FEATURE

The Call of Commitment:
Implications for the Direction and Intensity of Our Leader Behaviors and Actions

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ABSTRACT

The word "commitment" is ubiquitous and interpreted in a multitude of ways. This essay surveys definitions of commitment used in various disciplines, and examines different types of commitments, ranging from those involving personal objectives, to values and principles, to ultimate concerns. Commitment shapes human lives in a variety of powerful ways. Commitments are structured in ways that generally include a belief, care, declaration, practice, readiness for challenges, persistence, and identity. It is possible to develop and hone commitments through expression, reflection, self-scrutiny, conditional scripts, understanding of ritual and images, practice and partnership, and intentionality, et al. Commitments often spring from a calling that can be discerned.

> *Our mental health always requires the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. What man needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him.*
>
> - Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

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Introduction

Commitment is ubiquitous. Yet what do we know about commitment? Are there different types of commitment? What are the building blocks of commitment? How do commitments shape our habits and behaviors? Our identity? What are the antecedents of commitment? How does commitment develop? Finally, and perhaps most critically for any profession, can we intentionally train for commitment, like we train to become pilots or athletes? Viktor Frankl suggests we can because we're hard-wired to strive and struggle for goals worthy of us.

The first section of this chapter examines how scholars have defined commitment across a variety of disciplines. Next, I explore six different types of commitments. The third section focuses on the structure of commitment, including seven features that seem to be present for a commitment to fully develop and mature. Finally, I posit that we can train for commitment and I offer nine different exercises to strengthen our commitment muscle.

Defining Commitment

In the United States, some of us are committed to serving our Nation. Others are committed to losing weight or being an accountant or abolishing slave trafficking in Africa. These are all examples of commitment. Yet not everything we do can be woven into a story about commitment. While some people may enjoy word puzzles, it sounds a bit strange to hear someone say she is committed to solving the daily Sudoku puzzle. It makes perfect sense, however, to hear this same person say she is committed to her family or to protecting the environment. So what's the difference?

Commitment has been studied across various scholarship domains, including psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, religion, relationship studies, and philosophy. For example, researchers within the field of organizational behavior have defined commitment as a "force that binds an individual to a course of action that is of relevance to a particular target" (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). A prominent scholar who studies relationships defines commitment as "the tendency to maintain a relationship and to feel psychologically attached to it" (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). One sociologist defines commitment as "the attachment of the self to the requirements of social relations that are seen as self-expressive" (Kanter, 1972). Finally, one of the most common definitions suggests that commitment is the "pledging or binding of an individual to behavioral acts" (Keisler, 1971).

Yet to me each of these definitions somehow misses the mark. In many ways, commitment is one of those concepts–like creativity or spirituality–that defies an easy-to-operationalize definition. This is especially so within a military context, where the idea of commitment is woven so deeply into our enduring pledges and daily duties. In other words, these definitions, steeped as they are in the social sciences, don't quite capture the "call" of commitment, and how this call has tangible implications for the direction, intensity and duration of our leader behaviors and actions.

Types of Commitment

The term commitment conjures an entire family of mental images. Some of us have made a commitment to a particular career field, while others have made a marriage commitment. Some of us make personal commitments ("I am committed to my Lord") and dare I say that we make various behavioral commitments on a daily basis ("Sorry I can't go for a beer tonight... I made a commitment to go shopping with my wife"). These are all expressions of commitment.

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My research on the various academic and popular literatures on commitment suggests that our commitments can be placed in one of six categories:

- *Commitments to people* (family, friends, marriage)
- *Commitments to personal achievements* (career, leadership aspirations, influence)
- *Commitments to personal growth* (self-understanding, faith, physical fitness)
- *Commitments to values and principles* (honesty, social justice, defending our Nation)
- *Commitments to groups* (the football team, Wings of Blue, Sierra Club)
- *Commitments to ultimate concerns* (God, Deity)

Of course, these categories overlap. For example, while a husband might be faithful to his wife because he loves her, another husband is faithful because he's committed to the principle of marital fidelity. In addition, some of us keep our jobs because of our commitment to feeding and sheltering our family while others keep our jobs because we love what we do.

Furthermore, some of us make a significant commitment to a singular goal, often to a challenging career or a noble purpose (see Colby and Damon, 1992). Others of us seem to have difficulty making a commitment to anything; indeed, these individuals often perceive commitment as an infringement on their freedom (Kenniston, 1965).

Balancing our various commitments is a perennial challenge for most of us. The ongoing effort to integrate or "harmonize" our commitments is certainly more complicated and challenging than the life of a person who is committed to one goal only. Indeed, some of us strive to establish a *hierarchy of commitments* (for example, family comes before fitness) while others have identified an *ultimate commitment* (to God? Nation?).

There are also people who too easily break their commitments, almost habitually so. These individuals can establish a commitment (e.g., to learn a language or to call friends on a regular basis) but their day-to-day motivation makes their commitment less salient. And finally, there are those who can only be described as "commitment prodigies." These individuals seem to effortlessly make and keep their commitments with exceptional resoluteness.

In sum, the reality is that the "objects" of our commitments is almost limitless. Moreover, the wonderful thing about the nature of commitment is that we can be committed to something and yet fully understand and accept that not everyone should have to make the same commitment. Clearly, while some philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, posit that there are numerous "universal commitments" that all of us *should* make (to justice and fairness, for example), our commitments are mostly understood as examples of self-expression.

How Commitment Shapes Our Lives

Commitment seems important. But do our commitments make a difference? While there is relatively little empirical research on this question, here's what we know. Researchers have examined the relationship between goal commitment and performance and found strong evidence that the level of our commitment to a goal is a significant variable in predicting goal success or failure (Locke and Lathem, 1990). More particularly, there is compelling evidence that commitment is a strong mediating variable in smoking cessation and weight loss interventions (Oettingen, 2010). And researchers who study organizational behavior have clearly documented that a worker's level of commitment (to his or her job, organization or career) correlates with employee turnover, absenteeism, performance and job satisfaction (Meyer, 2001).

Yet the empirical study of commitment does not quite seem to fully capture the "call" of commitment as a source of power in our lives. Scientific studies often do not have the power of stories. Thus, the humanities can also help us glean and grasp the ways in which our lives are shaped by this mysterious yet powerful call. We have all been moved by stories of commitment found in history, biographies, and the sacred scriptures across religious traditions. Woven together, these various sources tell us that our commitments:

- Give us direction
- Shape our behavior and conduct
- Change us
- Place demands on us
- Help us know when to take a stand or to show resolve
- Shape our notions of accomplishment and achievement
- Motivate and energize us
- Offer us meaning and purpose
- Form and shape our identity
- Reveal our character

The Structure of Commitment

There seem to be seven discrete features that form the structure of commitment. That is, for any "object" of commitment (X), these seven features appear to be essential for that particular commitment to fully develop and mature. These features are:

1. Belief – I believe in X.
2. Care – I care about X.
3. Declaration – I make an intentional, often visible commitment to X.
4. Practice – I practice the habits and virtues of X.
5. Be Ready for Challenges – I need to be ready for the challenges I will face in my commitment to X
6. Persistence –I persist in my commitment to X, even in the face of crisis, setbacks or sacrifice.
7. Identity – Over time, X becomes a part of my identity.

These seven features are examined below:

1. ***Belief*** **(I believe in X)**

Beliefs come in all sizes and shapes. The seven Army Core Values are beliefs. Freedom is a belief. The expression "blood is thicker than water" is another belief. Beliefs are the seeds of our commitments. No one can form a commitment before they form a belief. Typically, children and adolescents "try on" and test out different beliefs, ranging from the prescriptive ("treat others as you would like to be treated") to the proscriptive ("don't drink and drive"). But at some point in time, we begin to establish for ourselves the beliefs we want to live by.

2. ***Care*** **(I care about X)**

Beliefs are a necessary but insufficient condition for developing a commitment. Too many people "believe" in this or that idea – but never act on those beliefs. Thus, we also need to *care – and care deeply* – about the beliefs that underpin our commitments. Our caring for X is the motivational force that connects us to our commitments. What we care about generates the emotional fuel and energy necessary to act on our beliefs. When we care deeply about a belief we literally "feel" its importance and seriousness; we begin to aspire to live in fidelity – often passionately and intensely – to these beliefs.

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3. ***Declaration*** **(I make an intentional, often visible commitment to X)**

The stage is set: the marriage between our cognitive beliefs and our passionate cares. We are prepared, metaphorically, to adopt our commitment. We are ready to invest significant time and resources toward this commitment. We are also ready to make "visible" our commitment. Sometimes this "declaration" occurs through a public pledge, a shared oath or a sacred vow. Other times, we make visible our commitment to ourselves *only*. Whatever form or shape this declaration takes, we usually strive to find ways to valorize this commitment. We begin to invest in this commitment, endowing it with significant meaning, for this commitment now expresses and signifies a noble purpose, one of our life goals.

4. ***Practice*** **(I practice the habits and virtues of X)**

The field of character education suggests that character consists of the head, heart and hands. Thus, in the model

of commitment presented here our beliefs ("head") and our caring ("heart") motivate and energize us to practice the habits and virtues of our commitments ("hands"). Put simply, our commitments are built on the anvil of habits. These habits form and focus our commitments. Moreover, what philosophers and theologians call the virtues can also be understood as habits of thought, emotions and actions in service to our commitments. As an example, let's say a soldier is committed to being a good brother or sister. What does having a commitment to being a good sibling mean in terms of habits and virtues? Showing concern? Sacrifice? Honest feedback? Most of us are committed to specific life-projects (such as being a good brother or sister) and it's through these commitments that we experience the virtues.

5. ***Be Ready for Challenges*** **(I need to be ready for the challenges I will face in my commitment to X)**

Every commitment has a cost attached to it (either to our time, resources, or to pursuing other opportunities). In addition, every commitment worth having will – at one time or another – face an internal or external threat. Having doubts or regrets about your career choice is an example of an internal threat. Learning that you will soon be deployed to Afghanistan and being concerned how this will affect your marriage is an example of an external threat. Anticipating and being ready for these internal and external challenges – *before* these threats emerge – is a critical but often overlooked step in the structure of our commitments. Those who care deeply about their commitments will find ways to ensure that they are holding themselves accountable to their commitments, whether through the *support* of prayer, family, or friends (or other "accountability pathways" such as self-regulatory strategies). In sum, for most of our commitments it is prudent to "build a dyke" before the proverbial storm hits.

6. ***Persistence*** **(I persist in my commitment to X, even in the face of crisis, setbacks or sacrifice)**

In some ways, our commitments are like quests. As we strive to keep a commitment, many of us will face adversity and crisis. Our strength of will and volition will be tested. For some of us, we will "devalue" our commitments, and over time care less about showing fidelity to them. However, the good news is that there is a body of research suggesting that when we persist through adversity and setbacks we bolster and escalate our fidelity to what we're committed to. In short, when a person's commitment is being challenged or attacked, a person with "high commitment" will respond by strengthening his or her commitment (Keisler, 1971).

7. ***Identity*** **(Over time, X becomes a part of my identity)**

My untested hypothesis is that the progression through the above features (or "steps") is invariant, but the pace is not. Often, we are unaware of these features and their progression. But there is an endpoint: Our commitments become the fiber and connecting threads of our life narrative, the story lines that become the plot of our lives. Our primary commitments become sacred to us. They tell us what we're willing to die and live for. We identify with our commitments and over time they form the core of our self-identity. Put simply: *We become our commitments and our commitments become us*.

Training For Commitment

The very idea of training for commitment sounds a bit strange. How could we ever build "commitment muscle" in ways analogous to developing a physical muscle? What would a "commitment workout" look like? I've listed below nine exercises to develop and hone our commitments. Think of these nine as a training regimen for anyone who wants to strengthen his or her commitment muscle:

1. **Each of us should be able to articulate our current life goals**

Our life goals are much broader than our commitments. For example, many students, soldiers and young professionals might have a life goal to get married but they've yet to make that commitment. A college student might have "being a leader" as a life goal, yet his or her commitment to this goal may be difficulty to fully enact

in their current role or responsibility. *Our life goals serve as the main bridges to our commitments.* In many ways, they help to formulate our commitments. It's also important to underscore that our life goals are more than just a listing of platitudes, ideals and principles ("I want to keep all my promises"). Instead, they are unique to our personal narrative (for example, one student recently shared with me that one of his life goals is to display the same strong "work ethic" as his grandfather and father before him). Finally, our life goals do not have to be a fixed blueprint, but a true response to our experiences and learning about ourselves. In other words, our life goals can (and should) evolve and change.

2. **Each of us should be able to articulate our current commitments**

Many people do not have a keen insight into their own commitments. What does it truly mean to commit to a military career or a medical career? Isn't it just a job? Most societies have yet to find a mechanism or a structure by which young people are challenged to articulate their commitments (professional, relational, ethical) in ways that are imbued with meaning and purpose.

3. **Each of us should fiercely scrutinize whether our commitments are truly self-determined**

The research is clear: "Borrowed" commitments (from our parents, our faith tradition, what a profession expects) are less likely to be adhered to than those we authentically "own." No one can impose a commitment upon us. We need to both self-legislate and self-govern our commitments. Put simply, our commitments are more than simply "walking the talk." Our commitments are about determining what our talk should be about. Identifying our commitments is an achievement in self-determining what is most important in our lives (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

4. **Each of us should have our own "if/then" commitment scripts**

"If/then" planning is common to the research on goal commitment. It is also a key insight of the leader self-structure, developed by Hannah and colleagues. In this model, a leader's cognitive affective processing system (CAPS) is activated when a particular situation primes the preferred behavioral or cognitive response. We don't possess traits, suggests Hannah, we possess skills and behavioral tendencies ("scripts") that are activated during particular situations. In other words, we can learn – via training and feedback on that training – how to produce consistent behaviors within particular situations. For example, the CAPS model explains how a first responder, soldier or fire fighter can be trained to face danger and uncertainty with confidence and competency. The question is whether this training orientation can be applied to situations where our commitments will likely be challenged. Clearly, such training would need to be individualized to ensure that these "if/then scripts" focuses on our particular commitments and the relevant challenges that each of us may face, including challenges to particular oaths, vows and pledges we've taken (Hannah, Woolfork & Lord, 2009; Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2010).

5. **Each of us should be aware of the "images" and "rituals" that speak to our commitments**

Images matter. We all have mental pictures of people who are our commitment role models. For many of us, our parents serve as these commitment exemplars. For others, stories from sacred scriptures summon for us what it means to be committed. In addition, there are various "commitment rituals" that express and embody our commitments, ranging from people who run in marathons to religious pilgrimages. Each of us should be able to identify what images and rituals nourish our commitments.

6. **Each of us should be able to explain how we practice the habits and virtues of our commitments**

Aristotle suggests that habits are indispensable to our commitments. Indeed, there is empirical evidence (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2010) to suggest that encoding particular habits ("behaviors of commitment") can actually lead to *caring more* about that commitment (what is generally known as a "felt commitment"). The point here

is not to allow the habit or behavior to become so settled that we forget or devalue the "why" of our requisite duties or responsibilities. It is this reflective quality that ultimately defines and gives depth to our commitment.

7. **Each of us should be encouraged to reflect on what we've learned when one of our commitments was challenged or threatened**

We know that learning from our challenges, even our failures, predicts growth and development. Just as pilots are trained to fearlessly examine their mistakes (and to learn from these mistakes), each of us should train ourselves to gain insight on how we responded when one of our commitments was challenged or threatened.

There is empirical evidence to suggest that encoding particular habits can actually lead to caring more about that commitment...

8. **Each of us should be able to identify someone who will hold us accountable to our commitments**

We have coaches for sports and non-athletic teams (such as the chess or debating teams) because we know that coaching can make a difference in performance. Coaching can also hold us accountable. Thus, when it comes to showing fidelity to our commitments, each of us should have our own "accountability coach." We should be able to understand how our coach holds us accountable to our commitments and helps us to be our best possible selves.

9. **Annually, each of us should reflect on our commitments**

Once a year, men and women in the military take a physical fitness test. Why? Because we recognize that physical fitness is important to being in the military. The test is a way to quantify and measure our fitness. Analogously, might we one day develop a way to measure the extent to which we are living our commitments? In several faith traditions, there is a time of the year when we are commanded to intentionally self-reflect on our behaviors during the past twelve months. Can we imagine a time when each of us, in our own way, fiercely reflects on the extent to which we have shown fidelity to our commitments? Taking the time to conduct this inventory would seem especially salient to becoming a leader of character.

Conclusion

There are several dimensions of commitment I have not addressed. For example, I have not examined the antecedents of commitment. Personal characteristics are also clearly important to the concept of commitment (age and education have been linked to levels of commitment) and so is a person's disposition (e.g., our need for achievement, affiliation, autonomy). In addition, environmental factors and family structure also play a role (Johnson, M, 1999).

I have also not discussed the seminal relationship between commitment and integrity. As I understand the term, integrity is being true in word and deed to a set of values and principles to which one is committed. In other words, we should strive to show integrity to our commitments—whether these commitments be personal, ethical, intellectual or professional.

In addition, I have not sufficiently addressed the relationship between commitment and noble purpose. Not all commitments are noble. Some are selfish and destructive. I have also tended to emphasize the "positive commitments" rather than our "negative commitments." For example, a student can have a positive commitment to being a good friend as well as a negative commitment to take whatever steps are needed to avoid failing physics a second time.

Nor have I adequately explained the ambiguity of some commitments. For example, what does it mean—in terms of specific actions—if I am committed to ending poverty in Africa? This commitment may not immediately translate to any specific action steps. This sort of commitment serves only as a backdrop for potential action rather than serving as a general rule of behavior (such as a commitment to keeping one's promises).

Finally, I believe we are "called" to our commitments and that discerning this call requires a certain kind of listening - a listening to the heart. All of us can be trained to hear this call and to become shaped by a vision of noble purposes that extends beyond mere self-interest. Indeed, I'd argue that we're most alive when we do. Perhaps this is why the wisdom literature suggests that if memory is the mental organ of our past, commitment is the mental organ of our future.

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