

will travel the last mile to execute that strategy makes the difference between stellar results and mediocrity, and sometimes any results at all.

Why, then, is this such a mystery for executives?

## Most Leaders Confuse Compliance and Commitment

The type of *commitment* to which we have been referring is absent in most organizations—that’s right, *most*. Compounding the crime is the fact that leadership usually doesn’t realize it. For example, when revenue and/or profits are suffering, executives rarely focus on a deficiency in commitment as the source or the cause. Instead, they round up Claude Rains’s “usual suspects”: competitor action, poor sales initiatives, lack of management oversight, economic woes, and so forth. (You might like to know that we serve on a number of boards, and perhaps the most egregious example comes from nonprofit arts leadership. They will cite a bad economy for the arts whenever projections aren’t met, never caring to discuss arts groups that *are* doing quite well.)

Consequently, many CEOs avoid dealing with commitment issues, no less than a man on his twenty-fifth date with a woman who is impatient to make some more permanent plans. The CEO assumes that commitment is never a problem, largely because the CEO assumes everyone is equally committed.

When executives work until eight o’clock at night, they sometimes expect others to follow their lead. We all know how well that works out. Those who may stay, due to guilt or aspirations or fear, seldom do so with high productivity. They feel *forced* into staying, but they are not *committed* to staying. (Perhaps the boss ought to be “committed” for believing otherwise.)

### StratComment

*“Projection” is the psychological conveying of one’s own strengths and weaknesses to others. That’s never more dangerous than when executives believe that if they are committed, everyone must be as well.*

Executives tend to underestimate the impact of noncommitment and believe that if people are merely doing their jobs without interruption and abiding by the organization's rules and procedures, then all is well. But that false belief is the essence of mistaking compliance for commitment. It's the difference between the receptionist who packs up at 4:50 p.m. and waits for the clock to strike 5:00 before bolting out the door, and the one who hears the phone ring at 5:05 on her way out and goes back to answer it. It's the distinction between the salesperson who has reached her optimal bonus potential and is "loafing" until next year, and the one who keeps plugging away to set new records because it's well known that the company needs all the revenue it can muster this year. As one fellow said while introducing himself during a meeting we were attending, "I can't remember how long I've been here, but I have fifty-four months to go." Hard to imagine how many innovative ideas he contributed each week!

Another vivid example was offered by an employee (we'll call him Mike) at a rubber chemicals plant where we were brought in as consultants. His first day on the job was ten years earlier, and Mike was shown the ropes by a veteran. The job he was assigned to do—filling large burlap bags with a powdery white compound and then stacking them—looked fairly straightforward. Deciding he wanted to make a good impression on his workmates, Mike worked as hard as he could to beat the veteran's explicit declaration: "We do fifty bags per shift." Filling eighty-two bags on his first shift, Mike was pleased with himself and enthusiastically reported his accomplishment to his peers. Mike failed to understand the grumblings from the others; the next day he produced eighty-seven bags during his shift. The following day there was a scratch on Mike's car. By the end of his first week, Mike got the message and started consistently delivering his fifty bags per shift just like everyone else.

Most likely, those CEOs who are oblivious to such corporate dynamics haven't experienced the robust nature and extraordinary levels of performance that true commitment generates, because they

haven't been amidst it before. The current reality may seem to be "as good as it gets," according to the mental set of someone who is racing to put out fires all the time, so that even a brief lull with mere embers represents an oasis in the day's journey. In some cases they have tried before to generate enthusiasm and energy and it didn't work for any number of reasons, so they have given up on dramatic improvement.

Their etiology is wrong, and their resultant actions are doomed.

Many leaders are simply out of touch with the sentiments of employees, which is the height of irony, since human resources departments often fill their time with a plethora of employee surveys and assessments (more about this in chapter 9). Blindfolded and in a soundproofed chamber, we can nevertheless report the results of two-thirds of those samplings: There's always poor communication and low morale, and employees say they feel disposable and there's no respect for opinions—do you get the picture? At which point HR brings in an external training firm to fix the problem, but unfortunately this action, too, focuses on the wrong thing.

More often than not, "morale problems" are avoided, delegated, or swept under the plants out in the parking lot because they are amorphous monsters that no one cares to deal with. ("I'm committed, and so is my team, so why aren't those ingrates?") Doesn't a morale problem, after all, reflect poorly on senior management? We really can't have that kind of thing here, management tells itself.

So self-images are preserved, new gurus are brought in, and the discussion continues about whether or not the employees we have are the right people. They *are* of course, the right people (in most cases), but they are not *committed* people. No matter how "right" the person is, he cannot act "right" if he isn't committed to the organization's values, direction, and goals.

Sometimes commitment issues are finally dealt with after the barn door is open, the horses have departed, the barn is in disrepair, and a horde of bats have taken over the place. We have seen direct reports

plead the commitment case and be ignored: “You’re going to have to be tougher and show more than just soft skills if you expect to head one of the subsidiaries.” We once heard some reporters at the American Press Institute say that the whole commitment and motivation thing is ridiculous, especially in journalism. Throw people in a room, lock the doors, they claimed, and occasionally throw in some fresh meat. The strong will survive and perform.

As a rule, when performance and effectiveness begin to decline (quality of work, responsiveness, customer satisfaction, new sales, repeat business, and so on), the commitment factor isn’t tracked or challenged. Yet we’ve all seen commitment plunge at companies such as US Airways, Dell, Maytag, and Ford. And we have also seen commitment be resurrected, as has happened at Apple, IBM, and Continental Airlines. (Interestingly, commitment never seems to vary from high ground at FedEx, GE, Levi Strauss, or Ritz-Carlton.) Once the indices decline, it is tougher and tougher to restore commitment.

Organizational reality does not have to be this way. Including and engaging employees so that they can fully commit to the strategy is *the* ultimate factor in whether strategy succeeds or not, because strategy *never fails in its formulation, only in its execution*.

Every CEO and leadership team has the potential to generate high levels of commitment. We have mentioned the examples above because they are cross-industrial, cross-hierarchical, and cross-cultural. We have seen Westerners scoff at Japanese businesses where employees and management commonly partake of exercise or meditation in the mornings before the start of the workday. Yet these are practices that help gain inclusion and commitment in their culture. It is not an “Asian belief system” that makes Toyota so strong, but the inclusion of its people in every aspect of quality, including the right to stop an entire assembly line when an imperfection is detected downstream (which, by the way, means the upstream people are very careful not to allow imperfections).

Contrast that to most Western manufacturing operations, where management typically has cardiac arrest if a mere employee deigns to stop the flow of work.

Against these odds, we have found that every top team can generate commitment, even without the morning exercises and meditation. But it takes quite a bit of courage, and therein lies the rub.