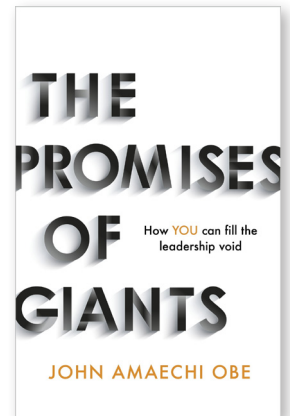


The Promises of Giants

How You Can Fill the Leadership Void

by **John Amaechi OBE**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Former collegiate and NBA basketball player John Amaechi has had a full and varied life. But everyday of it that he can remember has been lived as a giant. And that never goes away. The impact of being a giant factors into his every decision. It influences the way people see him and the way that he interacts with them.

The Promises of Giants: How YOU Can Fill the Leadership Void requires you to recognize that you, too, are a giant. And forgetting you're a giant—even for a moment—can have dire consequences. Giants can't do anything in the same way as everyone else. And when it comes to your interactions with others; neither can you.

The promises of giants guarantee a certain type of lived experience under the umbrella of that leader. It is a collection of promises made to the people you work with most intimately, to your workplace as a whole, and to yourself alone.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How and why you are giant, regardless of your size.
- Promises leaders should make to themselves.
- Promises leaders should make to those they interact and work with directly.
- Promises leaders should make to their organizations on a whole.

PART ONE: Promises to Yourself

I Promise to View Myself Critically, But Not Cruelly

If you are not open to focused introspection and you do not practice it on a routine basis, you will not be a great leader—at least not by the standards of greatness that truly matter. To be authentic, emotionally literate, intellectually curious, adaptable, and connected and engaged with those around you, introspection cannot be ignored.

It is a whetstone that sharpens your inner voice, which must be trustworthy. For the rest of your professional life, that voice will be your primary source of feedback. Colleagues, direct reports, and managers will be sources as well.

But the farther you advance, the more difficult it will become to acquire useful external feedback. Your colleagues won't tell you everything. And they'll sometimes tell you things that aren't necessarily accurate, for better or worse.

So this first promise is imperative: to view yourself critically, objectively, and compassionately. This means an honest, ongoing pragmatic self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Without an accurate understanding of your flaws and fortes, the starting point of your journey forward will be unclear, immediately setting you off course.

I Promise to Commit Fully to Success

It may seem self-evident that you are committed to winning. After all, you are reading about achieving personal, interpersonal, and organizational success and that in itself takes time and commitment.

Success and “winning” within the context of the promises are defined just by the fulsome achievement of one's goals—hopefully goals of noble intent, but, if not that, at least goals designed not to harm others.

Winning is a big picture operation. It's about a commitment to a vivid, long-term personal and organizational goal with a clear and unequivocal understanding of what success looks like when it happens.

When it comes to winning, you need to be clear on these seven things:

- “Nice [pleasant, thoughtful, conscientious, ethical, fair, honest, etc.] guys” don't necessarily finish last.
- Success doesn't require cruelty.
- Success is relative.

- Success requires a clear, vivid, and explicit vision.
- Success requires compromise.
- Success isn't a zero-sum game—you don't have to seek to destroy others to achieve success yourself.
- Success hinges on the minutiae (people often think there are pivotal moments.)

I Promise to be Bold and Vulnerable

Many of us have had experiences that make us familiar with the surge of emotions associated with conquering fear. We've learned that, when we demonstrate the ability to be bold, paired with the willingness to be just a little vulnerable, good things usually follow.

We have all felt that relief of, “Ah, that wasn't so bad after all. Lesson learned.” And yet it's a lesson that often must be relearned time and again with every new context.

Make no mistake, it is effortful to be bold. It is difficult to be vulnerable. And for these reasons, the promise to be both will be particularly challenging to keep. But you *must*.

Because being bold in the face of challenge, and allowing yourself to be vulnerable in the face of potential loss, opens up an entire spectrum of possibilities that would not otherwise be available.

But you do need both.

For many, the invitation to be bold will be more alluring than the invitation to be vulnerable. Intrinsically, boldness is conflated with courage and so has a more positive spin and is perhaps looked on with more favor than vulnerability, which is often associated with weakness or a lack of courage.

But the two are a powerful combination and each far less powerful on their own.

I Promise to Act with Vigilance Against My Biases

If we want to succeed in this world—to solve the big, new challenges and create the solutions that will be essential not only for our own success but for our collective survival—then we will need to live, work, and collaborate with people vastly different from ourselves.

As organizations and individuals we need effective ways to combat bias, and we will need to eschew those methods that continue to fail us and those individuals who refuse to develop the skills and capabilities to engage with people different from themselves.

Words and actions can be observed, measured, challenged, sanctioned, and rewarded. Words and actions are where actual damage is done.

The concept of privilege is often misunderstood and overly personalized. It is not about being rich or blessed with a life free from discomfort. It's about the distinct advantage secured only by being born into a certain identity.

They often come in the form of an absence of a particular impediment, which means we often don't realize we have these privileges when they're present because their impact only crystallizes when absent.

It is understandably a complex reality for some to embrace, fraught with potentially painful personal revelations and unnecessary guilt. But it is imperative that everyone does this work.

If you don't appreciate your privilege, you do actual damage just by your dismissal of its existence. Similarly, it is imperative that we appreciate the existence of our biases and do everything possible to prevent them from negatively influencing our actions and behaviors.

Corporate diversity and inclusion efforts would be better off focusing on behavior and rhetoric, as opposed to individual biased thought. In the workplace, we cannot control whether our colleagues harbor racist, sexist, or otherwise unsavory thoughts. We are not the thought police.

Our attention should be focused on what people say and what they do, on rhetoric and behavior. Words and actions can be observed, measured, challenged, sanctioned, and rewarded. Words and actions are where actual damage is done.

I Promise to Reject Excuses and Embrace Discomfort

Excuses are easy to find. And when they're not immediately evident, they're easy to create. Even if you love what you do, work can be tedious, rigorous, voluminous, and, in some moments, not particularly satisfying. Even though you might do almost anything to get out of it, it is work that is necessary, so it gets done without excuses.

Surely, you have your own list of situation-specific excuses, in addition to those that are more general and forever at your disposal. "I'm super busy" is the old standby but there

are other excuses to accompany this one.

- "It's always been done this way."
- "I'm but a cog in the wheel."
- "It's the fault of bureaucracy."
- "I'm an extrovert, so it goes against my nature."
- "I'm an introvert, so it goes against my nature."

Any of those statements may be true. But none of them should be offered as an excuse to avoid that which is unpleasant or difficult. None of them represent immovable barriers. And none are the statements of leaders.

True leaders promise to reject excuses like these at every turn, even at the cost of their own comfort or personal gain. We are mostly all busy. So it's not a distinguishing characteristic. And thus, it's a rubbish excuse.

Time is a precious and finite resource. Consider how you can be more focused, energized, and effective with the time you have by "Paying the FEE."

FEE is an acronym for Focus, Effort, and Execution:

- **Focus**—a single-minded, unwavering concentration on the creation of, and then progress toward, a clear, discrete, and well-defined target or goal.
- **Effort**—the discipline to apply yourself to mundane, vexing, or obscure tasks and preparation with consistent eagerness and enthusiasm.
- **Execution**—undertaking everything you do with the goal of eliminating unnecessary variance so that everything you do is not just effortful but done to a tight tolerance based on your plan.

People can make themselves remarkably "busy" without ever actually being stretched beyond their comfort level—without ever even approaching their actual capacity for delivery of key outcomes.

This is the promise of giants. That we will do right by people—care for, protect, and develop them—every step of the

way, even when it's not in our own immediate interest and even when it is uncomfortable or difficult.

I Promise to Tend to My Mind and Body

This self-directed promise stands to benefit you more immediately than any promise in the book. But even the promise to tend to your mind and body is not just about you.

It's about ensuring the sustainability of your own internal resources because your attention, patience, energy, and more will be taxed in order for you to achieve your goals and be relied upon by others in your business and social circles.

In the context of leadership, there are seven factors of individual resilience that demand our attention and directly contribute to sustained high performance.

- A healthy mindset
- Active learning
- Balanced nutrition
- Physical activity
- Occasional pauses
- Consistent recuperation
- A good night's sleep

PART TWO: Promises to Individuals

I Promise to Reflect Your Potential

True giants do not require titles or labels or formal positions of authority over others. Given the proper support, they can assert power and make an impression from anywhere within the organization, simply by the way that they treat people. By the way they look at people, even.

If you're not vigilant, you can be an exaggerated funhouse mirror for everyone you come into contact with, reflecting back an unrecognizable and unwelcome reflection.

The way you interact with people is critical. It can damage their self-regard and negatively impact their performance in ways you may never have intended. Or it can instill heightened and previously unreachable levels of confidence.

As a leader, a colleague and a giant, you must promise to reflect as accurately as possible the capabilities and promises of others; what others need to see in order to perform at the highest level—because that reflection has the power to tap into dormant reserves of unexplored potential.

When you don't see what you need to see reflected by those around you, it changes the way you interact with the world. As giants and leaders, we have a responsibility to make sure that this never happens on our watch.

This is not because it's important to be "nice." It is because, when we allow people to be seen as "less than" in any way, it limits their contributions. The mere feeling of being perceived as less valuable diminishes the value that a person can add to your organization.

I Promise to See You as an Individual and Not as a Job Description

Organizations bemoan the time and resources that must be spent recruiting "talent." But sometimes the talent is right under our noses, but not in the right roles. And this is because the "talent," or "human resources," is not viewed as human.

Workers have largely been commoditized, and, as such, they are separated and crammed into labeled boxes and confined lines of progression, from which escape is rare.

But organizations that will thrive in the future will flow with the recent humanization of the workforce through and post the COVID crisis and will embrace the need for talent to move and roles to evolve in a way they never have before.

The old, rigid, and sometimes unspoken boundaries on what people can contribute are antithetical to the ideals of innovation and disruptive thinking. They diminish performance, and they make people miserable. A lose-lose.

Winning in the long term and through inevitable bouts of volatility requires more than commoditized service and performance. That is why giants promise to see and treat people as unique, individual beings and as more than just their job descriptions.

I Promise to Deliver Timely and Effective Feedback

There are legitimate reasons to avoid difficult conversations, particularly around feedback. Such dialogues are challenging and energy expensive. We don't know what to say, or we fear that we'll get it wrong.

There's a chance our intentions will be misperceived and our subject will get upset and become emotional. And by talking about something, we may fear we'll make it worse and injure our relationship with the recipient. We imagine and fear a damaged future.

With a bit more focus and a few modifications, you can make clear to anyone you engage with that you've got them.

The good news is that delivering timely and effective feedback is just an ordinary skill. So, like any ordinary skill, it can be improved with practice and discipline. And as tricky conversations become more familiar, they will become less threatening. They will become easier, and you will become better at them.

Because what happens if you don't? The problems get worse, right? Your own situation gets worse. And you end up needing to have a difficult conversation anyway, only now it's more difficult because now everything is worse.

We promise to deliver timely and effective feedback because our people deserve it and need it in order to thrive. When we avoid constructive criticism out of fear that it might be cruel, we do them a tremendous disservice.

Preparing and delivering effective, timely feedback is not something you do once a year. It's something that you do constantly; it's ongoing. It's a never ending series of micro-appraisals.

It's arriving at work every day with open eyes and a commitment to notice significant, even if small, behaviors and actions, and to document and follow up on them within 24 hours. Embracing this concept of micro-appraisals will contribute to an environment where feedback is the norm.

I Promise to Be Present, and Not Only When I Need You

There is one last promise that should be made directly and personally to each of our colleagues. It is a promise to be truly and fully present while in their presence and a promise to be in their presence consistently, not just when we want or need something from them.

This is a promise to consistently, selflessly seek out and create quality time and meaningful interactions. A promise to forge true connections that contribute to a climate of collegiality because teammates that are familiar with each other and authentically collegial toward one another are proven to perform better.

Making good on this promise starts with an ongoing practice

of functional mindfulness. Mindfulness is more than a quirky, spiritual trend; it is essentially about an intentional focus and attention to what you're doing while you're doing it.

Without mindfulness, it's too easy to be consumed and overwhelmed by the myriad thoughts and to-dos competing for attention in our brains. A promise of undivided attention, even for short bursts of time, is invaluable.

It sends a message that what is important to your colleague is important to you, even when you're busy. It doesn't take much, really. With a bit more focus and a few modifications, you can make clear to anyone you engage with that you've *got* them.

PART THREE: Promises to the Organization

I Promise to Bear Responsibility for the Driving Culture

There is a broad acknowledgment that organizational culture is in decline, and it must be restored to right the ship. But there is often an air of detachment between a leader's influence and the culture they are seeking to improve.

Intentional efforts in cultural reform have their place, but ultimately, culture is the accumulation of millions of choices made by each colleague. People make choices. And those choices make culture. Some people are more influential than others but everyone makes a difference.

Dismissing our immediate and actual connection to culture is an indulgence that passively encourages bad behavior. When we excuse ourselves from responsibility for the culture, its more insidious and negative elements become easier to accept or at least overlook. When we choose not to act in the face of small infractions, those infractions become more common and grow in significance.

Everyone is part of the problem, just as everyone can be part of the solution. No one gets to wash their hands of the commitment. We are all custodians of the culture, and as giants we must promise never to turn our backs on that responsibility.

It is the choices that each of us makes that shape the culture around us. When you see something, you must do something. What you choose to do will differ depending on your place in the organization. But everyone can do something. Everyone owns some responsibility for the culture.

I Promise to View the Organization Critically and Truthfully

The vast majority of organizations have a sizable gap between what they promise publicly and what they deliver in reality. There is a pathological disconnect between the stories that we tell about our workplaces and the actual experiences of people within them.

Some of the cleverer organizations avoid stating untruths by projecting aspirational mission statements: declarations of what is hoped for at some later date, rather than assessments from the present state.

Organizations may not project a perfectly objective reality of who they are but as a leader, YOU cannot buy into your organization's hype—especially if you care about improving it.

Leadership requires a clear and accurate assessment of the landscape. Just as you promised to view yourself critically and truthfully, you must also promise to view your organization critically and truthfully.

It's necessary to have a clear and specific vision for the rosy future that you see for your organization. But you will never get there without a pragmatic assessment of the “now” that is as transparent and vivid as the future you're aiming to achieve.

So this is a promise to be clear eyed about that now. It's a promise to be more precise with how we describe ourselves, to stop feigning ignorance of the way things really are.

I Promise to Promote Everyday Inclusion Based on Earned Disclosure

A culture of inclusion is so important. It is an ethical and public relations imperative. But, first and foremost, facilitating disclosure is a performance prerogative.

You must promise to promote everyday inclusion in your workplace based upon earned disclosure. This is not only the “nice” way to treat people, it's the **ONLY** way to treat them if you expect to extract all of what they have to offer.

Let's get clear about what is meant by “everyday inclusion” and “earned disclosure.” Inclusion must be the standard

because inclusion is a choice that we make, a state that is created and maintained by our actions.

Diversity, in contrast, is our collective destiny. In modern society, diversity is inevitable and on the rise. But inclusion is optional—rooted in everyday choices that are made anew daily.

Everyday inclusion is achieved when people feel confident that they are consistently being seen, heard, and valued as whole and unique individuals. And psychological safety is essential in an environment of everyday inclusion.

Psychologically safe teams provide security and liberate their members to trust in one another; to disclose and offer insights fully in pursuit of solutions, without fear of repercussion or humiliation.

This matter of disclosure is one of the most misunderstood aspects of inclusion. Voluntary, “earned disclosure” is always as much a statement about the person receiving the information as it is about the person offering it.

Earned disclosure is a profound statement about the recipient that says: “I have watched how you behave and listened to how you talk, and you have earned my trust enough that I believe that I can give you this piece of me and you will treat it with the same dignity and care as I do myself.”

That trust—the ability to be vulnerable—is so powerful for organizational bonding.

I Promise to Create an Environment That People Never Want to Leave

This final promise is to create an environment that people never want to leave—because they've found a place where they are seen and heard and valued. A place where they'll receive constructive feedback but won't be abandoned should they fail, where they are never alone and never expected to be a specific, superficial “fit” in order to belong.

Put together inclusion, trust, psychological safety, and attentiveness and sprinkle in a healthy dose of joyfulness, and the result will be a potent mix that, when consumed, can be highly addictive. People will respond because they will recognize how precious and rare it is. And they will never want to leave.

Most of us want to see congruence consistently. And when we don't, we put up walls. You can tell people they're valued and they're the bedrock of your organization, but if your actions consistently fail to support that sentiment, they will notice.

If you even occasionally treat people as an afterthought, they will be disinclined to connect on your terms when you need them to. They'll be less willing to give extra. They will do just enough.

Making good on our promises requires disciplined and unconditional consistency. People need to be confident that their colleagues are all on a level playing field, held to clear and equal standards.

Giants can make a profound impact through seemingly inconsequential actions. By keeping these promises, you can positively shape the way that people view themselves. You can make people feel connected. You can unleash their talent.

The world is filled with unique, bizarre, and wonderful people with diverse gifts and reservoirs of untapped potential.

- Promise to be an ally to them and an advocate for them.
- Promise to be a true colleague and an authentic leader and to bring out the best in them.
- Promise a healthy but competitive passion for winning.

And keep those promises, unconditionally and persistently. That is the duty and honor of being a giant.



John Amaechi OBE is a respected organisational psychologist, New York Times best-selling author, sought after public speaker, executive coach and Founder of APS Intelligence Ltd. He is a non-executive director of a FTSE 250 food company and £2.4bn healthcare organisation in addition to being a board advisor for several FTSE100 organisations in the financial, legal and professional services, technology, publishing, engineering and retail sectors. John has been recognised as one of HR's most influential thinkers by HR Magazine. John is the first Britain to have a career in the NBA.

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