Building Commitment to Organizational Change

Introduction

As organizations seek to move beyond installation\(^1\) to achieve full realization\(^2\) of the intended outcomes of their initiatives, they must create sustainable shifts in the mindsets and behaviors of a wide range of people. These shifts do not happen immediately or automatically—they unfold over time, follow a predictable pattern of steps, and usually need to be orchestrated and supported.

An individual’s degree of commitment to change is reflected in the consistency with which he or she displays new mindsets and behaviors, even in the face of challenges. This article describes the general process by which people become committed to any new way of operating. It describes the implications of this commitment process for the success of transformational change in organizations. It also describes the approaches and techniques that can be applied to help people move through the process with greater speed and effectiveness.

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\(^1\) **Installation** refers to the process of announcing the initiative, setting up new equipment and/or processes, and training employees in its use.

\(^2\) Initiatives are “realized” when they accomplish the full aim of what was being pursued—sought-after behaviors are demonstrated in a quality manner and sustained over an appropriate amount of time.
Change Roles and Commitment

Four key roles operate during the change process:

- **Change Sponsor**: Has the power to authorize or legitimize change
- **Change Agent**: Facilitates the development and execution of implementation plans
- **Change Target**: Must alter something about his or her knowledge, skills, attitudes, and/or behavior
- **Change Advocate**: Wants to achieve a change but does not possess legitimization power

These roles are always present, either formally or informally, during change. They can be (and generally are) played by more than one person, and each individual can (and often does) inhabit multiple roles. Each role contributes to success or failure. Each has specific mindset and behavior shifts that are required for successful realization:

- **Sponsors** must become committed to consistently displaying support for the change through influential communication and meaningful consequences.
- **Agents** must become committed to supporting the sponsors’ intent for the change and applying effective approaches to execution.
- **Targets** must become committed to the new ways of thinking and operating required to fully realize the intended outcome.
- **Advocates** must become committed to effectively presenting their perspective to sponsors.

A low level of commitment among people in any of these roles can contribute to a change project’s failure. Such failure may be as obvious as a sponsor terminating a change project. It may be subtler, such as target apathy or disillusionment. In each case, however, the result is that the outcome of the change initiative falls short of the sponsor’s expectations.

Some changes can succeed without strong commitment from all four roles. If the sponsor’s commitment is high enough, change can occur even without significant support from agents or targets (i.e., targets can simply be told to comply or leave). The cost of implementing change in this manner, however, may include employee alienation, lost production, absenteeism, and grievances. And while targets may shift their behaviors, their pre-change mindset may remain intact, producing only compliance that is dependent on continued external pressure.

Full realization of most changes requires targets to do more than comply—they must commit themselves to different ways of thinking and operating. To the extent that employees need to display new behaviors in settings where they are not being monitored, and make decisions based on internalized standards or principles rather than external rules and pressures, they must move beyond compliance to a deeper, more self-sustaining level of commitment.
Defining Commitment

Commitment is powerful, yet little understood. People display commitment when they:

- Invest resources such as time, energy, and money to ensure the desired outcome
- Pursue the goal consistently over time, even when under stress
- Reject ideas or action plans that promise short-term benefits but are inconsistent with the overall strategy for ultimate goal achievement
- Stand fast in the face of adversity, remaining determined and focused in the quest for the desired goal
- Apply creativity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness to resolving problems or issues that would otherwise block the achievement of the goal

Given this, it is easy to see why commitment is so important to the success of organizational change. It is the cement that provides the critical bond between people and the change process. Yet most people involved in organizational change know very little about what commitment is, what it requires, how it is built, and how it can be lost. The outline of the Stages of Change Commitment (see Figure 1) provides a model of how commitment can be built and sustained.

Figure 1. Stages of Change Commitment
This model is shown as a graph. The vertical axis represents the degree of support for the new mindsets and behaviors, and the horizontal axis reflects the passage of time. The model consists of three developmental phases—Preparation, Acceptance, and Commitment—and the stages unique to each phase. Each stage represents a juncture critical to the development of commitment to change. A positive perception of change may stall (depicted by downward arrows) or increase (represented by an advance to the next stage). In addition, as people learn more about the change and what it will require, they may return to earlier stages in the process. The successful transition through a particular stage serves as the basis for experiencing the next stage.

The section below describes each of the phases and stages in this model. The subsequent section outlines approaches to helping people move through the sequence.

**The Phases and Stages of Commitment**

**Preparation Phase**

The Preparation Phase forms the foundation for later development of either support of or resistance to the change. There are two stages in the Preparation Phase: Contact and Awareness.

**Stage I: Contact**

Stage I is the first encounter individuals have with the fact that a change that may require them to shift their thinking and/or behavior is taking place in the organization. Commitment to an organizational change begins when employees—the sponsors, agents, and targets—pass through the Contact Stage. For example, if an organization decides to alter its marketing strategy, each role must come into contact with the change. The CEO, who will need to sponsor the change, may have this initial exposure to the prospect of change when reading a weak financial statement. The marketing director, who will likely be an agent for the change, may first hear of it through a senior staff person who has discussed the problem with the CEO. Members of the sales force, who will be targets of the change, may have their first exposure to it when a new sales approach is presented by the marketing director at a staff meeting.

Methods for delivering the first contact message can vary. There is a wide range of options including memos, staff meetings, personal contact, and other mechanisms. Regardless of the method, this first stage in the commitment process is intended to result in awareness that a change has taken place or may occur in the future. Contact efforts, though, do not always produce awareness. Sponsors and change agents are often frustrated when, after many meetings and memos about an initiative, some targets either are not prepared for the change or react with total surprise when it begins to affect them. The commitment model, which separates contact efforts from actual awareness of change, highlights the danger in assuming that contact and awareness are synonymous.

Outcomes for the Contact Stage are either:

a) **Awareness**—which advances the preparation process, or

b) **Unawareness**—in which no preparation for commitment will occur.
Stage II: Awareness of Change

In Stage II, employees know that a change is being considered or implemented. Awareness is established successfully when individuals realize that modifications affecting the organization’s operations (and potentially affecting them) have occurred or are possible. This requires that initial communications about the change reach the desired audiences and get the message across clearly.

This awareness, however, does not mean that employees have a complete understanding of how the change will affect them. They may not have an accurate picture of the scope, nature, depth, implications, or even the basic intent of the change. A sponsor, for instance, may be clear that he or she must lead people through a shift in marketing strategy but not understand what this will call for. An agent may recognize that he or she is being asked to apply a new methodology for executing the initiative, but not have a clear picture of the personal implications. And targets may perceive that a change is coming without knowing the specific ways they will need to alter their mindset and behavior. Before targets can progress toward acceptance, awareness must be developed into a general understanding of the change’s implications.

Outcomes for the Awareness Stage are either:

a) Understanding—which advances the process to the Acceptance Phase, or
b) Confusion—which reduces or precludes preparation.

Acceptance Phase

The Acceptance Phase marks passage over the Disposition Threshold. This is an important milestone; people shift from seeing the change as something “out there” to seeing it as having personal relevance. This perspective enables them to make decisions about accepting or not accepting their part in the change.

People often engage in individual activities designed to move themselves across this threshold—to help themselves move from awareness to understanding. They ask questions, pose challenges, seek additional information, and make inferences in an effort to clarify their picture of the change. Sometimes leaders wrongly interpret this behavior as resistance to the change initiative. Although it is possible for people to use endless questions and challenges as part of their resistance strategy, true resistance to the specific change at hand (rather than to the notion of change in general) can be manifested only when people understand it well enough to be able to formulate an informed opinion.

There are two stages of the Acceptance Phase: Understand the Change and Positive Perception.

Stage III: Understand the Change

In Stage III, people show some degree of comprehension of the nature and intent of the change and what it may mean for them. As they learn more about the initiative and the role(s) they are likely to play, people begin to see how it will affect their work and how it will touch them personally. These insights enable them, for the first time, to judge the change.
Judging something as positive or negative is a universal, and relatively automatic, process. When humans encounter something new or unfamiliar, our immediate reaction is to label it as positive or negative. Although we can consciously revise these immediate judgments, it takes effort to do so.

Each person’s judgment is influenced by his or her own cognitive and emotional filter systems—the unique set of lenses that he or she uses to view the world. These filters are developed through previous experience; some predispositions to view new things as dangers or opportunities may even be genetically linked. As a result of these filters, people can vary widely in their reactions to a new initiative. The same change may be viewed positively by some and negatively by others.

In addition, change of any significance usually has multiple aspects to it, and may produce both positive and negative reactions at the same time. For example, a target may have a negative view of a new company policy regarding relocation every four years but sees positive benefit in the level of job security he or she would experience. People combine these positive and negative reactions to form an overall judgment of the change.

Because the full implications of a change are rarely completely clear to anyone at the beginning, it is rare for people to be able to reach a comprehensive understanding early in the process. People move forward based on the information that is currently available. As new data become available, people may reevaluate their judgment of the change and move to a lower level on the Commitment Curve.

Outcomes for the Understanding Stage are either:
a) Positive perception—which represents a decision to support the change, or
b) Negative perception—which represents a decision not to support the change.

**Stage IV: Positive Perception**

In Stage IV, people form intentions to support or oppose the change. This is not done in isolation—they typically weigh the costs and benefits of the change against the costs and benefits of other alternatives, including doing nothing. Ideally, the benefits of a change to an individual so clearly outweigh the benefits of any alternative course of action that it requires little thought to decide to move forward. However, this is not typically the case. In many organizational change situations, the benefits of moving forward are only marginally more positive than the benefits of the best alternative course of action. In some changes, the path forward has such significant costs associated with it that the individual reaches an overall positive perception only because all of the alternatives are worse.

For instance, a leader may face a decision to lay off a large number of people from the organization. He is likely to see this as a tremendously difficult and costly move. But if he perceives that the alternative is the sale of the organization to a competitor who would be even more ruthless in the downsizing efforts, he may ultimately reach a positive perception about moving forward.

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3 As described in the following section, a positive perception does not necessarily mean that people like the change, but rather that they see it as the best available course of action.
Positive Perception is an important stage in the process of building commitment, but at this point the change is still theoretical. People must begin to try out the new way of operating—they must alter their mindset and behavior.

Outcomes of the Positive Perception Stage are either:

a) *Experimentation*—An initial trial of the new way of thinking and behaving, or
b) *Inaction*—Failure to make initial shifts in thoughts and behaviors.

**Commitment Phase**

The Commitment Phase marks passage over the Action Threshold. In this phase, the perceptions that have been created in the Acceptance Phase result in actual commitment—observable changes in individual mindsets and behavior. This is a critical step—there are many situations in which people will say that they view a change as positive, but, for a variety of reasons, will not actually take the first steps to shift their behavior. As an example, consider recycling: If asked, most people would probably agree that recycling is a good thing, and even articulate their willingness to recycle. However, when it comes to taking action, many people do not consistently display recycling-supportive mindsets and behaviors.

Some reasons that people who see a change as positive might not take action include 1) the lack of a setting in which they can try the new behavior; 2) absence of needed skills; or 3) insufficient time, energy, or adaptation capacity to engage in the new behavior.

There are four stages in the Commitment Phase: Experimentation, Adoption, Institutionalization, and Internalization.

**Stage V: Experimentation**

In Stage V, individuals take action to test a change. This is the first time people actually try out the change and acquire a sense of how it might affect their work routine. This stage is an important signpost that commitment is growing but greater support is possible.

The critical importance of this stage is that no matter how positively people view a change prior to engaging with it, their actual experience with it will reveal a number of small or large surprises. Some of these may be positive, but others may involve unanticipated problems that may have significant negative consequences. If problems become too costly, pessimism regarding the change project will increase and may reach the “checking-out” level. This occurs when early, uninformed optimism for a project transforms into informed pessimism, and the individual’s original positive judgment shifts to negative.

Because of the inevitability of surprises, some degree of pessimism is unavoidable during change. Nevertheless, the confidence of those involved in a change increases as a result of resolving such problems. An environment that encourages the open discussion of concerns tends to solve problems, promote ownership, and build commitment to action. As these problems are resolved, a more realistic level of conviction toward the change builds. This conviction advances commitment to the Adoption level.

Outcomes for the Experimentation Stage are either:

a) *Adoption*—Individuals continue their exploration of the new mindsets and behaviors, or
b) *Rejection*—Individuals cease their exploration of the new mindsets and behaviors.
Stage VI: Adoption

Stage IV, Adoption, is reached after individuals have successfully navigated the initial trial period. The dynamics here are similar to that of the Experimentation Stage. Both stages serve as tests in which the individual and the organization assess the cost and benefits of the change. Longer-term trials can reveal logistic, political, and economic problems with the new way of operating that can lead sponsors, agents, and/or targets to question the long-term viability of the new approach and potentially make a decision to terminate the change.

The differences between the Experimentation and Adoption stages are important, even though their dynamics are similar. Experimentation focuses on initial, entry problems, and adoption centers on in-depth, longer-term problems. The former is a preliminary test of the change. It tries to identify its initial human and technical impact. The latter tests the ongoing implications of the change. Experimentation asks, “Will this change work?” Adoption asks, “Does this change fit with who I am as a person/who we are as an organization?” The shift is from “Can we do it?” to “Do we want to continue it?”

Although the level of time and resources necessary to reach Adoption is great, a change project in this stage is still being evaluated and can be stopped. Following are some typical reasons change projects are terminated after extensive testing.

- Logistic, political, or economic problems have been identified that could be found only after a long test period.
- The need that sparked the initial commitment no longer exists.
- The overall strategic goals of the organization have shifted and no longer encompass the change outcomes.
- People in key sponsorship or agent positions leave the organization or are no longer as active in the project as they once were.

If the change is successful after this lengthy test period, it is in a position to become the standard new way of operating. Outcomes for the Adoption Stage are either:

a) Institutionalization—the new way of operating is established as a standard, or
b) Termination—the change is ended after an extensive trial.

Stage VII: Institutionalization

Stage VII reflects the point at which people no longer view the change as tentative. They consider it standard operating procedure. It is now the norm; not, as in the past, a deviation. As part of the institutionalization process, the organizational structure may be altered to accommodate new ways of operating, and rewards and punishments implemented to maintain new mindsets and behaviors. What was once a change requiring substantial sponsor legitimization has become part of the organizational routine that is monitored by managers.

The move from Adoption to Institutionalization is a significant one, and a double-edged sword. The threshold that is crossed here is that of “reversibility.” Once a change is institutionalized, it becomes the new status quo. Even if the original reasons for legitimizing the change become void or people no longer believe it is worth the price to continue it, organizational systems and inertia are capable of maintaining the new way of operating long after it has served its usefulness. Ending an institutionalized pattern that is ingrained into the fiber of an organization is extremely difficult.
This stage reflects the highest level of commitment that can be achieved by an organization—the level above it, internalization, can only be achieved by individuals who make a personal choice to go there. Although institutionalization is sometimes all that is required to achieve the organization’s goals, it has some potential problems. If a change has been institutionalized but not internalized, those affected may be motivated to adhere to new procedures primarily to comply with organizational directives. For example, some change projects become institutionalized when targets are given the option to comply or face severe consequences. Their compliance is achieved by using organizational rewards and punishments to motivate them to conform despite their own private beliefs about the change. If their perception of the change is generally negative, but they have chosen to go forward because the costs of not doing so are prohibitively high, they will likely mimic acceptable behavior. They learn to say and do the “right” things, but their actions will not reflect their true perspective. Because their mindset (beliefs and assumptions) does not align with their behavior, a great deal of managerial pressure will be required to ensure the ongoing presence of the desired behavior.

The success of change does not always depend on the target’s personal investment. Some projects require only that targets “do as they are told.” But as the pace and complexity of change escalates, producing more turbulence in the workplace, many organizations have modified their views about workers needing to understand or support organizational changes. Forcing change implementation often results in a halfhearted effort without a full return on investment. Institutionalized change, as powerful as it is, only delivers the target’s behavior, not his or her mind and heart.

**Stage VIII: Internalization**

Stage VIII represents the highest level of commitment an individual can demonstrate to an organizational change. It reflects an internal motivation in which individual beliefs and desires are aligned with those of the organization, and there is a high level of consistency between individual mindset and behavior. While an organization can legislate the institutionalization of a change, internalization requires the active cooperation of each individual. At this last stage, people “own” the change. They demonstrate a high level of personal responsibility for its success. They serve as advocates for the new way of operating, protect it from those who would undermine it, and expend energy to ensure its success. These actions are often well beyond what could be created by any organizational mandate.

One example that may illustrate the difference between institutionalization and internalization is the comparison between compliance with speed limits vs. adherence to seatbelt laws. For most people, speed limits are institutionalized. It is primarily the threat of receiving a ticket that prevents them from exceeding posted speed limits by more than a few miles per hour, especially in zones where the limit is clearly below the maximum safe speed. In contrast, most people have internalized the commitment to wear seatbelts. They buckle up, and encourage others in their vehicle to do so, because they feel safer that way and believe it is in their own best interest to engage in this behavior.

Enthusiasm, high-energy investment, and persistence characterize internalized commitment, and it tends to become infectious. Targets who have internalized a change cannot be distinguished from sponsors and advocates in their devotion to the task and their ability to engage others in the change effort.

The time needed to move through the Experimentation, Adoption, Institutionalization, and Internalization phases will vary according to the individual, the organization, and the nature of
the change project; the lines can be relatively clear or somewhat blurry depending on the situation. If a change is mandated, it can become institutionalized very quickly (but, as mentioned earlier, at a high cost of monitoring compliance). In other cases, institutionalization unfolds more gradually—as employees gain experience with the new way of operating, find ways to refine and improve it, and adjust to its long-range impact and requirements, the change gradually becomes a natural part of the organization’s culture or expected pattern of behavior. Internalization can begin very early in a change if the new way of operating is strongly aligned with individual beliefs and assumptions; it can also emerge along the way as individuals begin to see the advantages of the new approach. In some cases, it can fail to surface at all.

Understanding the steps and sequence for building commitment is a powerful advantage in building momentum for major organizational change.

Tactics for Building Commitment

Commitment needs to be built carefully and thoughtfully. At each stage, there are potential barriers to success, actions that can be taken to move people to the next stage, and indicators that can be used to mark progress. The table below summarizes some of the main tactics.

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<th>Tactics</th>
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<td>Contact</td>
<td>Get information about the change into a place where people are likely to see and hear it.</td>
<td>• Ineffective information dissemination</td>
<td>• Selecting announcement mechanisms such as memos, emails, voice mails, presentations, staff meetings, and posters</td>
<td>Information was made available and was viewed/heard by participants.</td>
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| Awareness | Ensure that people know a change is in process or will be coming. | • Information overload  
• Individual predisposition to pay attention | • Gaining attention through:  
– Multiple contacts  
– Credible sources  
– Engaging activities/materials | Individuals can name and briefly describe the change that is or will be taking place. |
| Understanding | Enable people to create an accurate picture of the likely organizational and personal impact of the change. | • Fear of asking questions  
• Insufficient information to allow exploration of implications | • Providing involvement in planning  
• Creating a safe environment for exploring organizational and personal implications and emotions  
• Enabling two-way communication  
• Offering personalized information | Individuals can accurately explain, in their own words, the general scope, nature, and intent of the change and how it will affect them personally. |
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| Positive Perception | Provide an accurate picture of the organizational and personal costs, benefits, and alternatives that persuasively communicate the advantages of moving forward with the change. | • Lack of trust in the reliability of information and/or the source of the information  
• Unrealistic understanding of alternatives  
• Insufficient information to enable effective choices  
• Leaders who lack credibility  
• Changes that do not bring any benefit to the individual | • Intentionally designing and communicating costs and benefits from the recipient’s perspective  
• Establishing, reinforcing, or recovering leadership’s credibility  
• Reframing negative implications to be less burdensome  
• Clearly articulating the cost and/or consequences of not changing  
• Using two-way communication to deepen trust and understanding of implications | • Individuals can clearly articulate the personal and organizational and costs and benefits of the change.  
• Individuals perceive net positive personal benefits.  
• Leaders perceive a net positive result for themselves and for the organization. |
| Experimentation | • Get people to try the new way of doing things and see if it works.  
• Enable individuals and the organization to answer, “Can we do it?” in a short-term test. | • Capacity and resource constraints that limit ability to experiment  
• Lack of tools, environment, or skills to practice new ways of operating  
• Fear of making mistakes/looking stupid  
• Lack of confidence in information received and/or the source of the information (including low leadership credibility) | • Setting up conditional implementation, pilot, or test environment  
• Developing needed skills  
• Setting clear priorities to ensure capacity and resources are available  
• Establishing positive consequences and encouragement  
• Modeling desired behaviors  
• Learning from experience and making adjustments as needed  
• Establishing, reinforcing, or recovering leadership’s credibility | • Individuals take initial steps to pilot or otherwise test the new behaviors/mindsets, investing enough resources to see if it works. |
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| Adoption    | • Get people to engage in a sustained effort to test the new way of doing things.  
  • Enable individuals and organization to answer, “Does it work and does it fit who I am?” in a longer-term test. | • Unresolved problems and challenges leading to frustration  
  • Insufficient investment of resources to ensure a long-term try  
  • Lack of feedback on progress | • Resolution of initial problems identified during experimentation  
  • Ongoing opportunities to surface issues and problems, with resources dedicated to resolving them  
  • Continued coaching, feedback, modeling, and reinforcement  
  • Effective measures and tracking of progress and results  
  • Establishing, reinforcing, or recovering leadership’s credibility | • Individuals give sustained effort to testing the change in realistic settings.  
  • Problems, if they exist, are assessed, and, if possible, solved.  
  • Useful information is gathered to make decisions about moving to institutionalization. |
| Institutionalization | • Ensure consistent, sustained operation in alignment with the change.  
  • Embed the new way of operating into the organization’s systems and standards.  
  • Replace formal sponsorship with effective management. | • Organizational systems and processes that do not support the new ways of operating  
  • Leaders who do not effectively support or manage the new approaches  
  • Inconsistent application of consequences | • Effectively realign systems (e.g., performance management) and processes around the new way of operating  
  • Ensure that leaders are doing their part to consistently support the new “standard”, including establishing, communicating, and applying positive and negative consequences  
  • Successfully resolve all significant problems surfaced during adoption | A critical mass of people throughout the organization is consistently applying the new ways of thinking and behaving.  
 New employees are learning the updated way of doing things as the norm. |
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<td></td>
<td>• Create a high level of congruence between individual and organizational goals, interests, and values.</td>
<td>• Lack of congruence between individual and organizational interests</td>
<td>• Understand individual goals and values, and structure reward systems such that individuals achieve their own goals by helping the organization achieve its goals</td>
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<td>• Move from formal sponsorship to individual responsibility and accountability supported by management reinforcement.</td>
<td>• Lack of alignment between individual mindset (beliefs and assumptions) and the required behaviors</td>
<td>• Reinforce internalized behavior through:</td>
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<td>• Create and sustain a true mindset shift.</td>
<td>• Erosion of commitment due to disillusionment or frustration</td>
<td>- Leadership modeling</td>
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<td>• Deeply-rooted culture that is not supportive of new mindset</td>
<td>- Reminders of why this change was made</td>
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<td>- Opportunities to discuss personal shifts in thoughts, feelings and values related to the change</td>
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<td>- Applying structured approaches to shift culture</td>
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**Implications for Building Commitment to Change**

The commitment model has many implications for those involved in designing and implementing significant changes within their organizations. Six of the most crucial lessons associated with building commitment are listed below.

1. **Human reactions to change are both intellectual and emotional.**

The commitment process unfolds at both intellectual and emotional levels. Usually, intellectual commitment precedes emotional commitment. Most people can grasp the implications of a change at a cognitive level fairly quickly. However, they often find that they need more time to make the necessary emotional adjustments.

This split-level commitment can produce confusion, mixed signals, and ambiguous communication for all involved. People can believe that they buy into a new approach (for example, a new way of organizing a work team), only to find, once they engage in the new behaviors, that there are consequences (such as changing relationships with co-workers) they are not emotionally prepared to deal with.

Managers of organizational change must learn to deal with both the intellectual and emotional levels of commitment; implementation plans should account for the differences between the two. Managers must also learn to distinguish between deteriorating commitment and the mixed
messages people produce when their heads have accepted the change but their hearts are still struggling.

2. Building commitment is a developmental process.

For a sustainable commitment to grow, the process must be viewed from a developmental perspective. The events leading to commitment are sequential in nature; awareness, for example, is the result of successful contact. Understanding must occur before a positive perception can be generated.

Obviously, sponsors can skip some steps by simply announcing that a change has already been institutionalized. With this approach, the announcement is made, behavior is dictated, and compliance is achieved. When organizational change is handled in this fashion, the likelihood of strong, sustained commitment is low, especially if the change has a significant disruptive impact on the targets.

Shortcuts to high commitment simply do not exist. Each stage in the process depends on the successful completion of prior stages. To move to the highest levels of commitment, implementation plans and sponsor and agent behaviors must be consistent with the sequential stages presented in the model.

3. Commitment strategies must be developed.

Executives often devote time, money, and energy to making the right decision about what should be changed while ignoring the need to build commitment to that decision. It is too risky to leave commitment to chance. A well-thought-out strategy will increase the probability that people will develop a high commitment toward the new ways of thinking and operating. Strategies for building commitment, however, should not be limited to targets only. Sponsors must develop plans to ensure that their agents are fully supportive, and agents often need to increase the level of sponsor support for programs that these same sponsors initiated.

Of course, change projects do not all call for the same level of commitment from employees. Some require only that they try it (experimentation). Other projects need a longer testing period (adoption). For many change projects, the intent of the effort will not be realized unless the change becomes formally sanctioned (institutionalization). If the long-range goals of a change demand high levels of support from the employees, maximum commitment is necessary (internalization). Before building a commitment strategy, it’s important to understand what levels of commitment are needed from which constituencies.

4. Commitment is expensive; do not order it if you cannot pay for it.

Organizational commitment is complex and costly. Most sponsors want full support for changes they intend to implement but have little understanding of the dynamics involved. Once they do understand the resources required to build commitment, they often balk at the expense. They want high target support but are not willing to pay the price to acquire it.

Through consistent action, people who are fully committed to implementing an organizational change show a high level of personal investment in achieving the desired goal. They reject the rewards that are not compatible with the implementation plan. Gaining this kind of advocacy at the target level requires great individual and organizational investment by the sponsors and the agents.
The commitment-building activities outlined above are costly, yet the payoff can be dramatic.

5. Either build commitment or prepare for the consequences.

Although building maximum commitment is important, there are times that logistic, political, or economic issues make the cost of generating commitment too high. If full commitment is not likely, preparation for the resulting resistance is necessary. Too often sponsors and/or agents decide not to invest in building target commitment, and are then surprised and unprepared for the inevitable resistance. Both sponsors and agents must either do what is necessary to build target support or decide that it is not worth the cost. In doing so, they must determine ahead of time what their response to the resistance will be.


The techniques described above for building commitment are powerful. Although individuals bear the ultimate responsibility for choosing what they will commit to, and whether they will shift their behaviors and mindsets, those who are orchestrating organizational change bear both a practical and an ethical responsibility for carefully choosing what they ask people to commit to. From a purely practical perspective, being selective about building commitment is good stewardship of organizational resources. Once people are committed to a new way of operating, it takes significant effort to shift that mindset and behavior in a new direction. It is therefore critical to make sure that the changes you are asking people to take on are the right ones.

From an ethical perspective, the exercise of influence in organizations is a powerful tool. Those who apply power, influence, and consequences to shift mindsets and behavior must understand the moral, social, political, and economic issues that are raised when they apply those tools to organizational change. They have an obligation ensure that they are putting themselves, and their efforts, in service of initiatives that bring value to the organization, to the individuals affected, and to society.

References