

# Building and Sustaining Commitment

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## WHAT IS COMMITMENT?

Commitment is dedication to a particular organization, cause, or belief, and a willingness to get involved.

People who are committed to an organization or effort truly believe that it is important, and they show up, follow through, and stick with it.

The more people who are committed to your organization, the greater the momentum you can generate to get the job done.

## WHY DO YOU NEED TO MOBILIZE AND SUSTAIN COMMITMENT?

Commitment is the backbone of a group or organization. It is what gives a group its strength.

Here are several reasons it is important:

- The more committed people there are, the more effective they are in influencing others. If a whole group acts with determination and commitment, great numbers of people will really pay attention.
- People who are committed are the ones who don't take discouragement seriously -- they don't give up. They set an example for those who don't have the confidence or experience to go through the hard times and hold out for the rewards of success.
- People cooperate at a higher level when they share commitment. Commitment fosters camaraderie, trust, and caring -- the stuff a group needs to keep it going for the long run.
- If people are committed to an effort for a period of time, they will learn what they need to know to be more effective. People need time to try things out, make mistakes, and then figure out a strategy that works.

## WHEN IS A GOOD TIME TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN COMMITMENT?

All the time, any time. Commitment doesn't usually occur at one moment. It grows within people over time.

Commitment grows when people:

- Work together
- Feel successful at what they do
- Make decisions together
- Work through conflicts
- Support one another's leadership
- Have fun and play together
- Overcome obstacles
- Hold each other to high principles
- Appreciate and respect one another
- Challenge one another to take the next step
- Build relationships
- Experience a victory together
- Learn from mistakes and setbacks
- See their leaders model commitment

Commitment can decrease when people when the opposite is true – when they don't communicate well, don't build relationships and support one another, become embroiled in unresolved conflicts, don't live their principles, and don't see leaders demonstrating commitment.

Although commitment grows in a natural way, you, as a leader or group member, can foster commitment in your organization. You can build commitment into your organizational culture. Although it is invisible, commitment is a very real quality that you can do something about if you are willing to focus your attention on it.

## **HOW CAN YOU MOBILIZE AND SUSTAIN COMMITMENT?**

How do you build and sustain commitment? How do you get your hands on that invisible quality and make it grow in your organization?

First, let's think about why people become involved in and committed to a group or organization. Start with yourself: Why are you are committed to your project or organization?

What is most important to you?

- The goals of your group?
- Your vision of what is possible?
- The people with whom you work?

- The length of time you've invested in this group?
- Your role in your group or organization?
- What you've learned in this group?
- The satisfaction you get from doing significant work?
- Other reasons?

People commit to a group or organization because they gain something important from their involvement. When you invite them to become involved, you are not only asking for their help, you are offering them an opportunity to:

- Work on an issue that is important to them
- Benefit the community
- Meet and spend time with like-minded people
- Expand their skills
- Be a part of a team
- Learn how to lead
- Rise to a challenge
- Meet high standards
- Accomplish something significant

You can be proud when you invite people to be committed to your organization. You're not imposing on them; you're offering them something of value.

Below are some specific ideas about how to build and sustain commitment, many of which will also strengthen your organization as a whole.

### **BE OPEN AND CLEAR ABOUT THE MISSION, PRINCIPLES, AND GOALS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION**

People have to know what they are committing to. They want to join an organization if they share similar principles and goals. Make sure that everyone in your organization is familiar with its mission, principles, and goals.

As a leader, talk openly about why you care about these principles and goals. For example, if you are working to develop a mentor program for teens in your community, talk about why that program is important to you. You might tell people how your life would have been different if an adult had not committed some time and attention to you when you were a teen.

## **MODEL COMMITMENT YOURSELF**

Everyone looks to the leader of a group or project to see if she is committed. If you care about the work, it will show in your attitudes and actions. People will watch to see how you act, and they will follow your lead. If they can count on you, it is more likely that you will be able to count on them. If you stay late to send out a mailing, others will be willing to do so. Commitment is contagious.

On the other hand, if you are working so hard that you are burnt out and always unhappy, people will take note of that too and they will shy away from following your lead. Try to strike a balance: don't make commitment look like an impossible burden.

## **GIVE PEOPLE WORK TO DO**

If someone shows interest in becoming involved in your group, don't wait too long to give them something to do. People need to feel that they are making a significant contribution in order to feel committed. Find out what they are interested in doing and see if you can match their interests to some work that needs to be done.

Also, give new people a job that brings them in contact with other people in the organization. That will draw them into the group sooner and more easily.

## **PICK OUT THE RIGHT LEVEL OF CHALLENGE FOR PEOPLE**

People need to feel successful and they also need to stretch their abilities. Both are important. When you are first getting to know someone, try to match them with work in which you think they can achieve some success. This will help people to feel good about themselves and will encourage them to stay.

As you get to know them better, give them gradually increasing challenges. Being challenged keeps people excited about the work they are doing. Sometimes people will need encouragement to try things they have never before considered. Sit down and talk to people to find out what jobs they would like to try. It is a worthwhile investment of time, because they will know that you care about them and their development, not just about what they can produce for you.

## **BUILD AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN WHICH STAFF, VOLUNTEERS, AND MEMBERS APPRECIATE AND RESPECT EACH OTHER**

People need to feel respected and appreciated in order to stay connected and committed to a group or organization. This is simple and important, but sometimes not easy to remember. Still, there are several steps you can take to build a group or organizational culture in which people treat each other well:

- Model appreciation and respect: Take the time to think about the people with whom you are working and openly appreciate them and their work. Although some people may be surprised when you do it, everyone likes to be appreciated. Treat everyone the same way you would have others treat you – with respect and good humour. You may be the leader, but that doesn't mean you're more important as a human being than the person who answers the phone or helps with a mailing.
- Teach people in your organization to notice what is going well, rather than just noticing what needs to be improved. For example, you can open meetings by having each person talk about what they have done well since the last time you met. You can also have people show appreciation to each other as a way to close meetings.
- In heated discussions or conflicts, make sure people continue to show respect for each other. Conflicts can be important growing periods. To ensure they are useful rather than destructive, do not let people personally attack each other. Keep discussions to the issues. If people have personal conflicts, mediate the conflict or bring in an outside person to do so.

## **LISTEN, LISTEN, AND LISTEN**

Listening is a powerful tool. Everyone could use someone to listen to them. When you listen to others with respect, they sense that you have confidence in them and are interested in what they think. In turn, your interest and confidence helps them to think clearly and creatively.

If you want young people, old people, immigrants, low-income people, people of colour, or anybody else to be committed to your organization, listen to them. Try asking a teenager or young person to share their thinking on a topic with you. How do you think we should design this community centre? What is the key issue in this neighbourhood? That teenager may be surprised, at first, because adults so rarely care about what they think. However, if you can break through their "cool," teenagers will be delighted to tell you what they think.

## **SUPPORT PEOPLE'S LEADERSHIP**

To help sustain commitment in your group or organization, think about each person as a potential leader and train them to lead. If people view themselves as a leader of a group, they will view the group as theirs. They will have a feeling of ownership, and will be more likely to take initiative to make sure things work well.

We traditionally think of leaders as the people who are the directors of the organization and make all the important decisions, but you can expand your definition of leadership. For example, you can view the event organizer as one of the key leaders, but the person who informally resolves conflicts is a leader, too. Even the person who gets everyone in the room laughing when the energy bogs down is performing an important leadership function.

Help people to recognize their leadership talents, and encourage them to try out more. Invite them to speak in public or chair a meeting. You don't have to give people leadership titles, but sometimes it helps them to take themselves seriously.

Even though people have different levels of leadership skills, everyone can contribute something of importance. Everyone has a point of view that is valuable. Everyone has talents to share.

## **CELEBRATE**

Don't forget to celebrate. Any excuse will do: a victory, an organization's anniversary, a time to give out prizes or certificates to volunteers or workers, or a cultural sharing time are all good reasons for people to get together, relax, and enjoy each other's company.

## **A FEW EXTRA TIPS**

- Commitment grows steadily but often slowly. Be patient. It will come.
- Appreciate whatever level of commitment a person can make. People will vary greatly in their level of commitment and that's okay. Some people will have more time, more interest in the goals and mission, and a greater understanding of the value of commitment than others.
- You can always invite and encourage people to do more. If they do, great. If they don't, appreciate them for what they can do.
- Don't guilt-trip people into commitment. It generally doesn't get the long-term results you want. People need to feel that their contribution matters, even if it is small. If they feel that they are a disappointment to the leader, they may not stick around.
- People are often yearning for meaning in their lives. When you ask people to commit to an effort, cause, or organization, you are offering them something of high value.
- And remember: Commitment takes time!

## **IN SUMMARY**

In the words of John Gardner, "Commitment requires hard work in the heat of the day; it requires faithful exertion in behalf of chosen purposes and the enhancement of chosen values."

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