



# How to Create Trust and Commitment in the Workplace

People go through a natural, unconscious process before they will commit themselves to an organization, person or course of action. You can accelerate this process by knowing how to consciously and consistently develop trust, respect, confidence and support among team members.

By Mac McIntire

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in the workplace today, particularly in a down economy, is maintaining the trust and commitment of your employees.

Workers have become increasingly cynical and no longer believe that management has their best interests at heart. The greed and mismanagement of top American firms has caused many employees to turn inward in an ever stronger resolve to “look out for number one.” Teamwork in America has dissolved as companies and individuals hunker down rather than stepping forward together to ensure their company’s long-term profitability and growth.

Never before has there been a greater need for people to work together as a team to resolve the problems in the workplace. Now, more than ever, managers must reverse the “every-man-for-himself”-trend and unite the team around a common goal. The fastest way to do this is to understand the process people go through internally before they will commit to a specific action, person or entity. By knowing the steps of the commitment process, you can accelerate the process and quickly reacquire the loyalty and commitment of your workforce.

## The Ladder of Commitment

The model in the diagram on this page, entitled the *Ladder of Commitment*<sup>®</sup>, explains how to build trust and commitment in the workplace.

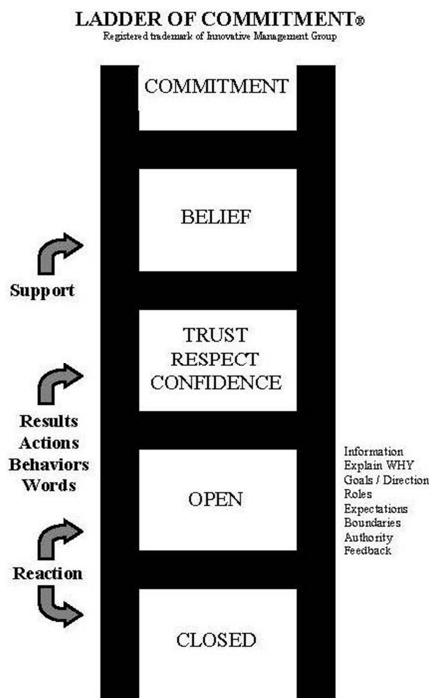
The model is depicted as a ladder because people have to climb up to “commitment.” Unfortunately, people do not start out committed in any element of life, although it may appear otherwise on the surface. For example, even though one might expect a new employee to be committed

to a job to which he or she applied and willingly accepted when hired, this usually is not the case. Commitment is not automatic. Most people are reluctant to commit themselves to a task until they fully understand it. Typically, people do not openly share their opinions or ideas at work until they’ve assessed whether or not it is safe to do so. New employees invariably hold back until they’ve achieved a level of comfort and confidence before they completely commit themselves to an organization, individual or course of action. This initial hesitancy to commit, signals that the employee is in the **Closed** area at the bottom of the ladder.

Similarly, although newlywed couples make vows of commitment at the altar when they are married, the fact that 52% of marriages in the United States end in divorce shows that vows of commitment are a far cry from true commitment, just as accepting a new job doesn’t mean the worker is willing to do that job. Newlywed couples and new employees start at the same place in the commitment process – a state of “hope” (not commitment) where one hopes the marriage or the new job will work out.

To become truly committed one must climb the *Ladder of Commitment* and go through each successive rung on the Ladder. Deep, lasting commitment only results when relationships have been solidified as one climbs up the Ladder.

The most vital step in the commitment process is to get people out of their “Closed” posture and up to the **Open** rung on the Ladder. The most successful companies are those that have a culture of open communication between their managers and employees. Successful companies do not leave communication to chance or make assumptions that effective communication has taken place. They



ensure every employee has the information needed to succeed at work. Successful companies *over-communicate*. They use several different modes and methods to get their message out. They know the decisions made in the workplace are only as good as the information from which those decisions are made.

For effective communication to occur, people must be willing to speak openly. The strongest determining factor of whether someone will open up is the *reaction* they get once they do. If the reaction is positive, they'll be more inclined to speak openly again. However, if the reaction is negative, most people will close down. Extreme negative reactions to employee input can cause workers to permanently close down.

Employee performance is strongly tied to the reactions employee's experience in the workplace. Positive reactions typically generate positive results, causing employees to open up. Negative reactions produce negative results, causing employees to close down. Consequently, you need to realize that *most of what a manager does is manage reactions*. If you want your employees to become committed, you control the negative reactions in the workplace that cause people to close down.

The first, and most important, reactions you have to manage are your own. If you react poorly to what you perceive to be stupid or silly ideas or comments from your employees – and cause them to close down because of your reaction – you may never hear their good ideas or comments later as they keep them to themselves.

As a manager you also have to control the reactions of others. You must manage the reactions of your employees. Employees often react poorly toward the customers or toward their fellow employees, causing those people to close down. Customers, too, can react poorly, causing employees to close down. You may even have to control the reactions of your boss, whose reactions often trickle down and stifle the commitment of the workforce.

Open communication occurs when managers and employees react well to each other's input, ideas, and perspectives. Department cooperation and coordination is most effective when people learn not to over-react to departmental requests or procedural requirements.

Once reactions are under control and people have moved into the "open," there are specific and important things that must be discussed in the open area. To achieve high levels of understanding and commitment, employees need complete information about what is required of them. They need to know what the *goals* of their tasks are and why they are important. They also need a clear understanding of

their *role*, what is *expected* of them, their *authority* level, and the *boundaries* in which they must perform their tasks. Additionally they require regular, honest, helpful *feedback* that recognizes their accomplishments or provides constructive coaching when improvement is needed.

Companies that communicate effectively usually are more likely to develop working relationships among their staff that are infused with **Trust**, **Respect** and **Confidence**. The trust, respect and confidence rung of the ladder is where real progress is made in a company. Tremendous levels of production can be achieved in organizations where management trusts the employees and the employees trust management. When management respects the opinions, ideas, decisions and judgments of the employees and the employees feel likewise toward management, wonderful things happen. People confidently go about their tasks without fear or concern over the political machinations that take up far too much energy and time in many organizations. They also are more inclined to take risks or think outside of the box in order to improve their part of the business.

More importantly, people who trust, have respect for, and have confidence in others are *supportive* of those people. The tangible indicator of whether or not an organization has a culture replete with trust, respect and confidence is witnessed by the level of support one can sense throughout the organization. This is denoted in how management supports the employees, how the employees support management, how employees support each other, and the evidence of support between departments.

When people trust, respect, have confidence in, and are supportive of one another; it is easy for them to "believe" each other. It is easy to accept input or feedback from others, even feedback of a personal nature, when they believe the person delivering the feedback is interested in a common good. Likewise, when those in the business are at a level of belief, it is easy to respond favorably to changes that might come along within the organization because people know the changes are necessary to succeed.

Once people step up to the **Belief** rung on the ladder, **Commitment** usually follows. The difference between belief and commitment is what a committed person does with, or because of, their belief. Committed people sink their whole heart and soul into that in which they believe. They offer their time, talents, resources, energy and anything else required to succeed in that to which they are committed.

Unfortunately, real commitment in too many organizations seldom occurs because the company never rises to the level where the employees believe management or where management believes the employees. The reason for this lack of belief is because neither party trusts, respects or has confidence in the other. The trust, respect, and confidence are missing because they have not spent the time openly communicating about the things that matter most in the company. Sadly, closed organizations may get employees to comply when directed by management to perform a task, but compliance doesn't equate to commitment.

Companies that actively encourage their employees to honestly and openly communicate up and down the ranks will find their employees to be more enthusiastically committed to performing their tasks at expected levels. §

**Innovative Management Group** facilitates management and employee training programs that generate solid trust, respect, confidence and support among team members that ensures employees work effectively together. True team work is developed when workers produce sound business results. We show how to accelerate the process of moving individuals and teams to high-performance levels.

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