

S T  G E N



**COMMITTED  
ACTION  
SUPPLEMENT**

## COMMITTED ACTION

In the *Harvard Business Review* article “Promise-Based Management: The Essence of Execution,” Donald Sull underscores the crucial roles that communication and accountability play in an organization’s ability to execute effectively. He reminds readers that although many executives emphasize *doing* over *talking*, most spend two-thirds to three-quarters of the workday in (formal and informal) conversation.

A closer look at how team members talk to one another can yield some critical insights into execution. *Speech Act Theory*—a branch of linguistic philosophy that explores how people use words to coordinate action—shows that *talking* is, in fact, *doing*.

University of California philosophy professor John Searle introduced a taxonomy of “speech acts” based on the roles that different statements play in getting things done. *Directives* attempt to induce the listener to do something; they include requests and commands. *Declarations* are authorized pronouncements such as when a boss fires a subordinate. *Assertives* make a claim of truth (or belief). And *Commissives* (related to commitment) bind the speaker to a future course of action and include not only promises but also offers (I will do this if you accept) and counteroffers (I can’t do that but could do this). Applying this linguistic framework to the corporate context, Searle’s colleague (and former student) Fernando Flores showed that productivity suffers in proportion to a lack of understanding of these fundamental—yet not commonly understood—communication principles. He makes a compelling case that *requests* and *promises* are the basic units of coordination in commercial organizations, and *assertives* should be used primarily to clarify those requests and promises.<sup>1</sup>

Whether conscious of it or not, through their acts of speech, employees weave a complex web of requests, commitments, assertions, and declarations that affect a company’s ability to succeed.



Fortune 500 Management Consultant and former MIT professor Fred Kofman believes that relationships are the basis of how we actually get things done in business.<sup>2</sup> Building on the work of Searle and Flores, Kofman argues that the level of consciousness we bring to the process of making and fulfilling promises not only impacts the work itself and the trust in our relationships, but also reflects and defines our integrity as individuals.<sup>3</sup>

This Committed Action Supplement draws from Sull, Searle, Flores, Kofman, and others to provide a powerful practice that can be used to weave together trade-offs, disciplined process, and personal productivity into an efficient, coherent execution system.

***The essence of the practice of Committed Action is increasing awareness of what people actually say and do—as well as the dynamics and implications of such.***

Organizational consultant Mark Youngblood defines Committed Action simply as “making and keeping promises,” and he considers this practice a critical catalyst for achieving

organizational results. He has observed that where commitment is absent, performance always suffers. Donald Sull places these issues directly at the center of organizational performance.

***Employees up and down the corporate hierarchy make commitments to one another. These agreements are the strands that weave together coordinated action in every organization.***

According to Sull's research, many if not most of the vexing challenges leaders face stem from broken or poorly crafted commitments. All too often, people fail to consider the fact that in order to actually deliver on a commitment, one may need to solicit and oversee a fairly complex web of supporting agreements from colleagues, superiors, subordinates, vendors, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD COMMITMENTS

Sull's research shows that commitments that lack one or more of the following five characteristics cannot be reliably counted on to be either organizationally binding or personally compelling.<sup>5</sup>

*Good commitments are public*—Agreements that are made, monitored, and completed in public are more binding—and are therefore more desirable—than side deals hammered out in private. When individuals make commitments out in the open, in front of their peers and bosses, they can't conveniently forget what they agreed to do, recall only a few conditions of the agreement, or back out entirely.

*Good commitments are active*—Negotiating a commitment should be an active, collaborative process that takes place through dialogue. Active conversations probe assumptions and should comprise offers, counteroffers, commitments, and refusals.

*Good commitments are voluntary*—The most effective agreements are not coerced but voluntary, and the parties have a viable option (such as a counteroffer) for saying

something other than an unqualified yes. People assume little responsibility for promises made under threat (although they may comply out of fear). By contrast, most people feel deeply obliged to follow through on a commitment if they exercised free will in making it.

*Good commitments are mission- and values-based*—Commitments are often solicited without tying them explicitly either to the organization's goals (or values) or to individual goals (or values). Making the connection to the organization's aims helps individuals contextualize their commitment and feel integral to the success of the organization. Tying commitments to personal values taps individuals' intrinsic motivations and fosters a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

*Good commitments are specific and explicit*—This last point cannot be emphasized enough. All parties must be specific and explicit about their commitments throughout their lifecycles. Requests must be clear from the start, progress reports should accurately reflect how promises are being executed, and successes (or failures) should be outlined in detail at the time of delivery rather than after the fact, during a quarterly performance check-in, or through annual 360-degree feedback.

**Learning Asset:** "Promise-Based Management: The Essence of Execution," by Donald N. Sull and Charles Spinoza (*Harvard Business Review*)

#### COMMITMENT CONVERSATIONS

People often take a legalistic view of commitments, defining them according to the terms of a deal, much as lawyers might focus on specific clauses in a contract. More important than the actual content of a promise, however, are the discussions that give it life and make it personally compelling. Kofman refers to these discussions as "commitment conversations" and outlines three levels on which they occur.

### The Work

The first level involves the task itself (including the broader project and work within which it is situated). Every commitment has a task implication. Organizational execution involves a complex network of commitments to get things done that an individual could not achieve alone.

### The Relationship

The second level involves the relationship, and especially the trust between the two parties. As such, every commitment has a relationship implication.

### Individual Integrity

Kofman argues that on the deepest level, the way people approach commitments informs and defines their integrity as individuals. "How good is your word?" he asks. "Do people view you as a person with integrity—someone they can rely on?"

## FIVE KEYS TO COMMITTED ACTION

Youngblood—building on Searle's, Flores', and Kofman's work—identifies five crucial elements of Committed Action.

1. Making effective requests
2. Enrolling others
3. Committed responses
4. Managing commitments
5. Managing and learning from breakdowns

### MAKING EFFECTIVE REQUESTS

Many people are under the impression that their requests are clear and are surprised to learn later that the expectations inherent in their requests were not met.

Do you hear exchanges like the following in your organization?

"Someone needs to work on that managers' report."

*"Yes, you're right."*

"We need that managers' report for the meeting next week."

*"Good idea."*

"We've got to get going on that report."

*"Yeah."*

Interactions like this can be deceiving. It sounds like something productive occurred, but in actuality, this is far from the case. The above statements are not requests and the responses (in italics) are certainly not commitments.

If a request is to be effective, the person making the request must first get clear on what exactly it is that they want and need. When clear conditions of satisfaction are not established, one should not blame others for failing to meet expectations. Effective requests establish clear conditions of satisfaction in terms of exactly *what*, of *whom*, and *by when*.

To establish clear conditions for satisfaction, ask:

- What exactly do I want (or need)?
- Under what conditions would I be satisfied?
- How will I know if my concern is resolved?
- What would be happening or what would stop happening if my concern were resolved?

Bear in mind that every single detail need not be articulated at the start of a project, but it is important to be as specific as possible and then amend the agreement as more details become available. The key point is to be able to leave the conversation with the conditions of satisfaction stated as clearly as possible and understood and agreed to by all relevant parties. Following are several good examples of effective requests (contrasted against ineffective examples).

#### INEFFECTIVE REQUEST

"Someone needs to work on the managers' report."

"I'd like to get a copy of those sales figures."

"We could really use some fresh ideas."

#### EFFECTIVE REQUEST

"Andy, I need you to complete the managers' report by noon tomorrow."

"Jon, I need your team's sales figures by the end of the day today."

"I want everyone to bring two new ideas to Thursday's 3:00 meeting and be prepared to discuss them."

## ENROLLING OTHERS

Stagen uses the term “enrolling” to describe the process inherent in achieving others’ buy-in. Enrollment begins with the assumption that people are already committed to something (related to the endeavor) and uncovering those connections may lead to a collaborative rather than compliant attitude toward the effort.<sup>6</sup> It involves listening deeply to what people really want and allows them to draw their own conclusions and exercise free choice. Although enrollment is a skill that takes time to cultivate, the result is often greater levels of alignment and commitment.

## COMMITTED RESPONSES

Youngblood offers examples of the kinds of replies that may be heard when requests are unclear. Do any of these vague, noncommitted replies sound familiar?

Clearly, none of the above replies would be categorized as committed responses. Regardless of the clarity of a request, if the reply one receives sounds like the examples listed above, there is no commitment.

### Before Making a Commitment

The word “integrity” comes from a Latin root that means “whole” or “complete.” Youngblood offers a uniquely illustrative metaphor. Consider a four-legged stool. When one sits on a stool that is whole and intact (with all four legs), it is solid and supports effortlessly. Breaking a promise diminishes perceived integrity, like removing a leg from the stool. When only three legs are left, a portion of one’s energy must now be devoted to keeping balance so fewer goals can be met. As promises are broken, ever more energy will need to be redirected to remain balanced and effective. At some time or another, everyone fails to keep commitments—this cannot be avoided entirely. Yet the skill with which these commitments are managed can have a significant impact on the ability to execute successfully (individually, in teams, and organizationally).



When you make a commitment you are giving your word. Keeping promises is an act of personal integrity that affects others’ willingness to trust you. Would your co-workers and employees say that you keep your promises? If not, how has that impacted your effectiveness and your relationships?

Kofman counsels that before making a commitment, three questions (concerned with sincerity, competency and resources) should be carefully considered:

1. Do I really intend to do this?
2. Do I know how to do this?
3. Do I have the resources to do this?

### Four Effective Responses

Effective responses fall into four categories as listed below:

#### No (I Decline)

When one says no to something, bandwidth is created to say yes to something else. Yet saying no can be difficult—people may procrastinate or avoid giving a definitive answer to a request. Although it may be slightly uncomfortable to do so, declining a request can actually build trust in a relationship. It reinforces the fact that that person doesn’t commit to tasks on which he isn’t serious about following through. Example: “No, I’m not going to be able to attend that meeting.”

#### Yes (I Agree)

Say yes only if the intention is truly there to complete the task, if one is actually able to do it, and if the resources are available. Rather than just saying yes, restate the specific request in your response. Example: “Yes, I will complete that report and send it to you by Wednesday at 5 p.m.”



### I Promise to Promise

People often need some time to carefully consider the request (and their intentions, abilities, and resources) before making a commitment. If one can't answer yes at the time the request is made, then he commits to respond at a specific later time. Example: "I'll get back to you with an answer by noon on Friday."

### I Counteroffer

One determines that he cannot fulfill the request (or offer) as proposed unless certain conditions of satisfaction are altered. This is a process of negotiation that results in mutually agreeable terms. Example: "Although I can't get the report to you by Wednesday, I can commit to have it to you by end of day Friday."

## MANAGING COMMITMENTS

Commitments are the responsibility of both the person making the request and the person making the promise. To ensure that commitments are effectively managed, progress must be tracked, regular check-ins must take place, and commitments must occasionally be revoked.

### Tracking Progress

Most projects involve numerous commitments that unfold as milestones over time. It is important that each team member maintains an inventory—in writing, not in his head—of all of his commitments, including delivery dates. It is especially helpful to use transparent systems that allow all involved parties to keep abreast of exactly where things stand.

### Instituting Regular Checkpoints

It is necessary to check in regularly (appropriate to the timing of the project), to ensure the action matches the conditions for satisfaction. This allows enough time to "course correct" or to clarify the conditions of the agreement as time passes, more information surfaces, obstacles arise, or understanding of the circumstances changes.

### Canceling Requests

In the practice of Committed Action, the person who made the request is expected to formally cancel (in a timely fashion) if the work is no longer needed. This avoids unnecessarily wasting time and effort. When canceling a request or offer, it

is helpful to provide the specific reasons for the cancellation so the other person can appreciate how the circumstances have shifted rather than bring negative assumptions to bear on the person originally making the request.

### Revoking Commitments

People often ignore or duck promises they aren't going to keep, hoping the other person won't notice or call them on it. Over time, this behavior damages trust in the relationship. To avoid this, it is essential to revoke a commitment as soon as one realizes that it will be impossible to fulfill it. Again, provide specific reasons so that others can appreciate how the circumstances have shifted.

Revoking a commitment can be uncomfortable and difficult to do. It is human nature to prefer to avoid the issue and pretend as if everything will be fine. However, sincerely revoking a commitment can actually build trust by showing the other person that he doesn't have to wonder if the commitment will be honored. The other person will know that she will be notified in advance if the terms of the agreement can't be met.

## UNDERSTANDING BREAKDOWNS

When requests and responses are vague and ineffective, then there's no commitment to break. Youngblood states it simply, "Where there is no commitment, there can be no breakdown." For example, if a person agrees to complete a task but does not commit to a specific date, a breakdown cannot be declared. It is only when a real commitment is established that the possibility for a breakdown is created. An interesting dynamic begins to occur when genuine commitments are made: People begin to notice everything that is inconsistent with that commitment. Given this reality, breakdowns can and should be expected. Indeed, it is the nature of organizational life that intentions are not always met and milestones are not always completed by agreed-upon dates. Committed Action practitioners learn to view breakdowns as valuable learning

opportunities. When an individual or team understands why they failed to deliver on a promise, they can use that insight to bolster future performance.

### Formally *Declaring* a Breakdown

By *declaring* a breakdown, a shift can be made from a “victim” orientation into a “creator” mode.<sup>7</sup> This puts the issue on the radar and addresses it proactively—an empowering move. When things are considered to be “working,” the mindset tends to be “business as usual.” When someone demonstrates the courage to declare a breakdown, people are snapped out of their ordinary mindsets and can mobilize and act in new ways.

## WORKING WITH BREAKDOWNS

To learn from our inevitable breakdowns, follow five simple steps:

1. Declare the breakdown.
2. Allow people the time and permission to express how they feel about the breakdown and, if necessary, vent their emotions. (Do not blame, simply notice and name feelings.)
3. Take inventory of the situation while separating objective facts from subjective interpretations.
  - It is important to acknowledge honestly and objectively what happened or didn’t happen.
  - What percentage of the goal (or milestone) was achieved?
  - What was the impact (in terms of people, relationships, energy, costs, etc.)?
4. Learn from the breakdown by asking, “How did this happen?” This is not an occasion for blame or excuses, but rather an objective analysis of the circumstances that created the breakdown.
  - Did another unanticipated priority take precedence over this one?
  - Was the original goal unrealistic?
  - Was the scope of the objective broader than the resources that were available?
5. Make a renewed commitment.
  - Was time mismanaged?
  - Was coordination or communication a factor?
  - Were there circumstances outside our control?
- If the failure to deliver on the commitment creates a cost to the person who originally made the request—in terms of time, inconvenience, pressure, etc.—it is essential to discuss these costs as part of the conversation to correct the breakdown and make good on the original or revised promise.
- What is the intention going forward? What are the specific actions required? What are the new conditions for satisfaction?
- Are there other requests of others that will need to be made?
- If necessary, create a new action plan with scheduled milestones and a task list.

## CONCLUSION

Committed Action ties together the other three essential elements of execution: Deliberate Trade-offs, Disciplined Process, and Personal Productivity. Committed Action is fundamentally about becoming more aware of what we say and what we do. In addition to fostering greater accountability, it also enhances teamwork and engenders trust. Beyond simply being a tool to help individuals and teams execute more effectively, over time the practice of Committed Action cultivates qualities associated with individual development from “Socially-defined” to “Self-authoring” and, in terms of team development, from “Compliance” to “Collaboration.”<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Building Trust: In Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*, by Fernando Flores and Robert Solomon, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> See Fred Kofman's 2001 CD audio course, *Conscious Business: Imagine a Workplace That Succeeds Through Higher Awareness*. Note that this is not the same as his more recent (2006) book and audio book entitled *Conscious Business: How to Build Value Through Values*. The former includes a section on Commitment Conversations, while the latter does not.
- <sup>3</sup> Note that Kofman's analysis, as well as the other examples in this section of the module, mirrors the three perspectives seen in Ken Wilber's Integral Theory framework of I, We, and It. The objective It perspective can be used to describe any objective reality such as behavior, work, or a business. In this section, It refers to the work (or task) in question. In the Stagen *Learning to Learn* module, the It perspective is used to refer to an organizational perspective (the company).
- <sup>4</sup> "Promise-Based Management: The Essence of Execution," by Donald N. Sull and Charles Spinosa, *Harvard Business Review*
- <sup>5</sup> "Promise-Based Management: The Essence of Execution," by Donald N. Sull and Charles Spinosa, *Harvard Business Review*
- <sup>6</sup> See Stagen *Learning to Learn* and *Communication* modules for more information on making the move from *Compliance* to *Collaboration*.
- <sup>7</sup> See *The Power of T.E.D.*, by David Emerald or the Stagen *Escaping the Drama Triangle* core practice handout.
- <sup>8</sup> These terms are adapted from Harvard's Robert Kegan's developmental psychology stages and are used here with permission. For more information see Stagen's *Learning to Learn* module.