

## Commitment and Conviction

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***This article explores the widening gaps between commitment and conviction in personal life as well as at the workplace. These gaps manifest themselves in a disconnection between one's daily duties and one's inner desires. The way around this disconnection is to manage and bring in some amount of balance between one's commitments and one's personal convictions. Not only would it contribute to organizational success but also enrich one's life.***

*"Individual commitment to a group effort, that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."*<sup>1</sup>

*"You should never abandon the heart of your personal conviction. Sometimes, we call it our inner voice; a voice that is speaking to us. There are also times when we call it our conscience. I have followed my inner voice. I followed what I believed to be correct."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A quote attributed to Vince Lombardi, American Football Coach, national symbol of single-minded determination to win.

<sup>2</sup> Professor M S Swaminathan in an interview to Soka Shimpa, a Soka Gakkai newspaper in August 2005. <http://www.sgi.org/english/Features/articles/swaminathan.htm>

**I**t is the synthesis of individual commitment and personal conviction that builds institutions—political, economic and social. It sustains the nature of businesses, oils the wheels of development and progress and gives structure to personal relationships within the family and the society. Paradoxically, the very point where one expects the perfect synthesis between individual commitment and personal conviction is the point where exist risks of fissure. One of the possible causes for such tension is, what is called the only constant—change.

Our institutions change, our work culture changes, the nature of business changes and our job description changes. Not only that—the dynamics of personal relationships, responsibilities and family duties also change. What do not alter are our deepest beliefs and values—our convictions. The point this article is trying to make is that our ever-changing obligations and commitment are based on our rather enduring and permanent convictions, which are ultimately an amalgamation of our inner perceptions, values and intuition. As a consequence, what we are left with are wide gaps between what we have committed to do, and what we actually believe in.

Yet another possible reason for the chasm between individual commitments and personal convictions are the availability of choices. Our modern world offers us a myriad of options in work, relationships and way of life. One just has to stand by the soap and shampoo shelf in a store to be daunted by the varieties to choose from. The amazing range of choices that we have, complicates our life and often drives wedges between what we need, what we want and what we have. Life for man has changed from the simple exchange of barter to the complicated exchange of the market economy. As it is, the need to conform to societal demands concerning lifestyle, education, profession as opposed to living one's dreams is difficult, and the dazzling choices further add to the complications. The choices we make would impact our lives, and whether those choices match our personal convictions or not impact our lives even more. Not only does one have to adapt to the change and deal with the unexpected, but also make appropriate choices, which may or may not be in accordance with our deepest convictions. It is very easy therefore, in this modern world of change and choice, to realize one fine day, that the commitments we have made are divorced from our inner convictions. The consequence is that work becomes drudgery, responsibility a burden, and life becomes anything but worth living.

What we need is to match our commitments to our convictions. What we need to do is pursue occupations that we can commit to with conviction. While an organization sets the pace and nature of the work it wants—it's the people who actually have to carry it out. When people work towards a goal that they believe in, commitment is easier. The ideal situation is when each individual is involved in doing the work that he or she loves to do. The reality is that one has to earn a living, pay the rent and live up to the responsibilities of home and organization, regardless of whether or not we enjoy what we do or whether it is in direct conflict with our convictions.

### **The Seed of Conviction**

What then is personal conviction? It is how you orient yourself to look at life—what values and beliefs you hold on issues of work, family, parenthood, friendship, professionalism and so on. What you consider duty and what you consider leisure. What you feel is right and what you feel is wrong. The seed is planted at infancy, when as children we grope around for nuggets of wisdom handed out to us by our elders, tempered with responsibility, our duties, as opposed to shirking chores. The seed takes root egged by an innate sense of what is the right thing to do as opposed to wrong. As we grow, we slowly acquire values regarding justice, honesty, work, entertainment, love etc. Parenting, culture, religion, economic standard of living and environment all contribute to the values and conviction of an individual.

The initial learning—the beliefs, the feelings and the thoughts that develop soon take root, to form one's internal orientation. Each of us has our own set of convictions. However similar the upbringing or socio-cultural milieu, not everyone's conviction will be the same. Even in one family, the personal convictions of siblings are different. Personal convictions, in fact, are what give a person individuality—his or her own stamp, so to speak. Perhaps it is the marvel of creation that while all humans are made up of DNA—the building block of life—everyone's DNA is different from the others. While one's personal value system is hard to analyze and set aside like fingerprints, it is a fact that without it, it would be difficult to distinguish one person from the other.

We could assume personal conviction to be simply faith or confidence in certain beliefs that work for the individual. A person is convinced that bribery is not the

way for him, and hence, will not be bribed. Yet another, however, sees the bribe as a perk. It was Mahatma Gandhi's personal conviction that non-violence was the right weapon to counter British imperialism, while for Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, an army was the answer. Personal convictions direct the individual to make certain choices and weigh the consequences. They also channel our ambitions, orient our actions and fuel our dreams. It is finally on the basis of these personal convictions that we begin to make commitments to people around us, the workplace we choose to be in, as well as to ourselves.

### **The Shoots of Commitments**

The initial commitment that a person makes are to his or her family—commitments that arise out of emotional and physical ties—commitment to a grandparent, parent, a child, a sibling etc. Commitment leads to responsibility. The way a society is structured, what kind of values, social mores as well as religious customs are attributed to the family unit, would determine the nature of the commitments. For example, the father as the head of the unit in a patriarchal society, would decide the roles of the others around him, and their individual commitments would vary accordingly. These commitments may not be borne from choice but would be honored (or dishonored) depending on the individual's personal conviction, values and feelings. No matter what, a certain amount of commitment is needed to ensure stability, and enable the family to function as a unit.

With education, association with the peer group and wider interaction, each of us is exposed to the entire social gamut. One's personal convictions would help in the selection process of friends, of personal goals, of employment and ultimately of the direction of one's life. Life is all about the choices we make and just as we commit to our family responsibilities, we commit to our professional goals. Consciously and subconsciously our personal convictions determine the job we choose, the friends we make and even how we spend our money and time. "Our most important commitments are the result of mundane decisions we make about how to allocate money, time and energy"<sup>3</sup>. You would assume that such commitments are effortless and almost ordinary decisions, but the fact is that they spring from the bedrock of personal conviction. Commitments are not made in isolation. We make commitments because we feel a certain way, we believe in

<sup>3</sup> Donald N Sull and Dominic Houlder (2005) "Do Your Commitments match your Convictions?" *Harvard Business Review Online*.

certain things and we have expectations as well. Expectations may vary from making oneself or someone else happy to expecting praise and rewards.

Just as it enables the smooth functioning of a family, individual commitment ensures the success of organizations. “The success of any organization’s future business strategy depends a great deal on its employees’ commitment levels”<sup>4</sup>. While an organization can put in place caring leadership, good compensation package, promotions, training and development facilities and a healthy work environment, the sense of involvement would depend on the individual’s own level of interest and commitment to the job. To be committed to the workplace, an individual should be able to identify with the work goals, the environment and the values of the organization. He or she should be convinced to give their best to the company and be valued for it. There should be individual pride in the work, reciprocated by organizational recognition. “To be committed to the work, one must have ownership. To have ownership, one must be able to influence what goes on in the workplace. And to influence the workplace, one must be heard and reasonably answered by bosses”<sup>5</sup>.

The workplace is a dynamic unit—the leadership can change, individuals can be transferred or given additional duties or a new technology may be implemented. Anything can happen from the threat of downsizing to the fact that colleagues might not be a mental match. When the individual does not value the work he or she does, or is not valued by the organization, he or she would begin to falter in the given commitments. While a person of strong personal convictions can be a self-motivator, not everyone’s convictions will match the needs of the organization. While people with strong, clear, distinct personal convictions might still be able to honor the commitments of their choice and stand by them, they also might be the ones who are irked when what they had committed to do in the first place, no longer match their personal convictions.

### **The Thorns in Between**

Consider personal convictions as a framework that defines, gives structure to, and sometimes even controls ones’ expectation, actions and goals. However, that

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<sup>4</sup> Dinesh K Vohra (2004) “Employee Commitment and Corporate Excellence”, IT People, *Indian Express Group*.

<sup>5</sup> Bennet Simonton, “Listening, the Doorway to Employee Commitment”, *Innovative Leader*, Volume 14, Number 4, October-December 2005.

framework necessarily has to work around the dynamics of change, and choice and often, despite one's most sincere efforts, the commitments we make do not match our personal convictions. It could be due to a variety of reasons. Often the misallocation of skills is the beginning of discontent, because a person is not doing what he or she is good at doing or enjoys doing. The fact is that you work hard at something you enjoy. On the professional front, an organization is about establishing structure, exercising control and ensuring efficiency and, sometimes, over-zealous efforts in these directions can stifle individuals. Changes of leadership, policy or targets also affect individual commitment, especially if the organization cannot effectively communicate the new goals, or the new leadership cannot inspire employee commitment. While those who are self-motivated or can control the resentment they feel about the mismatch of commitment and their conviction plod on, others may begin to doubt and question their commitments.

Apart from the organization-individual value mismatch, it could also be a sense of discontent springing from the individual concerned. Sometimes, it could be changing family demands—motherhood, for example, requires a woman to reconsider her professional commitments and rearrange it around the demands of her child. The professional targets may get pushed down on the priority list, while the personal takes precedence. Maybe, earning the bread and butter is just not enough. As ordinary mortals, the tendency is to reach out to the exotic—that which is different from the normal. Many successful corporate heads leave their plum posts and exorbitant salaries behind in pursuit of what the poet Robert Frost called the road not taken. The individual thirst to take a risk, follow a passion in one's work and do something 'worthwhile' as opposed to the predictable desk job often drives a wedge between commitment and one's inner self.

The resultant discontent grows into a disconnection between the commitments one has made and the personal convictions one holds. As individuals we may face dilemmas of sorts when we are unable to wholeheartedly commit to the organization goals, because we no longer believe as strongly about them. It becomes difficult to relate to the demands of the company and we begin to resent even the time we have to commit. If the disconnect is not dealt with, then there is the risk that a person would be unable to adapt to the changes in the organization, unable to operate proactively, unable to motivate others in the team or the organization and unable

to lead an enriched life. The thorns of discontent would prick all that is positive and unleash negativity as well as a feeling of helplessness or even aggression.

### **Stemming the Problem**

The solution does not always lie in leaving on job in search of another. It doesn't always lie in giving it all up to follow a passion. Sometimes you cross over the hill to find that the grass is the same shade of green as it was on the other side. There cannot be a total match between one's personal convictions and commitments but there is a way to stem the problem rather than allow both the individual and the organization to suffer. What is called for is a shift in attitude, thinking and behavior in both. While the organization needs to effectively communicate, engage and reward the individual, we as individuals need to reassess prior commitments, respect our convictions and be rational in thought, action and expectation.

Both organization and the individual needs to take stock of the situation. The organization would have to make it conducive to retain individual commitment by exploring the values and attitudes it holds towards the employee, the employee's family and to the society at large. How the organization handles change impacts the commitment level of the individual. "Getting the people in an organization to feel real commitment to a change effort requires managing people's natural resistance to changing the status quo. Resistance is the natural, inevitable consequence to a disruption of people's expectations. It cannot be eliminated, but it can be managed effectively"<sup>6</sup>. It would need to communicate the new vision in such a way that the individual can identify with it. There should be enough control so as to ensure structure—rather than stifle individuality. There should be appropriate training and orientation that would help the individual integrate with the functioning of the company and feel a sense of involvement. Whatever the organizational efforts, the sense of involvement and the level of commitment ultimately rest on individual effort. For us all there is a need to:

*Analyze Beliefs and Values.* What are the personal beliefs and values that you as an individual would bring to the workplace? Can you identify with the organization's culture or would you feel like a misfit? The idea is not simply to join an organization and slip into the 9 to 5 routine. One must be able to articulate

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<sup>6</sup> "Creating Successful Organizational Change", White Paper, Mincu & Associates.

what you stand for in terms of skills, principles and values. Others should be able to sense what you bring to the team and what you expect.

*Prioritize.* Prioritizing is an important thing to do to stem the growing distance between commitment and conviction. What is more important—the family, the salary, the nature of job you want to do etc.? Prioritizing would help an individual to decide how much time, energy, money and emotion to allot to each item on the list. In the process, one is not investing too much in a low priority item and regretting the effort. It is important to put the maximum effort in the most important thing—which is why there is a need to prioritize.

*Be Realistic.* While dreams do indeed spur us on to greater things, one has to be realistic in expectations and actions. Personal convictions serve as a framework within which we have to adapt and adjust. Accordingly, we need to make realistic commitments, rather than with an aim to please the superiors. One has to assess one's skill, commit to the tasks that we can do and stand by our convictions as realistically as is possible.

*Intuit and Believe.* Do not, however, be a slave to rules and regulations—be open to inner perceptions and go with the gut feeling. Intuition is an emotional skill that can be developed by increasing awareness, confidence and ridding oneself of preconceived notions. Keep the inner-self alive rather than bury it under the files and paperwork.

*Be in Control.* Have the ability to rein in the negativity and exercise control both in the workplace as well as personal life. Often things do not happen the way one thinks it would, hence the need to control disappointment and keep sight of the bigger picture. Being in control enables you to keep track of what you are doing now and how you can plan out the work in the future.

*Build Self-worth.* Respect yourself first and others can respect you for who you are. This goes a long way to build self-worth, which, in turn, enables you to make and stand by your professional and personal commitments. In fact, honoring the commitments you have made in turn add to your self-worth. The self-worth would add to the personal esteem of an individual as well as to the contentment levels.

Stemming the problem and balancing the commitments with our convictions rest with us. While an organization can enable and support us, it is left to us as individuals to connect the two.

### **Conclusion–Branching Out**

Often, despite, it all one needs to keep a job that one might not fully enjoy because of more reasons than one—it could be the money, convenient office timing, the logistics etc. However, while it is imperative to have a bread-butter job, it is also possible to pursue a labor of love. Orienting one’s personal conviction towards a different goal is a very good way of maintaining the balance between professional commitments and personal satisfaction. The balance has to be maintained to lead an enriched life and options are a plenty.

Rather than feed the discontent between individual commitment and personal conviction, branch out towards building ‘emotional energy’ which is described as “...an aliveness of the mind and spirit that connects you to the vitality and fun of life”<sup>7</sup>. We do indeed have to work hard in the office and we do indeed have family obligations but we do not have to let it emotionally drain us out. The nature of work is going to be fast paced and result oriented and one’s personal convictions may or may not match that of the organization. Family duties will necessarily have to be attended to. Nevertheless, one has to find ways to interact and connect with people in the workplace. One has to find a way to contribute to the community and network with people outside the workplace. Be it through hobbies, or exercise, development of one’s spiritual well-being—one has to be open to people, experiences and deal with the dynamics of change and choice.

Just as we develop our own personal convictions, we similarly need to develop our own workable rationale that helps us maintain the balance between commitments and convictions, and ensure a comfort level with the self. Work and life is all about meeting challenges and when individual commitments can be balanced with personal convictions, it is easier to keep the promises we make.

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<sup>7</sup> Mira Kirshenbaum (2005), “7 Secrets of High-Energy People”, [www.lifestyle.msn.com](http://www.lifestyle.msn.com)