

# COMMITMENT IS POWERFUL; ATTACHMENT IS NOT

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In an age when the innovators are giving the elbow to the warriors, and when organisations need to be adaptive, collaborative and inventive if they are to survive and perform well, what is the role of commitment?

Many of us believe that it is power and wealth and talent and creativity that determine high achievement in business and in life generally. Not so, according to recent research. Persistence is the key determinant of great achievement. And I contend that persistence always starts out as an intention, and the coupling of the two results in a powerful commitment.

A former Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, used to say that self-interest doesn't always win the race, but at least you know it is trying. In a similar vein, commitment does not always achieve its goals, but it's odds of success are considerably better than the alternatives.

In her recent book "Grit", Angela Duckworth argues that you can predict the likelihood of someone succeeding at some venture, by tracing their history of persisting at previous ventures even if these have little or no relationship to the present one. Did the person stick at a sport when they were growing up, or a hobby, or a friendship, or an area of study, or a job, or a committed relationship, or a parental responsibility, and achieve some level of success at any of them?

She cites the example of recruitment success at West Point military college in the USA. This is one of the most prestigious military leadership colleges in the world which recruits only the best graduates with the highest grades and greatest sporting prowess and subjects them to an extraordinary battery of tests to establish their suitability for admission to West Point. Yet the drop-out rate of new cadets within the first year of training was very significant. Talent alone was a not a good predictor of success. Duckworth claims that West Point achieved remarkable improvements in their retention rates by including her

simple “persistence test” at the time of recruitment, and later by changing the prevailing culture of bullying and hazing.

Duckworth, who is a colleague of Martin Seligman of positive psychology fame, has formulated a “double persistence” theory of high achievement. She argues that talent alone will not make you skilful at something – talent plus persistence is what is required to develop a skill. But, she contends, skill alone will not guarantee high achievement in any field. It takes skill plus another big dose of persistence to become a high achiever. Because of this double dose of persistence, it is not always the most talented or even the most skilful who achieve the most in life. There is hope for the rest of us!

However, as I have written before in my article “Changing Habits”, persistence is not enough to guarantee that we will persist at persistence. Something else is needed – I am calling it Intention, and Angela Duckworth calls it Passion. Intention and persistence are the two dimensions of commitment, and commitment is very powerful. Commitments start out as “unreal” intentions, and it is our effort and persistence which make them real. Many people believe that you need a lot of courage to persist at things, and often you do. But I believe that you need far more courage to generate an intention and to honour it when there may be no evidence whatsoever yet that it is real. Indeed lots of our intentions fly in the face of reality and the evidence. Twenty diets later, how much courage does it take for you to say “I intend to lose 10 kilos and keep it off”? How much courage does it take to say “We will improve student learning outcomes significantly at our school” despite the poverty of your students or your previous educational record?

Yet all powerful and successful commitments start out this way. They start as an intention for which there may be little or no evidence. In fact, they are an act of creation. “All men are created equal” we might declare, when it is patently obvious that humans are living very unequally. “We are the business of choice for customers and employees” we say, while all the data currently tells a very different story. These are not lies – but they are not the truth either. As I have written in a previous article “Strategic Success for Leaders”, they are based on a present-day sense of the future. We are the source for these intentions and we are the guarantors. We generate them, either individually or collectively, and we are the ones who declare that we will make

them real through our own efforts and persistence. As leaders we know that this will mean mobilizing the effort and persistence of others too. And when the going gets tough and we want to give up on a commitment, it is our very own self-generated intention where we go to find succour.

Angela Duckworth has a similar idea but she calls it Passion. And she claims that passion consists of both interest and purpose. Often, we commit to certain paths because of our individual or collective interests. Over time, we stick at the commitment because of the meaning it gives us which is now bigger than ourselves and is about contributing to others. Effective leaders help build organisational cultures which support and even demand both passion and persistence. Good luck surviving in an elite sports team, or any other high performing group, without them! I believe that leaders waste their precious organisational strategy and culture sessions when they keep them purely analytical and behavioural – they need to be generative too. Generative can be motivating but it is a million miles from being just motivational, which dissipates at the first flat tyre. I regularly receive messages from managers who did a short one week leadership course with me eight or ten years ago telling me about its on-going impact – they have generated value for themselves through insight and commitment which goes well beyond transient motivation. Organisations need to be developing more of those commitments and that kind of leadership.

There are times when commitment does not seem powerful – it seems more like a great big ball and chain which is sending us and others to the bottom of the ocean. Often this is not commitment, or not anymore, but rather attachment. Commitment can be a hard slog at times, but it is always sourced in our own freedom of choice and responsibility. Indeed, taking responsibility can be how we get back in touch with a foggy commitment. If we “must” achieve a project for any other reason, including to get the results, it becomes an attachment. It is good to measure progress, but obsessing unduly about the result of our commitment can sometimes kill our commitment. If you are like me sometimes and getting on the scales several times a day to check your weight loss, you have probably stopped doing the things needed to lose weight, have succumbed to vanity and have imbued your scales with some mystical power instead. Attachment is generally sourced in our ego or

collective identity and it is not powerful and not satisfying. Corrosive “judgementalism” can result from attachment (see my earlier article “Leadership that Transforms Groups”). Detachment is also what allows us to make the occasional wise call to stop persisting. If we do not stay mindful and intentional about our commitments they can mutate into attachments.

Leaders and organisations need to be aware of the paradox that lies at the heart of powerful commitments. They require lots of effort and persistence to achieve success, and they require creativity and “letting go” to get started and to stay powerful and satisfying during the journey.