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Commitment: The Secret Power of the 21st Century Organization

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How do you build successful sustainable performance? *Focus on the commitment of your employees.* Commitment to an organization arises when the organization provides employees with opportunities to satisfy their needs and desires.

The needs and desires of employees are determined by the stage of psychological development they are at and the needs of the stages of development they have passed through but have not yet mastered. In other words, commitment arises when employees are able to grow—get their survival, safety and security needs met, and when their work gives them a sense of meaning—when they can meet their desire for self-expression, connection and contribution.¹

Commitment to an organization is enhanced when the leaders, managers and supervisors embrace democratic principles, treat employees as equals, listen to what employees have to say, deal with employees fairly, and give employees opportunities and challenges to grow and develop both professionally and personally.

Commitment is further enhanced when employees believe the leaders, managers and supervisors care about them and their families, and care about the local community in which they live. Commitment continues to increase when they feel they can trust the organization, its leaders, managers and supervisors to always do the right thing.

The bottom line on commitment is this: *When you feel a sense of commitment to an organization, you identify with it; and whatever you identify with you care about.* However, you will only feel a sense of commitment to an organization if you feel supported by that organization in meeting your needs.

Bob Chapman, CEO of the \$1.7 billion manufacturing company Barry-Wehmiller, has created a world-class company with off-the-charts moral, loyalty, creativity and business performance by adopting the principles outlined above. The company rejects the idea that employees are simply functions to be moved around, “managed” with carrots and sticks, or discarded at will. Instead, Barry-Wehmiller manifests the reality that every single person matters, just like a family.²

How does commitment show up?

You can recognize commitment in an organization in the following ways:

- At the first level of consciousness (survival), commitment shows up as willingness to do what is necessary (legally) to secure the financial stability and health of the organization, and the health and safety of employees.

- At the second level of consciousness (relationship), commitment shows up as a deeply engrained loyalty—a steadfastness of belief in the organization and its leaders and what they are attempting to do—and as heartfelt connection and camaraderie among employees
- At the third level of consciousness (self-esteem), commitment shows up as a willingness on the part of employees to go the extra mile whenever it is necessary. When employees are committed, they bring their discretionary energy to their work.
- At the fourth level of consciousness (transformation), commitment shows up as a willingness to adapt and change—let go of old habits and change who you are, change how you operate, and change how you do what you do for the benefit of yourself, your subordinates and the organization. Commitment also shows up at this level of consciousness as a willingness to try new ideas, take risks and innovate.
- At the fifth level of consciousness (internal cohesion) commitment shows up as passion for your work and enhanced creativity.
- At the sixth level of consciousness commitment shows up as a deeply held desire to connect with others so you can make a difference in the world.
- At the seventh level of consciousness commitment shows up as devotion to selfless service—a profound sense of inter-connectedness, a focus on the common good, and the desire to leave a legacy.

Continuous transformation

Whilst all these aspects of commitment are important, the most important is the ability and willingness to adapt—continuous transformation. The most successful organisms and species have always been those that learned how to adapt to their changing environments. Evolution has never been an exercise in long-term, strategic planning; it has always been an exercise in emergent learning.² Emergent learning along with a predilection and facility for adaptation lies at the core of all successful evolution and cultural transformation.^{3, 4}

Successful organisms have always evolved by making continuous real-time adjustments to their way of being based on feedback from their internal and external environments. This is why organizations that display a high level of internal cohesion are able to survive and prosper more easily than those that do not. The interpersonal connectedness that arises from internal cohesion enables an organization to act as a single organism, thereby facilitating emergent learning, adaptation and agility. The key factor in creating internal cohesion is interpersonal trust.

This means that the most successful organizations in the twenty-first century will be those that not only understand how to build internal cohesion, but are structurally agile enough to adapt to the changing needs of society and the changing needs of the market place. They will be working with free-form, flexible organizational structures that create high levels of employee engagement and empower people to focus their energies on innovation and continuous renewal.

The role of the leaders, managers and supervisors will be to create a values-driven culture based on democratic principles and create working conditions that support employees in meeting their deficiency and growth needs—thereby engendering high levels of employee engagement. When the culture and working conditions are right, employees will bring their hearts and souls to their work and release their creative and discretionary energies.

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey call such organizations “deliberately developmental”. A deliberately developmental organization is organized around the simple but radical conviction that an organization will best prosper when they are more deeply aligned with people’s strongest motive, which is to grow. This means going beyond consigning “people development” to high-potential staff. It means fashioning an organizational culture where supporting people’s development is woven into the fabric of working life and the company’s regular operations, daily routines and conversations.⁵

In addition to caring about the needs of employees, the successful twenty-first-century organization will also care about the needs of the organization's external stakeholders—customers, suppliers, investors and the local communities and societies in which they operate.⁶

Conclusions

To achieve all these objectives, the leader of the organization will need to: (a) build an inspiring vision and a purposeful mission for the organization that goes beyond making money; (b) manage the values of the organization by getting regular feedback from employees, customers, suppliers and society at large about how the organization can meet their needs; (c) manage his/her way of being/operating by getting regular feedback from colleagues and direct reports about how they can change their way of being/operating to enhance the performance of the organization; and (d) require that the directors, managers and supervisors in the organization do the same.

In summary, in order to be successful in the twenty-first century, the leaders of organizations will need to embrace a new leadership paradigm—a shift in focus from “I” to “we”; from “what’s in it for me” to “what’s best for the common good”; and from “being the best in the world” to “being the best for the world.”⁷

Notes

1 Richard Barrett, *The Values-Driven Organization: Unleashing Human Potential For Performance and Profit* (London: Routledge), 2014.

2 Bob Chapman, Raj Sisodia, *Everybody Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People Like a Family* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin), 2015.

Marilyn Taylor, *Emergent Learning for Wisdom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2010.

3 See George E. Vaillant, *Adaptation to Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1977, which traces the history of 100 Harvard graduates to determine the key factors that led to their success or failure in life.

4 See also Richard Barrett, *The New Leadership Paradigm* (Asheville, NC: Fulfilling Books), 2011, p. 21 for the results of the study of Harvard graduates cited in the previous reference.

5 Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming A Deliberately Developmental Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishg), 2016.

6 John Mackey and Raj Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating The Heroic Spirit of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press), 2012.

7 Richard Barrett, *The New Leadership Paradigm* (Asheville, NC: Fulfilling Books), 2011, pp. 13–22.