



# COMMITMENT

## WHAT IS COMMITMENT

A great business leader once said:

"...the basic philosophy, spirit, and drive of an organization have far more to do with its relative achievements than do technological or economic resources, organizational structure, innovation, and timing. All these things weigh heavily in success. But they are, I think, transcended by how strongly the people in the organization believe in its basic precepts and how faithfully they carry them out." (from Thomas J. Watson, Jr., *A Business and its Beliefs - The ideas that helped build IBM*).

As true as this is for the success of a corporation, it is even more so for the individual. The most important single factor in individual success is COMMITMENT. Commitment ignites action. To commit is to pledge yourself to a certain purpose or line of conduct. It also means practicing your beliefs consistently. There are, therefore, two fundamental conditions for commitment. The first is having a sound set of beliefs. There is an old saying that goes, "Stand for something or you'll fall for anything." The second is faithful adherence to those beliefs with your behavior. Possibly the best description of commitment is "persistence with a purpose".

Many successful business people are hailed as visionary leaders. On careful inspection they are found to be individuals who hold firmly to a simple set of commitments, usually grounded in beliefs such as "the best product money can buy", or the highest possible customer service". It is the strength of these commitments, religiously followed, that led to their business success.

## WHERE TO PRACTICE

It appears that effective leaders hold dearly to a half dozen commitments. The first, and most basic, of these is a commitment to a set of values, principles or beliefs. These underlying principles define both the organization's uniqueness and the fundamental direction in which it wants to head. This first commitment leads to a common vision and purpose within the organization.

The second commitment is to oneself, to how one acts as a leader. An effective leader possesses a strong sense of personal integrity and self confidence. This leads to a willingness to share the credit for success. Another side to this commitment is a deliberate emphasis on continual self-improvement.

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The combination of a strong, positive commitment to self and to a set of principles serve as a foundation to effectively maintain the remaining four commitments. These commitments are to: customers, results, employees, and the organization.

Everyone has a customer and is a customer to someone else. Customers are usually thought of as external to the organization who needs your product or service. A question worth asking is, "How much are others willing to pay for my work?" The price your customers are willing to pay measures its values in their eyes.

Besides serving customers, all organizations target specific results. Given the large number of demands placed on all of us, it is important to concentrate on achieving the most important goals and objectives. Commitment to results is largely determined by how clear priorities are, what actions get rewarded, and what risks are being taken to improve intended results.

The next commitment is to the people. The quality of the organization's commitment to customers and results is largely based upon the quality of its commitment to people. The simple reason for this is that it is these people who serve the customer and achieve results. How are people treated in the organization? Commitment to people is largely the product of treating people with respect, challenging them, and giving them effective feedback on how they are doing.

The final leadership commitment is to the larger organization. Other departments, higher management, the organization's overall strategy & mission are important. Communication is the key with this commitment. How people talk to, and about, each other greatly affects the quality of cooperation. How open are the channels of communication up, down, and across? Can management be challenged? Will people support management decisions and changes?

Balancing all six commitments is the key to well directed leadership. When management supports its employees, they will be able and willing to achieve intended results, When these results support customer needs and expectations, customers will support the organization with their business. A strong and healthy organization can then continue to show commitment to its people. The glue that holds this process together is the values and leaders in the organization.

## **HOW TO PRACTICE COMMITMENT**

Effectively demonstrating commitment to others, to the organization's basic principles, and to oneself is never easy. The truth is, demonstrating commitment is hard work. Wavering commitment is usually seen as no commitment at all. The only way to achieve a reputation for commitment is through determination and persistence. Genuine commitment stands the test of time.

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Day to day, commitment is demonstrated by a combination of two actions. The first action is called **supporting**. Genuine support develops a commitment in the minds and hearts of others. This is accomplished by focusing on what is important and leading by example. It is not uncommon for people to be either confused as to what is important, or lose sight of it over time. Supporting means concentrating on what adds value, spotlighting what's working, and rewarding others who are focusing on what is important and leading by example. A crucial aspect of true support is standing up to those who would undermine commitment, those whose words or actions show disrespect.

The second action underlying commitment is called **improving**. Improving stretches our commitment to an even higher level. Commitment means a willingness to look for a better way and learn from the process. It focuses on eliminating complacency, confronting what is not working, and providing incentives for improvement. The spirit of improving is rooted in challenging current expectation and ultimately taking the risk to make changes. These changes are based more on an optimism in the future than dissatisfaction in the past. It is embodied in the reply of car maker Professor Porsche, who, when asked which was his favorite model in the long line of Porsche automobiles replied: "I haven't built it yet!"

It is the combination of both supporting and improving behaviors that makes up the practice of commitment. Separately neither action is capable of sustaining commitment. Promoting alone can come across as a shallow and pollyannish. Continuous improvement can be seen as "good is never good enough". Together they provide a needed balance. Both are essential to commitment.

## **WHEN IT IS MOST IMPORTANT**

Commitment is most difficult and most readily proven during tough times. How someone weathers the storms most clearly demonstrates their basic beliefs. In antiquity, Epicurus stated: "...a captain earns his reputation during the storms." When your competition scores big against you, when the money dries up, or when the glamour of success wears off, this is when it is easiest to compromise your commitments. The real test comes when you can hold the line against the easy route of compromise.

Fortunately, paying the price that commitment commands has payoffs worth the cost - a reputation for integrity and, even more important, the commitment of others in return. Commitment is a two-way street. You only get it if you are willing to give it.