MANAGING BY COMMITMENTS

Five Disruptive Practices to Improve Execution

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Commitments to Execution,
One Conversation at a Time

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Failure to execute strategic initiatives is a perennial management problem. There is gap between goals, tasks, and results. Existing work-norms are dysfunctional and are not producing the results to move the organization ahead.

There is one simple practice your organization can change that will dramatically improve execution - *making and keeping commitments*. This document describes an easy to implement process cycle that can make a difference.

Managing by Commitment – A Brief History

Commitment based Management (CbM) is not a new idea, it was first introduced as an innovative management practice in the 1980's with the work of Fernando Flores (UC Berkeley) and Terry Winograd (Stanford).

They described a "conversation for action" where two parties make an explicit agreement to deliver a specific outcome by a certain date. The core concept was that the performer was required to negotiate a specific commitment, leading to more buy-in to meeting the deliverable, better collaboration, and better results.

The process of a virtuous conversation between the requester and the performer was defined in three stages: negotiation, delivery, and assessment. Early implementations to promote this process were eventually perceived as too prescriptive and confining, but the construct offered profound promise.

Today the need for enterprise-wide coordination and collaboration has grown many-fold. Accountability is more diffused than ever and communication overload has reached epidemic proportions with new and multiple channels operating at the same time. Dialog between the organization and group manager and department manager and employee is unstructured and not presented in a useful context. Technology advancements have enabled better access and easier adoption. It is time to reinvent and reinvigorate CbM's core principles and practices, but with better implementations.

The Planning to Execution cycle—Two Out of Three does not Work

The biggest challenge is not creating vision, nor developing plans. These are initiated and created throughout the organization, with many meetings, discussions, and involvement occurring at all management levels. The final outputs are commendable but without execution, these have little to no measurable impact for the company.

Balls get dropped, deadlines are missed, deliveries are half-done, priorities constantly change, projects overrun budgets, and initiatives don't get accomplished.

And it's easy to see why.

- Everyone within your business community and network have an overload of messages and communications
- Program execution discussions are increasingly conducted remotely, not face-to-face or even in real-time
- Manager-to-employee coordination has declined with business decentralization and globalization
- Personal accountability has becomes more diluted and unclear, active employee engagement is in decline

A return to the 20th century command and control hierarchy will not work, as today's workforce expects to have more influence over decisions that effect their day-to-day work, not less. The solution is to develop new methods and principles that improve execution and simultaneously create more commitment.

Commitments Drive Better Execution

There is one profoundly fundamental process you and your company can change that will dramatically improve execution – *everyone needs to get better at making and keeping commitments*. It is as simple as saying what you're going to do, and then doing what you said. Straightforward, but not easy.

Simple scrutiny of the issues reveal that common work norms do not support this principle. In fact, many of these practices actually get in the way:

- Management makes vague requests or platitude statements without an actual specified performer
- Delivery dates, if they are mentioned at all, are proposed without confirmation
- Agreements to deliver, when obtained, shift, and derail without clear dialog
- Expressions of satisfaction with the delivery, or of dissatisfaction, are absent

Even worse than these mechanical flaws, there are interpersonal breakdowns:

- Team members are silent about their cynicism toward a proposed request
- Real engagement by employees is lacking, there is little incentive for contributing any discretionary effort
- Employees, at all levels, work on their favored assignments and leave other tasks to decay
- Low trust that deliveries will be met forces a need for backup systems and frequent management check-ups

Managers and employees all have reluctantly accepted this dysfunction for a long time. Now is the time to disrupt the old system, implement a new approach by getting back to basics, and recreate working relations around the foundational principle of "say what you're going to do, and do what you said."

Negotiating a commitment, rather than being coerced or given an assignment has powerful implications.

Accountability is increased since the performer has ownership over the commitment because they had a real part in crafting it. Clarity and transparency builds trust between each party. Requestor confidence is increased many fold. The quality of the ensuing dialog between performer and requestor removes vague assumptions and instead forms clear and realistic agreements. Our word creates a bond with the other person.

Five Disruptive Practices For Making and Keeping Commitments

Management by commitment can be readily implemented with a small set of repeatable and observable behaviors. These are simple, profound, and are as obvious as they are radical.

This process is not limited to your company's hierarchical roles; requests go down, up, and sideways. Depending on the level of transparency or management requirements, other stakeholders and observers can be added to the conversation. It is important to be clear who is being asked to perform a task of activity and for whom.

The following five disruptive practices describe the repeatable end-to-end program:

1.   *Make requests, not assignments.*

The manager—requester formulates an explicit request in the form of a question, not a statement. For example, "Bill, can you get the product specification completed by August 1?"not "Bill, I need the specification by August 1." Bill responds by making sure he understands the specific details, expectations, and due date associated with the request.

2.   *Negotiate clear agreements.*

This is the part about "saying what you're going to do." For delivery dates that cannot be initially met, the performer submits a counter-promise they can keep. The requester changes from a position of hope—i.e. "I assigned this task to Bill with an August 1 due date, and I'm hoping he will deliver.", to a position of confidence—i.e. "Bill said an August 1 delivery was really a problem for him, but committed to getting it to me by August 5."

Performers also need permission to decline a request where delivery cannot be met at all. This is a radical notion. Allowing team members at any level to decline requests from upper management would be a very disruptive concept in most organizations. And yet, where performers never have the ability to say NO, there is not the possibility of a committed YES. The practice of negotiating commitments is not one most workers are adept at or even comfortable with; some personal courage and training is called for. This practice puts the performer more on a peer-to-peer footing with the requester, but yields clear accountability.

3.   *Keep communication going during the delivery stage*.

Stuff happens along the way, priorities shift to meet business requirements. Commitments made by the performer at the outset are not guarantees that the delivery date will be met, but agreements must be honored in a manner that is far different than failing to deliver on just another assigned task. Having made a promise to deliver, the performer is now obliged to alert their manager-customer as soon as anything arises that might interfere with meeting their agreement. An observable hallmark of this practice is early notice of potential problems with meeting a commitment.

4.   *Present the deliverable explicitly*.

The performer makes a clear statement saying "Here is what I said I would deliver" or "This is why I could not deliver." This is the essence and evidence of accountability. In current work norms, this step is frequently murky—not clearly defined. Deliveries that are nearly complete slide in more or less on the day they were hoped for. It is rare for a performer to make the statement "Today I am delivering on the agreement we made."

5. When the requester, always acknowledge and assess the delivery.

Honesty and truth demand an assessment as to whether the delivery met the original expectations. Answering the question - were you satisfied? – completes the cycle and assures closure. This underutilized practice is the minimum quid pro quo to the performer's effort and serves to represent the manager—customer's accountability to honor the agreement. Moreover, these are the golden moments when feedback enhances future performance and trust.

End-of-year performance reviews have lost much of their value, this practice heightens the value of more continuous performance feedback.

New Systems Are Needed

Implementing management by commitment will rely heavily on a new generation of software systems. Acquiring and instantiating these new practices requires support and re-enforcement. New system implementations that take advantage of modern web, cloud, and mobile technologies are needed. Software helps add structure to commitment conversations, and then tracks agreements so they are more accountable, observable, and measurable. New systems to support these practices are coming, but leaders must first embrace the concepts and implement the processes.

To Learn More

For more information about developing a successful approach to next-generation work practices, contact 4Spires to speak with one of our experts. We have deep expertise in workflow management and understand how to attain these benefits while minimizing the risks and we'd welcome the opportunity to share them with you. Our CommitKeeper software is an online tool founded on these principles. Our team looks forward to talking with you about what can be done to improve execution across your organization.

COMMITMENT ISN'T THE TIME YOU SPEND. IT'S A LINE YOU CROSS!