# White Paper

# Leadership and Commitments

## What Really Matters?

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Any job applicant today can expect a question around "passion." What is he or she truly passionate about? There is a good reason for this. Hiring managers know there is a huge difference in performance between people operating out of passion and those in "paycheck-only performance." It is the difference between commitment and compliance.

This is true of all work, including leadership. So the question becomes, what are effective leaders truly committed to? This is no small question for organizations seeking to develop their leadership pipeline.

This kind of commitment is distinguished from merely stated commitments. It is one thing to say you are committed to a particular thing; it's another to do it. The Latin root of the word, *miterre*, means "to send out." The commitments addressed here are in terms of what is sent out into the workplace as action, not just words.

Of course, leaders take many actions, every day. However, distilling these actions into basic categories yields a few integral commitments that matter most for leadership effectiveness. These commitments are the subject of this white paper, and the book, *The Five Commitments of a Leader*. They are critical to understand and operate on if you want to be an effective leader.

These five commitments are:

- To the self
- To others
- To the organization
- To the truth
- To leadership

## What is leadership, and where does it occur?

There are many definitions of leadership. At Management Concepts, we believe a good definition is "Being a catalyst for new ways of thinking, being, and acting." The emphasis here is on the creation of something new. We also believe in the concept of leadership at all levels. This means anyone can lead, not just "people at the top."

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Let's explore each, looking at what the commitment means, and then ways you can develop that commitment into something that increases leadership effectiveness.

## A Commitment to the Self

It may seem paradoxical for leaders to begin with a commitment to the self, but this is not code for "looking out for No. 1." Instead, it reflects the importance of leaders truly knowing themselves: who they are, what they are about, what is important to them, and ultimately how that affects others.

The fact is, leaders who do not know themselves can be oblivious, and unaware of important parts of the self that others may readily notice. For example, micromanagers often fall into this category. Without reflection on themselves and their motives, they unconsciously rationalize their actions on the basis of "good attention to detail."

### Getting the "Story"

One powerful way to increase self-understanding is in the "story." Getting the story, in this context, means standing back and becoming an observer of yourself, understanding how you perceive and interpret reality, and how you then act on that. The story is essentially self-identity, and understanding it opens the door to the possibility of new ways of making meaning of events. While this may sound abstract, a simple example clarifies. Two people can sit in the same meeting and have completely different reactions to what happened. Objectively, the events were identical, yet the subsequent interpretation reflects different meaning-making systems, or stories, in the people.

Until we admit the possibility that the way we see things ultimately governs and binds our actions, we are more or less stuck in our meaning-making systems. It usually takes a crisis or a gradual exposure to a better, more accurate and more results-oriented meaning-making

system to make a change. However, the proactive move is to go out and get it. This means to deliberately ask what other ways of viewing situations—particularly your recurring, chronic problems—could be.

This then moves change out of the strictly action department (where those actions are bound by how you currently think of things) into how you think about work and people. It is a much more fundamental and powerful lever. New assumptions create new possibilities. If your story is that people aren't capable, that has certain effects. If your story is that people are capable, other things result. Think the Pygmalion Effect.

Clearly, part of understanding your self connects to how you relate to others, and that brings us to the next commitment: people.

## A Commitment to People

Probably the single most important question to ask in an effort to understand effective leadership is: what is the nature of the relationship between leaders and others? In the content and context of that relationship lies key information on how well the organization is probably performing. Is the relationship strained, marked by mutual misunderstanding, a lacking trust, low on motivation, or full of resentment? Or does the relationship contain clear communication, mutually reinforcing processes, genuine commitment, and a clear sense of moving ahead together?

Recall someone in your work life who showed a genuine interest and concern for you. This person wanted to know how you were doing, what your own goals were, what you liked and didn't like, and a host of other things that mattered to you—which created a sense of connection, or loyalty.

Now, contrast that with someone who showed no particular commitment. There was no indication of an interest in you, your goals or hopes for work. Whom would you have worked harder for, and more collaboratively with? Who would

you have gone to the mat for? Whom would you have pulled an all-nighter on a project for?

A commitment to the people actually means a commitment to the most powerful, generative, productive resource of an organization. One of the most effective ways to demonstrate a commitment to people is through listening to them.

## *Learning to Listen*

Let's begin this section with the single most powerful technique I have seen in many years of working with leaders in people-oriented topics ranging from communication to conflict to leadership. It is deceptively simple, and sometimes challenging, but it pays enormous dividends in showing commitment to people, and thereby creating connection, buy-in, and support.

To explain it, let me share a simple statistic. For years, with hundreds of leadership development participants, I have asked people to raise their hands in response to two simple questions. The first is whether they have ever worked for a great leader. Some unpredictable percentage of the group raises hands. Then I ask them to drop their hands only if that leader was a bad listener. Over years and many hundreds of people, a total of *four* hands have dropped. (Amazingly, two were in the same group.)

What does this tight correlation tell us? Certainly not that all you need to do to lead is listen. There is much more to it than that. However, it does strongly suggest that a prerequisite to great leadership is what has been called the "lost art" of listening.

True listening is a great marker of genuine interest in people—their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. People understand both at an intellectual and emotional level that you care when you listen. It means a lot because they now understand that their thinking *matters*. Simply put, most people want to be heard, so your listening increases their motivation.

You may think, "But I listen to people all the time." You probably do, and here a distinction is necessary.

One form of pseudo-listening is being preoccupied or distracted, perhaps with the email currently on the screen. You may be thinking about all the other things on your to-do list for that day.

True listening means essentially emptying yourself of whatever thoughts of the day or hot-buttons are currently running. The goal is understanding the communication as the other person means it (not just what it means to you), with the subtleties, distinctions, and feelings behind the content. This is what "getting it" means. It is not a superficial hit-and-run. It is deep, committed listening.

From a stance of powerful listening, people often clarify their own problems and solutions (and sometimes give you the credit for solving the problem, even when you said nothing!), and you gain great information on what is happening. With this, your comments and suggestions are much more likely to be on target.

Leaders who are routinely dismissive of, or impatient with, others' ideas, particularly when they are in conflict, send strong signals about the degree to which they are committed to people. Listening is a big marker of the commitment to people.

## A Commitment to the Organization

A commitment to the organization is *prima facie,* a given, for anyone leading. Yet, in many workplaces today there is a sense that people in leadership positions are "in it for themselves." What is it that will allow leaders to elevate organizational interests above pure self-interest? What makes it worth it? To answer this question we turn to the role of mission and values.

## Connecting to the Mission and Values

The mission of an organization can be thought of as, quite simply, why it exists. It's the overarching purpose of the organization, the rationale for it operating. Mission statements are written from the standpoint of what the organization does, in the broadest sense.

The mission statement should be clear and direct. If you can't boil it down to succinct, powerful statements, you may be hedging, or unclear. It's usually a sign of trouble when people aren't exactly sure what the mission of their organization is.

Some examples of mission statements include:

- Helping returning veterans re-establish their lives
- Educating others
- Helping the unemployed find jobs
- Protecting the public
- Improving the quality of life for single parents.

Simply put, the mission should have sufficient meaning and importance for leaders that they are willing to subordinate pure self-interest in the service of it. After all, if the leaders won't, why should anyone else?

It is crucial for leaders to have a sense of taking responsibility for helping organize and guide the efforts of others toward the mission. Yet, they can't force anyone to accept or buy into it. Effective leaders can only invite others to be part of this shared meaning. It is a matter of willing and eager commitment, not forced compliance. The more leaders involve others in understanding and appreciating the mission, the more support and commitment there will be.

As a leader, it is also important to ensure you are aligned with the organization's values if you want to ensure a commitment on your part. If you disagree with the values, disconnects materialize and will ultimately be obvious to those around you. Lacking the commitment to the organization's values, your leadership will be limited.

A story wraps up our discussion of all these elements. One participant in a management development program, Jack, once walked into a session and shared what he had seen that morning. Jack, who worked in a workplace safety enforcement role, had driven by a worksite where an employee was not wearing regulation breathing material. Jack was unable to stop, and had no actual badge authority on the site anyway, working instead as a manager in his own office in headquarters.

However, Jack related that as he thought of this employee breathing dangerous substances, he remembered all the people who were wearing the safety equipment that day as a result of his work in headquarters. He said, "It made me proud that some people are going to live to see their grandchildren because I do what I do each day. Sometimes I forget. But it makes me proud to know I'll make a difference for those people."

Here, Jack talked about a mission (his agency exists to protect workers), and values (caring about workers and their safety).

## A Commitment to the Truth

Some people consider the phrase "truth-telling in organizations" to be an oxymoron because they feel that their organizations have made it profoundly threatening to tell the truth.

However, leaders must give voice to the truth. They must be committed to the truth in order for the organization to do its best work. This means understanding the truth, surfacing the truth and sharing the truth with others. Working off of false assumptions, misinformation, or denial is a recipe for misalignment and incoherence in work. Accountability and commitment to the truth are fundamental, sometimes painful, and always inescapable.

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In their book *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner write: "In every survey we conducted, honesty was selected more often than any other leadership characteristic; it consistently emerged as the single most important ingredient in the leader-constituent relationship."[1]

The promise is that truth-telling helps the organization to detect, learn, respond well to a variety of events, communicate effectively, and align itself with customers' real needs. It helps leaders at all levels to be a critical part of that.

## Telling the Truth on Three Planes

Being committed to the truth as a leader means engaging on three crucial levels: with yourself, with others and with the organization at large.

The pursuit of the truth about yourself—self awareness, in particular—is the essence of the chapter on being committed to yourself as a leader. It is an internal truth, and results from a kind of internal communication.

Truth-telling with others takes the shape of honest external communication. This keeps the air clear, keeps everyone in the loop, reduces misinformation, and minimizes perception errors.

Truth-telling in the organization at large means surfacing what needs to be communicated across groups of people—in teams, workgroups or operating units, for example. This is a pivotal point at which leaders emerge and say what needs to be said for the good of the organization (reflecting a commitment to the organization), or whether they "go to ground," by playing safe and withholding the potentially controversial ideas that they think move the organization closer to the truth about what it should be doing. An example is stepping up when you think the organization is headed down the wrong path, saying the truth as you see it.

For leaders, the stakes are high. Perceptions of withholding, fudging, or avoiding the truth are quick to form—and then difficult to shift. They erode credibility and confidence, and tend to set into motion self-protecting, dysfunctional behavior. Communication is damaged, trust declines and disclosure becomes dangerous. Who wants to tell the truth when that is not valued in an organization?

In addition, there are repercussions for the business. James Clawson, in his book, *Level 3 Leadership*, writes: "…if potential leaders cannot create an atmosphere around them in which others are encouraged to tell the truth and find it safe to do so, the business will be making decisions based on late or faulty or incomplete information far too often."[2]

Trust, candor, effective problem-solving, and collaboration result from truth-telling and truth-sharing. You have no doubt dealt with people who told it straight—gave you the pluses and minuses, so that you could make a good decision. In all probability, you considered these people true partners, and were more willing to entrust them with an influence in big decisions.

The most important action is to model the behavior you want. Like so many other things, that's easier said than done, particularly when performance isn't happening, a much-anticipated initiative is faltering, or something you actively supported turns out to be a bad idea. But it's worth it.

As Dotlich and Cairo state in their book, *Why CEO's Fail*, "…if top people are open and honest about their flaws, they will help create a culture of openness and honesty."[3]

Another way to promote truth-telling is to intentionally ask people about the lessons they learned after any significant experience. Give them time to prepare their views in advance so they can think through carefully how they really think and feel. As they hear different takes on what mattered and what happened, they will increase their appreciation of the diversity of views. Again, individuals' felt truths may vary,

and the idea is that by sharing those different perspectives a powerful shared understanding can be built.

Again, this is not code for accepting all conclusions, regardless of merit. In fact, part of the practice should include critical-thinking skills that allow the group to get to the bottom of issues and ideas, sifting fact from opinion, and grounded conclusions from more spurious ones. This should be done in a constructive way that helps everyone sharpen and refine their thinking for the next time.

Good, open-ended questions tend to promote truth-telling more than pronouncements or judgments. Examples of such questions include:

- What are we seeing and what are we missing?

- Where have we gotten it right and wrong?

- Is there anything we or I am doing to make truth-telling hard?

The answers should be discussed in a way that looks like a conversation rather than competing monologues, rigidly fixed positions, or ideologies. Safety is key; people will not share their truths if they feel threatened or attacked.

## A Commitment to Leadership

It is only after the individual has made a commitment to the self, the people, the organization, and the truth that he or she is in a position to truly consider what a commitment to leadership means. A person can have the previous four commitments and yet not be committed to leadership. There is one more piece to the puzzle and one more step in the journey.

The essence of the commitment to leadership is a type of calling. This call may be experienced as a tug of conscience; for example, the insight that a group of people need organizing help to most effectively realize their vision or accomplish their mission. There must be a

genuine, felt sense of creating something meaningful through exercising leadership. Only you can determine if leadership is a calling for you. Committing to leadership means committing to this calling.

Not everyone is meant to lead. It is true that everyone leads in some capacity in his or her own life, at a minimum. Only when an individual feels this inner sense of the need to step up should he or she engage in the quest to lead others.

## *Engaging in the Cycle of Leadership*

Making the commitment to leadership can involve the following elements. They are something of a cycle of creating something new, yet you may intervene as a leader at any stage:

- **Seeing.** Perceiving clearly what is, the status quo

- **Imagining.** Looking beyond what is, to what could be

- **Aligning.** Beginning to configure the elements of work—people, resources, processes in order to create something new

- **Working.** Executing the plan, and ensuring that as leader you don't function only as the "technical expert," but allow others to develop their capabilities along the way

- **Adapting.** Changing what needs to be changed as you notice how things are working—or not

- **Achieving.** Finishing the job—getting it across the goal line

- **Celebrating.** Making sure to take time to fully recognize and celebrate the accomplishment

- **Seeing anew.** Looking again at what is in order to restart the cycle

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In this cycle, leadership shows up as an agent of change. That is entirely appropriate today, given our definition of leaders as the catalyst for new ways of being, thinking, and acting.

## Summary

Of all the many ways to look at or think about leadership, the concept of commitments is one that helps distinguish thought from action. The five commitments addressed here integrate many of the behaviors and competencies leaders today are expected to have. You can assess yourself for these commitments, and organizations seeking to develop their leadership pipeline can similarly look for evidence of these commitments in their candidate pools.

Leadership is a never-ending challenge. As you step into these commitments in an intentional way, you will find more and more opportunities to model the kind of leadership that helps organizations thrive. The framework of the commitments helps propel you to higher and higher levels of effectiveness.

## Endnotes

1  James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1995, p. 22).

2  James Clawson, *Level Three Leadership: Getting Below the Surface* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999, p. 47).

3  David Dotlich and Peter Cairo, *Why CEOs Fail: The 11 Behaviors That Can Derail Your Climb to the Top and How to Manage Them* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003. p. 148).

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