

Commitment

We all want commitment, but what are we doing about it?

Have you ever heard people complaining about a lack of commitment? We all want commitment, from someone else. The project team wants upper management commitment. Management wants team commitment. The question is, what are they doing to get it? Are we expecting commitment to be automatic?

There are three key elements needed to get commitment:

- Understanding
- Agreement
- Personal interest

Let look at each of these. Understanding is where it all starts. If we don't understand what is expected, it is impossible to be committed. The problem is, people don't always like to admit it when they don't understand. That's why it is good ask for examples, fill in details, and dig deeper to determine the level of understanding. The opposite of understanding is assumption. We assume the client, management and the project team want something, but we don't check it out. Getting everyone to understand sounds easy, but it is not and it takes time.

Agreement leads to action. Don't confuse silence for agreement. If you assume agreement when it is not there, you will eventually have to deal with the truth. Agreement is hard to get. It may be tentative in the beginning and may take time to develop, especially if we are dealing with something new. Understanding is objective and easy to test. Agreement is more subjective. You cannot force it. You have to encourage, support and let it grow.

If you want true commitment, ask yourself if you are willing to invest the time and effort to develop understanding and agreement. If not, you are setting yourself up for phony commitment and failure when things get difficult.

Personal interest is the third element and it has tremendous power. It adds the passion for actually making things happen. We call this personal interest. This does not mean being selfish. You may have heard of "What's In It For Me" (WIIFM)? Many people think that without a WIIFM, there cannot be full commitment. Personal interest goes beyond this. It is what gets you up in the morning and gets you moving. For each of us it could be a different thing. Personal interest leading to commitment is far more complex than just offering a cash bonus. Yes, there are some people who will work hard for more money, but others may be completely unmotivated by it. Find out what people really want.



Enforcement will be required if you don't get commitment. Enforcement works in the short team. As the boss, you can tell people what to do and not have to explain yourself. There are times this is appropriate, such as in an emergency situation when time is short. If enforcement is allowed to continue over time it becomes counterproductive because it creates fear. Fear is a powerful motivator, but when it continues, it motivates people to eliminate what is causing them to be afraid.

As shown in the above graphic, there is a continuum from 100% commitment to 100% enforcement. Of course we would love to have 100% commitment all the time, but that is not realistic. The leader has to make a decision. As the level of commitment goes down, the level of enforcement has to go up. The number one goal of the leader is to get the job done. As you balance enforcement with commitment, remember that in the long run commitment will take you further.

We have a formula for commitment:

$$\text{Commitment} = (\text{Understanding} + \text{Agreement}) \times \text{Personal interest}$$

Here is an example. Many companies have to go through downsizing. If you were in charge of human resources and senior management told you that you had to come up with a plan to downsize, you could say, "I understand what I have to do and I have made plans like this before. I also agree with this because if we don't eliminate the required percent of jobs, the company will go bankrupt and we will all lose our jobs." At this point understanding and agreement is very high. If you were then told to eliminate your job as part of this, what would happen to your personal interest? If the boss were to ask, "When will you have the plan on my desk?" You might say, "Sometime in the next eleven years." According to our formula, personal interest is zero and anything time zero is zero.

Vision

A shared vision is a great place to start if you really want commitment. Don't assume that everyone sees things the same. Take the time to develop a common vision. In our workshops, we take teams through a process to develop a vision statement. The process has structure and guidelines, but no hard and fast formula for what a vision statement looks like. Here is the process.

Raw material

To get a vision we work on some raw material that will form the building blocks for a statement that expresses our common understanding, agreement, and interests.

- *Preferred future state*: what is it going to look like when it is done, be it three months, a year, or three years down the road?
- *Current state*: what does it look like now?
- *Personal interest*: what will the team, the client, management and you, personally, get out of this?
- *Who/what*: get specific and name two distinct groups *who* will benefit from the project and identify *what* the benefit is. The first *who* will probably be the most obvious, usually the client. The second *who* should be more inspiring. *What* is the greater benefit to the company?

Here is an example. Our project is to automate a manual system. The *future state* is instant access to information that will help our client make more informed decisions. The *current state* is information on paper scattered throughout the office and never there when you need it. The team's *personal interest* is to learn new technology by applying the latest development tools to a business problem. Office workers will get the information they need when they need it. Management sees this as an opportunity to cut cost and improve service at the same time. You see it as an opportunity to keep your job and get promoted. Customers will be happier with the overall service. The two distinct groups we want to focus on are the office workers using the system and the customers. The office workers will be more satisfied with their work because they are doing a better job with less effort. Customers will be excited about a level of service they have never seen from anyone, and they will stay with us regardless of price.

Now we have raw material. The art of a vision statement is to weave the material together into a statement that makes sense to everyone. To be effective, it should be believable, inspiring, clear, short and memorable.

Here is an example.

We will create an on-line customer information system within six months. Our customer service reps will be more effective on the phone and customers will keep coming back.

This statement could be used anytime you are asked what your project is all about. It invites questions and further discussion. It might take your team some time to build an effective statement, but it will be worth it. A tip is to get it down first, then get it right. Start out wordy and then boil it down into a couple of clear sentences.

The process of writing a vision statement facilitates getting understanding and agreement from your team while identifying personal interest. If the statement came down from on high, you deprive yourself of the process. Even if your project sponsor has already written a great vision statement, look at the vision from the eyes of the project team and let them write their own. The goal is to get commitment.

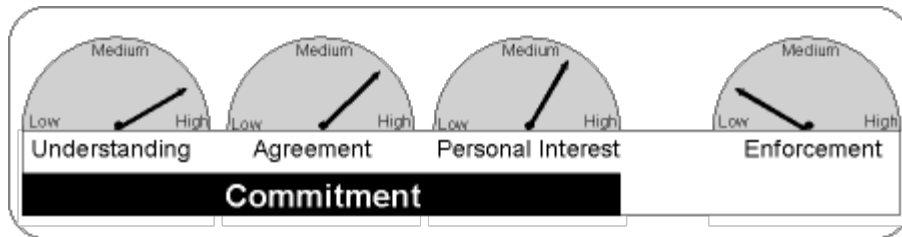
You are not done yet. Commitment will ebb and flow. When you finish the vision statement exercise, the team commitment will probably be high. You will be off to a good start. Don't be surprised when commitment comes crashing down, just like the last time your computer crashed. Your first reaction to commitment crash or computer crash is discouragement and a strong desire

to quit. There could be many reasons for the crash. With the computer, you press reset and most of the time it fixes itself. With commitment, you need a reset as well. For example, when you hit something you don't understand, work stops. To get past this, you and your team have to clear up the misunderstanding. Sometimes we can do this on our own and sometimes we have to go outside the team. Either way, commitment will be low when misunderstanding is high.

Sometimes there are forces outside of our control, and we understand them all too well. They stop the project dead and commitment is gone. For example, funding gets cut and we understand why. We may even agree with the decision. There is nothing we can do about it. We can, however, go back to the vision statement and see if there is another way to accomplish it on a lower budget. If you did not take the time to develop the vision, you have nothing to go back to. Commitment is what keeps us going in this situation. It is our reset button in the event of a crash.

Care and Feeding of Commitment

Even when things are going reasonably well, commitment can still go up and down. In our workshop, we talk about the gauges. Take a look at the current level of understanding, agreement, personal interest, and enforcement. Be honest about where you are and ask where you want to be. If you find the need for enforcement has gone up, it is a symptom that commitment has gone down. You have three indicators of why commitment is down. Look at them and figure out which needs attention and support.



Once you have learned this simple and direct technique, you will increase your likelihood of success. Where others may become angry, frustrated and defeated, you have an approach for getting commitment back on track.

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