. This ensured co-ownership of the process and buy-in for the interventions (Cummings and Worley, 2009; Coghlan, 2019).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### 3.1 Stories and outcomes

*Cycle 1: The Tech Trap.* Initially, we assumed that better workflows and software would end overpromising (Pizam, 2012). We implemented a new project management system and improved internal communication. However, results from project client feedback showed a persistent lack of satisfaction. This misalignment between our tech-driven solution and

the root causes became clear as we applied the Burke-Litwin model (1992).  We realized we were addressing only lower transactional parts of our organization, not the transformational beliefs and values needed for sustainable change.

*Cycle 2: From System to Self.* Applying Systems Thinking (Senge & Sterman, 1992) and the Iceberg Model, we shifted our focus away from processes and towards underlying mindsets. Analyzing time horizons revealed that the overpromising trend coincided with Estatoora's growth period. Through collaboration with the team, we found out that new hires, while driven, lacked a deep connection with our core values. Examples of response from our inquiry are the sales people tending to promise unrealistic deadlines to win contracts based on pride, not our commitment to service. Our production people also overextend themselves to "prove worth," undermining quality and client trust.
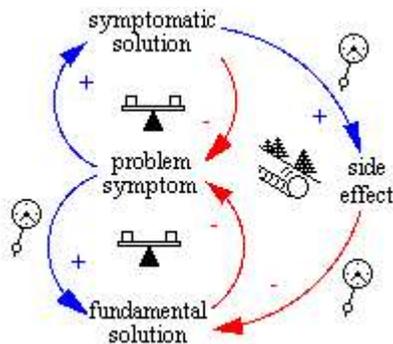


Fig. 1. Peter Senge's Shifting the Burden

Figure 1 shows Peter Senge's "Shifting the Burden" archetype (Senge, 1997). This framework guides and helps us (the researchers and collaborators) to visualize the root cause of our overpromising issue.  As the diagram shows, we were previously stuck in a cycle of addressing surface-level symptoms (symptomatic solutions) without tackling the underlying reasons for overpromising. This repetitive cycle made it difficult to identify and implement long-term solutions. By understanding this archetype, we can move beyond temporary fixes

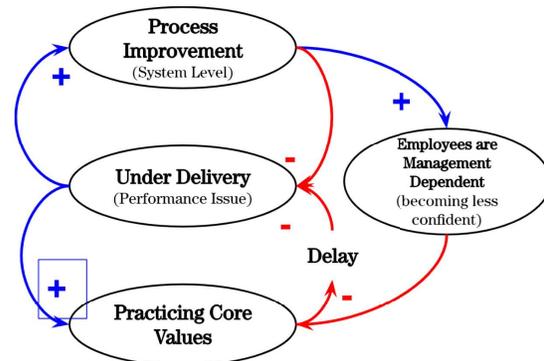and focus on addressing the core causes of overpromising at Estatoora.



Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework  on Refraining to Over Promise

Figure 2 presents the dynamics between system level process improvement that affect performance. With the collaboration of the action researcher and the employees, we identified interventions necessary in addressing the core issue of under delivery. Coaching and one-on-one mentoring were held outside of work hours to foster genuine connection. As CEO and mentor, I focused not only on the technical skills, but on aligning each employee's actions with our core values (Collins & Porras, 2011). This personal approach (Cummings & Worley, 2009) aimed to reignite the "aggressive" and "service with passion" spirit that had fueled our original success.

Client feedback gradually showed a marked improvement, specifically citing increased reliability and trustworthiness.   This suggests that addressing company culture was essential to stopping the cycle of overpromising.

### 3.1 Self-reflection and learning

*Cycle 1: The Power of the Right Framework.* Initially focused on system improvements, I quickly realized that our overpromising issue was more complex. Frameworks like Lewin's Force Field Analysis became essential tools, allowing us to analyze hidden factors impeding our change efforts.  The Burke-Litwin model

helped us understand our organizational maturity, revealing the limitations of addressing only lower transactional issues. This cycle, though imperfect, taught me to actively seek the framework that fits the problem, not the other way around.

*Cycle 2: Thinking Deeply, Growing Widely.* Systems Thinking's emphasis on root causes proved transformative. Identifying the "Shifting the Burden" Archetype exposed the cycle of short-term fixes that masked the real problem: a misalignment between our espoused core values and our experience of them. Mentoring became our solution, focusing on realigning individual actions with our values. This led to improved outcomes and organizational growth. Client feedback validated success, showing increased reliability and trustworthiness. While our employees became hungry to learn, with one proposing their own action research to drive further development, showing that addressing the core value gap created a ripple effect of positive change.

This research has a bigger implication. The experience, for example, reinforces the importance of action research training. Without this foundation, I would have lacked the tools to identify root causes and implement effective, sustainable solutions. It also proves that ethical business isn't just about policy, but about actively cultivating values within an organization. My commitment to ongoing self-reflection is key, ensuring that I recognize and address my own biases as a leader.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

This action research at Estatoora demonstrates that overpromising can be a symptom of a deeper misalignment between an organization's espoused values and the lived experience of its employees. While frameworks like Burke-Litwin can identify areas for improvement, a more nuanced approach is necessary to address root causes. Systems Thinking provided a powerful lens to expose the "Shifting the Burden" archetype at play in our company.

Our intervention of one-on-one mentoring was aimed to bridge this value gap. The results were positive, with client feedback showing increased trust and reliability. More importantly, a culture of

continuous learning was fostered, with employees taking the initiative to propose further action research for departmental growth.

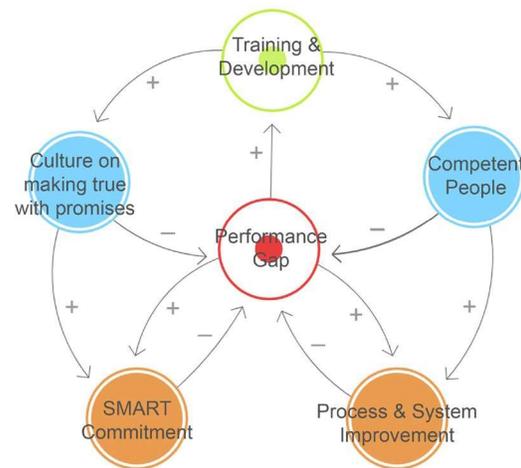### 4.1 Extrapolation and Contribution

Fig. 3. The Estatoora-Vitruvian-Man Conceptual Framework

This study offers valuable insights for organizations facing similar challenges. It highlights the importance of critically examining the underlying assumptions that may be driving overpromising behavior. Furthermore, it emphasizes the transformative power of aligning values with actions through a multi-faceted approach. The "Estatoora-Vitruvian Man" framework presented here provides a practical roadmap for businesses seeking to bridge this value-action gap and cultivating a culture of ethical commitment.

### 4.2 Post-Second Cycle Outcome and Meta Reflection

*Content Reflection.* This research transformed my understanding of overpromising and commitment drift. True alignment, not just surface-level competence, is needed. I learned that employees must embody the organization's core values for it to fulfill its promise to clients. While technical skills remain crucial, deeper behavioral change is required for sustainable success, as evidenced by our

mentoring program.

*Process Reflection.* Our chosen frameworks (Burke-Litwin, Systems Thinking) were essential in identifying the root cause of overpromising and developing effective interventions. However, unexpected external factors, like the pandemic, exposed a further need: supporting our employees' mental health. In true alignment with our core value of "service with passion," we added team-designed counseling opportunities. This demonstrates our commitment to addressing challenges holistically, not just with technical fixes.

*Premise Reflection.* Previously, I relied heavily on my technical background for problem-solving, believing solutions were always process-driven. This research forced me to adopt a more critical mindset, seeking to understand the 'why' behind issues before rushing to implement changes. This has led to more humane solutions that address the root causes, not just symptoms. For example, when a valued employee suddenly resigned, typical practice might have been acceptance. Instead, the exit interview revealed a deeper story: family pressure. Refusing to lose a strong contributor, I proposed an innovative solution that aligns with our "aggressive" core value and supports her personal situation. It allowed her to remain with Estatoora remotely, while also expanding our operations reach.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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