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Simple Promises, Big Changes

Recently I took a trip to Chicago with a large group of people coordinated by the Charlotte Chamber. It was a fact-finding mission designed to explore the challenges and successes of a large city. We toured the riverfront, Millennium Park and Chicago's vibrant downtown; watched several presentations, encountered interesting practices, and gained some insight into the workings of the city. There were many opportunities to inspire us and generate ideas to bring home to Charlotte. But a profound moment occurred during a group discussion on the second day of the trip. Here is what occurred.

A Public Promise

An associate of Mayor Daley's office described a city environmental initiative which has been announced to all Chicago citizens for participation. As she explained the pledge, she handed each of us a wallet-sized brochure titled the "Take Five Pledge," outlining five specific actions to benefit the environment. Among these were: replacing 4 light bulbs with new compact florescent bulbs, turning off the tap water while brushing teeth, replacing one car trip per month with riding a bike or walking, planting or caring for a city tree by watering, mulching or removing litter, and replacing plastic shopping bags with reusable shopping bags.

The Mayor's office calculated that if every Chicago resident was true to this pledge, these results would follow: the energy-efficient light bulbs would cut carbon dioxide to equal taking 81,164 cars off the road; turning off the taps during brushing would save enough water to fill 33,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools; biking or walking just once a month would decrease emissions by 1.89 billion tons; and replacing shopping bags would eliminate 10 million pounds of carbon dioxide (the equivalent of 515,000 gallons of gasoline). Mayor Daley has said that his vision is to make Chicago "the most environmentally friendly city" in the world, and the "Take Five Pledge" effort is clearly a declaration leading the city in that direction.

It would have been easy for him to just stop there, and it would have looked nice on a poster. However, a tangible promise of action truly can make a difference, so the Mayor's office took it one important step further. After handing out the pledge brochure, the associate asked our group of over one hundred people to repeat aloud, in unison, a verbal promise - to keep each of the 5 pledge items.

What we discovered over breakfast the next morning is that many of us, alone and in the privacy of our rooms, had turned off the faucet of the hotel room sink as we brushed our teeth – just because we promised that we would.

Applying the Lesson

We got rapid confirmation that sincerely-made promises have the power to produce tangible and meaningful results. A simple action, like turning off the water every morning as we brush our teeth makes a measurable difference. Imagine the net result if only twenty percent of the citizens kept their promise – you do the math – the impact would be substantial.

After my last column, I heard from many readers with ideas of their own of what would make a great city. Among these were many letters urging stronger family units, more environmental and social responsibility, and increasing trust and communication between members of this community.

If the “Take Five Pledge” from Chicago demonstrates the cumulative impact and positive influence of vision, declaration, and individual promises, I wonder if Charlotte can benefit from its example. Can we take our own vision, make our own declaration and keep our individual promises to create a city that works for everybody?

What if we all consider five personal promises that could make lasting impact on our city’s future? What if we kept our promises simple and doable? What if we each had our own version of the “Take Five Pledge” and shared it publicly? What if we live consistently with these five simple promises every day?

Would it make a measureable difference in the quality of life for our city? I’m willing to bet it would.

For those looking to share their promises with another, email me your Take Five list at the address below. For those interested in checking out Chicago’s version of the Take Five Pledge, visit: http://www.earthmonthchicago.com/pages/take_the_pledge/4.php.

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