

COMMITMENT

for the HR Professional

By Joanne L. Smikle

HR professionals are responsible for creating engaging environments that spawn and support high levels of commitment. That commitment extends beyond the individual business units and the enterprise to the larger industry in which the enterprise functions. While creating this commitment is of vital importance, it is equally important that HR professionals have high levels of commitment themselves. It is difficult to deliver what one does not demonstrate.

This article focuses on the importance of commitment in the HR and OD profession, strategies for cultivating it within individual practitioners and strategies for enhancing one's individual commitment. It features insights from two senior practitioners with extensive experience managing various facets of human resources, talent management and organizational development.

What exactly is commitment?

There are many definitions and models of commitment in both business and academic literature. For the purposes of this work, we will use

Meyer and Allen's (1991) definition.¹ These theorists hold that commitment can be comprised of desire, need and/or obligation. They further define commitment as a psychological state, a mindset. This commitment is what characterizes the relationships employees have with their employer. It also determines whether they stay with an employer. Clearly commitment is related to retention and satisfaction.

Meyer and Allen make a clear distinction between three types of commitment: affective, continuance and normative. An affective commitment, the most desirable of the three, reflects an emotional attachment to the organization. It is characterized by a sense of identification with the organization. It is also characterized by involvement in the organization. When an employee has a strong affective commitment they stay because that is what they truly want to do. Steve Persche, Senior Director of Human Resources for Johnson & Johnson in Skillman, New Jersey, says of affective commitment, "It is a personal, core, individual thing." He elaborates

on this by saying that affective commitment directly impacts an HR practitioner's intent to stay with an organization. Persche contends that this type of commitment creates an infectious enthusiasm. He holds that there is excitement and pride in the organization and in the organization's abilities. HR practitioners who possess affective commitment are, according to Persche, "pride builders, they inspire pride in others."

Continuance commitment is quite different. It is rooted in need, most often economic need. In this case employees are aware of the costs associated with leaving and opt to stay. Those costs include benefits like pensions and profit sharing, accrued leave and the perks that accompany seniority. When continuance commitment is the driving force, employees stay because they need to. The third and final type of commitment is normative. This is an obligatory motivation for staying with an organization. An employee demonstrating normative commitment will stay not because she/he wants to or needs to, but because of a feeling that they ought to.

¹ The definition provided is adapted from J.P. Meyer and N.J. Allen's article, "A Three-Component Conceptualization of Organizational Commitment," published in *Human Resource Management Review*, 1991.

While continuance and normative commitment are not uncommon, they are the least desirable for organizations looking to build sustainable engagement and employee satisfaction. It is important to analyze organizational systems to determine whether you are emphasizing affective, continuance or normative commitment. Each will deliver very different results for the organization. It is equally important to identify which of the types of commitment is typified by your own behavior.

Commitment to the profession

Not only do people commit to their employers, they also commit to the profession of which they are a part. This is what Bergmann (2011) refers to as professional commitment.² Professional commitment is a belief that a person holds in the goals and values of the profession. The belief is coupled with an acceptance of those goals and values. Blair Slaughter, PhD, Vice President of People and

Organizational Effectiveness at Baltimore-based T. Rowe Price notes, “Practitioners have to be concerned about the profession of OD.”

Slaughter’s point should be considered seriously. Professional commitment is characterized by a willingness to work hard on the behalf of the profession. She further holds that organizations want help solving practical business problems. She says “OD and HR people get credibility when they can solve those problems. We should be practical problem solving partners.” This type of professional commitment is of vital importance in the HR community. Not only is it the foundation for positioning those senior in the profession as key players in the C-suite, it is also an important element for drawing in the next generation of HR professionals.

Building individual commitment

With a clear understanding of the types of commitment, it is important to understand how one builds a deep

commitment to both the profession and the organization. Persche advises that building one’s personal commitment is important because the HR function is often in question. He holds that it is only as good as the people doing it. In Persche’s fifteen years with Johnson & Johnson he has come to the conclusion that commitment can drive great things. However, he cautions that it is rooted in personal motivation. If an HR practitioner lacks the motivation to commit to the organization, the industry or the profession, it will be very difficult to have the internal spark required to drive a deep, effective commitment.

Commitment is built through focused attention on learning. This learning extends far beyond building a sound knowledge base regarding the requirements for success in the HR function. It extends to learning about the metrics that matter in the larger organization. Many HR practitioners

² The definition provided is adapted from T.J. Bergmann et al’s article, “Integrating the Three Domains of Employee Commitment: An Exploratory Study,” published in The Journal of Applied Behavioral Research, 2011.

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lack substantive knowledge of the strategies that drive the larger organization. They function without a real understanding of what different business units actually do, how they measure their success and the factors that drive their operations.

Beyond motivation and focused attention on learning, commitment is built by viewing the organization as a viable system and understanding the critical role that HR and OD people play within that system. Slaughter advises that, "Our craft as OD people is the organization. We must be authentic to be invested in the organization because we are the system." She holds that we are vital to the system and must understand that fact in order to be fully committed to the collective. Credible, committed practitioners cannot be mere spectators. They are important collaborators in maximizing the effectiveness of the organization.

It should be noted that commitment has natural ebbs and flows depending

upon what is going on with the organization and the individual. Persche cautions that a person's commitment can go up and down within a range of acceptability. It is normal and natural to experience periods where an organizational initiative or change is less than convincing. However, the larger strategic intent should be compelling enough to enable the maintenance of a deep, abiding commitment to the organization. Persche advises that the business units we support expect behavior that is living into the model of leadership. They rightfully expect that their HR practitioners are fully committed. He asks, "How can you talk about principles if you, yourself, as an individual outwardly struggle?" Even when your commitment feels like it is waning, it is important to be sure that is still well within an acceptable range because HR practitioners are expected to be models of commitment and engagement.

Summary

Having a real, demonstrated commitment is essential to the individual success of HR and OD practitioners. It is one of the subtle ways we add value to the organization. This is not to be confused with operating as a "yes man" or "yes woman." In fact, quite the opposite is required. Persche suggests that being skeptical and engaging in healthy debates is important. He states that, "You can squeeze more credibility out by voicing questions and analyzing disconnects for the organization. You must do more than tow the party line. You have to be thoughtful in how you exude your commitment." Slaughter seconds this notion when she says that OD professionals are not satisfied with the status quo. They believe the organization can always continue to improve. She wisely states that, "They do not push the agenda faster than the org can absorb it, and they are concerned about the organization and its capacity."

Certainly we must model best practices in the various facets of HR and OD in which we practice. Underlying our own ability to demonstrate high levels of expertise is our sincere commitment. This commitment is to the organization that employs or retains us, to the industries in which we function, and to our larger HR/OD profession. Demonstrating this commitment adds value to the organization, credibility to our individual persona and significance to our careers. We are responsible for modeling the affective commitment that can literally transform organizations and entire industries.



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