



Commitment and Change

By Jim Selman



Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality. It is the words that speak boldly of your intentions. And the actions which speak louder than the words.

It is making the time when there is none. Coming through time after time after time, year after year after year.

Commitment is the stuff character is made of: the power to change the face of things. It is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism.

—Shearson Lehman

The focus of my work is transforming organizational culture, building new competencies for leadership and communication, and coaching people to accomplish what they say they want to accomplish. At the center of my work is the notion of commitment—not just the word, but the idea that **commitment is a universal phenomenon and basic to**

all human coordination. Commitment is the foundation for any kind of intentional change. If we are to have a future beyond what is predictable, it will be because people commit to that possibility and then commit to actions to make it happen.

From my perspective, there are two kinds of change in our everyday experience of living: that which we make happen (such as starting a business, creating a new market, producing unprecedented results or building a new product) and the kinds of change which seem to happen around us in the course of life itself (such as climate change, various ‘social’ problems and shifts in fashion). In the first instance, people are clearly committed to make something new happen. In the second instance, our choice is often to change ourselves **in relationship to** changes that we did not conceive or intend—to cope with or adapt to a ‘new reality’. In both instances, however, I suggest the key to accomplishment is our capacity to commit ourselves to creating something that did not exist for us previously—to invent new interpretations and practices for having our reality be consistent with our commitments. I meet few people who have a powerful distinction between commitment as the essential access to creating or intentionally relating to change and commitment as a kind of “lip service”, a well-intended gesture.



A Paradox

A paradox appears when we consider that the problem may be our common sense about change and commitment. On one hand, it can be argued that without commitment nothing will change, at least that we have anything to do with. We must accept whatever the circumstances of our lives give us and learn to cope effectively. For many, this leads to a kind of resignation and passive acceptance without real possibility for changing our world or ourselves. On the other hand, if we only commit to what our common sense tells us is feasible and possible, we will, by definition, have more of the same because common sense is our collective understanding of the world based on past experience and practices.

Yet, anyone can identify dozens of examples of ‘realities’ today that were unimaginable or made no sense only a few years ago and yet that are becoming ordinary now. Consider the internet, cell phones, cloning, fax machines, the collapse of the Soviet Union, expanding political awareness, terrorism and the global economy as examples. Most of the people I meet in technological fields say they are working on solutions to problems that will be obsolete by the time they are implemented. At the current rate of knowledge expansion, we are rapidly approaching a time when almost anything we learn will be obsolete before we learn it. In such a world, to organize our thinking and our actions around what has worked in the past—our common sense—is a formula for ever-increasing anxiety and failure to achieve our ambitions. I believe that some of the most pressing questions of our times relate to how to thrive and prosper in an increasingly unpredictable world.

This discussion centers on questions about commitment. What is it? What does it mean to commit? How does our understanding of commitment shape our lives and possibilities? What are the consequences of making and keeping (or not keeping) commitments? What is our everyday relationship with commitments, our own and others? Most importantly, how can our commitments enhance our satisfaction in living, our effectiveness in accomplishing our ambitions and our capacity to empower ourselves and other human beings?

Living and Working in a Context of Commitment

All human beings make commitments. Even the most ardent procrastinator will recognize at some point he is committed to not making a decision. Sometimes we keep our commitments, and sometimes we don't. Commitment is a universal phenomenon. It has been argued that one of the things which distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom is that we have the capacity to generate and act consistent with our commitments (while the behavior of animals is a function of instinct). Without commitment, we could not coordinate actions. We would not have institutions such as marriage, enterprises could not exist, even normal social interactions such as meeting someone for coffee would not occur. Life would be a random event. The future could never be more than a mechanistic extension of what has gone before and life, for the most part, would be circumstantially determined.

Most of us agree that commitment is important, but live as though it is a mere convention and that outcomes are a function of forces and factors outside ourselves.



The capacity to commit may be the most distinguishing and constitutive aspect of our existence as human beings. In spite of this, the term 'commitment' and what it refers to is transparent for most of us most of the time.

Moreover, most of us hold the idea of commitment in a sort of 'moral' condition in which those who don't keep commitments are 'bad' and those who do are 'good'. In this condition, we are essentially trained to only make those commitments which are virtually certain or very predictable based on past behavior. This condition is often reinforced by idle speculation, explanations and justifications about what might happen if we fail to keep the commitment. Explanations and justifications, however, are themselves projections of the past into the future. In my view, this perspective is a mistake and a pitfall that discourages taking risks, obscures responsibility for action and our relationship to commitment, and limits the possibility for creating positive change.

Characteristics of Commitment

First and foremost, commitment is an action. To commit is to bring something into existence that wasn't there before. At the moment of its coming into existence, a commitment is a creative act, distinct from whatever reasons or rationale we might have for making the commitment. This action is being taken by and between human beings all the time. Whether we are committing to meeting a friend or paying a bill or going to school, we are always moving within a fabric of conscious and unconscious commitments. The action of committing is also always

connected to the future—to another action, event or result. When we commit, we are saying, "I will be responsible for something happening in the future which would not occur in the absence of my commitment." Commitment defines the relationship between a future that is entirely determined by historical circumstances and one that can be influenced, changed or created by human beings. When we don't consciously commit or commit conditionally, we are in effect committed anyway—to the status quo.

A second important aspect of commitments is that they are not just personal. When we commit, we are also creating expectations on the part of others and, in some cases, our commitments have a direct and important impact on the choices others have and how they perceive their future. Commitments have the characteristic of both opening particular futures and closing other futures simultaneously. When a parent commits to send a child to a private school, he or she is doing more than just providing an educational opportunity: the child is also being placed into a particular situation which will allow for choices or commitments which would not otherwise present themselves. Likewise, the commitments of our forefathers are passed to us as 'reality' that we must either accept as our own or change by means of new commitments. In this sense, commitment is as much a social phenomenon as it is an expression of individual choices.

A third characteristic of commitments is that they exist only in our speaking and listening—in language. A commitment occurs in conversation as a 'speech action' which brings into existence some desired future condition as a possibility which, when fulfilled, becomes a new 'reality'. The power of commitment is that it is the only action of



which human beings are capable in which the future and the present appear in the same moment. When I promise to meet you, I am evoking the future time and circumstances of our meeting in the same moment as I speak the promise. In making the promise, I am committing to be at the meeting at the time and place we've agreed to. Likewise, if you requested the meeting or accept my offer, you've committed to be there also. In this sense, **both promising and requesting are commitments to participate in creating particular futures together.** If I am not serious about my promises and requests, you will stop listening to them as commitments and will not coordinate your actions with mine. The result will be chaotic, produce distrust or annoyance, and eventually we will either not communicate at all or, more likely (as is the common case), we will implicitly agree to cope with whatever our circumstances allow and avoid the question of responsibility for our actions altogether.

The Possibility for Change

Most of us live and work in environments that we say should change in one way or another. If we listen carefully to our own conversations and the conversations of others, we can notice that much of the time we are talking about our circumstances within the same perspective that we might observe a game or a movie. Our conversations are those of observers giving an account or telling a story about how we see or how we feel about our 'reality'. We can often hear people speaking about 'the way we are here', the problems of the economy or the society or within a particular company and why it is difficult to effect meaningful changes. What is transparent, however, is that these conversations rarely result in new commitments to action. In other words, our

conversations about what needs to be done or what needs to change don't, in and of themselves, change anything! In fact, they reinforce the status quo and become self-fulfilling and self-justifying in nature.

We live in a kind of 'cultural drift' in which we must learn to cope with historically determined circumstances with very little power to effect change or create a future that is discontinuous with the past.

An everyday practical example of this can be seen when we speak with people in organizations and ask how much time is spent in meetings and how do people evaluate the value of meetings. Predictably, we will hear there are too many meetings and most of them are a waste of time. At the same time, most people are complaining that they lack the time to do many of the things which they say need to be done. The conclusion most often reached is to have fewer meetings. This is, in turn, followed by all the reasons we can't really have fewer meetings or why we can't have our meetings be more productive. The general mood becomes one of 'resignation' until we simply accept or put up with the status quo and go through the motions of meetings without concern for or expectation that they can ever change. Unfortunately, most of the work human beings do—in fact most of our lives—happens in meetings with other people. Consider, for example, that a telephone or email conversation is a kind of meeting, a sales call is a kind of meeting, and most planning occurs in meetings. Even social events or having a romantic dinner can be viewed as 'meetings'.

Meetings are never a problem in and of themselves. We can all think of examples of



meetings that were extraordinary, even life-changing. What people are saying is that they spend too much time in meetings that are unproductive or unsatisfying. To a large extent, this is because people are speaking without commitment or they lack competency in resolving differences and having effective dialogue. If we ask ourselves what we are committed to making happen in the meeting—then organize our conversations around that commitment—we will begin to observe and experience a different meeting. Not only do we empower ourselves as actors in the meeting (as opposed to reacting to what is said), but we also begin to listen differently to what is occurring and have many options not normally apparent.

The British writer George Bernard Shaw said:

Reasonable people adapt themselves to the circumstances. Unreasonable people adapt the circumstances to themselves.

Progress depends on unreasonable people.

This quotation highlights the dilemma that confronts us when we seriously consider making fundamental changes in how we live, how we work, our business culture and our practices for coordination. It suggests that if we expect anything to change, we need to be **unreasonable**. More specifically, we need to make unreasonable commitments.

If we only commit to what we think is reasonable or feasible, we are, by definition, making commitments to more of the same—to living in the cultural drift. ‘Reasons’ are, by definition, products of past experience and common understandings for why things happen and what is or is not possible.

Being unreasonable is not the same as being unrealistic. Being unreasonable means acting in a manner that is inconsistent with conventional wisdom and common sense.

Any example of significant change began with someone making a commitment to a possibility that was viewed as unreasonable or impossible at the time. Commitment is the difference between living in a context of responsibility for creating the future versus living in a context of reasonableness in which we must cope with whatever the circumstances give us.

Creating a Context of Commitment

The question, of course, is how do we shift our ‘way of being’ from one of reasonableness and historical inertia to one of commitment and empowerment. One of the things I have learned in my work is that people place a great deal of value on intelligence and knowledge. In a world that doesn’t change or that changes very slowly, this value makes sense and is even practical since there is time to learn and apply what we know. In a world that is changing at exponential rates, however, conventional intelligence and knowledge are often obsolete before we have time to apply them. If we need proof or established acceptance of knowledge before we act, then it is often too late and our competitors have gone on to something else. We become intelligent and knowledgeable followers.

Intelligence and knowledge may inform what we commit to, but in themselves change nothing. The only thing that changes anything is commitment and action—intelligence and knowledge are not action. At best, they are a potential for action. At worst, they are a source of cognitive blindness and arrogance.



In today's world, we must be willing and able to commit to possibility and action based on our vision and a view of what is needed to fulfill that vision. Knowledge must become a by-product of commitment rather than a prerequisite for making commitment. Intelligence is being redefined as something like having the capacity for change.

Resistance to Change

However, before discussing any new approach to this kind of change, it is important to recognize another phenomenon that has become apparent over the past decade. Specifically, almost any discussion of how to effect changes—either personally or in an organizational context—will provoke a degree of skepticism or even cynicism about pop psychology, management ‘fashions’, or self-help and consulting ‘gurus’. This cynical orientation usually results in either trivializing or discounting any possibility or the value of new proposals and approaches to change.

In other words, the problems associated with effecting meaningful changes in our lives and in our organizations are aggravated by the culture's tendency to reject whatever might make a difference. If the culture tells us that people or institutions can't change, then it will also provide the interpretation necessary to discount any proposal to the contrary.

The need for change has created burgeoning therapeutic, consulting and publications industries over the past few years. There are many examples of shallow or opportunistic practitioners attempting to cash in on these trends. Thoughtful people and organizational leaders, however, also recognize that to lump all theories and proposals into the same category and then dismiss the entire category as having limited value is to succumb to profound resignation and the conclusion that

there is no possibility and nothing makes a difference. This view is not only deadly in practical terms, it destroys the human spirit and creativity that are so essential if we are to succeed in accomplishing any vision beyond the status quo and a future determined by our circumstances.

Our work is based on the observation that human beings not only describe reality in conversations, but that we also create the reality we are describing.

An Alternative Point of View

The ‘world’ we relate to and organize our actions around is pretty much whatever we say it is! Any worldview or model of reality can be shown to be an interpretation created and shared by human beings—a collective or individual point of view. What is less evident is that we are continuously recreating our view of the world, and therefore how the world occurs for us, in every conversation at every moment. Our actions, in turn, will correlate with how the world occurs for us. Since our actions are producing whatever circumstances we have, we inevitably find ourselves in a self-referential and self-fulfilling relationship with our view of our world. When people recognize this for themselves, they recover the capacity to be responsible for their point of view as just their point of view. When this occurs, people can interact with others in new ways, have different conversations, make authentic commitments, take new and unprecedented actions and thereby change or even transform their ‘reality’.

To illustrate how this happens, I am reminded of a recent conference we conducted for an



organization in Canada that was by everyone's account extraordinary. The leadership team of the company declared a new future for themselves, had breakthroughs in their relationships with one another and generated powerful commitments to action. Near the end of the conference, I asked, "What will be the first question people will ask you when you return to the office?" The obvious response was, "What happened?" or "How was the conference?" The normal response would have been, "Fine" or "Great" or a description of what actually happened. I asked, "What is the 'reality' of this meeting in the future? Is it what in fact happened or is it in the conversations you and other people will have *about* what happened?"

The conference participants acknowledged that the future reality would be in the conversations about the meeting. They speculated that these conversations would probably be that the leaders went off to another meeting and that it was just another example of top people getting benefits and that the meeting didn't have much impact or effect on people's day-to-day experience. I then asked, "If the future reality was a function of what you say when asked the question, what could you say?" They acknowledged that they could declare the meeting to be an historical turning point, they could share their personal breakthroughs, and they could make new promises to people or begin to open new conversations for changing their relationships with those asking the questions.

The result of having created new conversations in the company has been that the value of the meeting has gone far beyond what actually occurred or the experience of the individual participants. The meeting has been the occasion for the participants to

exercise their leadership in shaping the perceptions of the people in their company and also in enrolling them in new possibilities for change in the future. By changing everyday conversations, they have begun to create a new culture based on commitment and possibility.

Culture as Background Conversations

'Culture'—whether viewed from the perspective of an individual, an organization or society—does not exist as a factual 'reality' independent of our background (transparent) conversations about:

- What is and is not possible
- What limits or constrains action
- Who we are
- How we deal with differences and contention, and
- Our relationship to learning and commitment.

This 'cultural interpretation' forms the basis for how we listen and speak to one another, shapes our day-to-day practices, and ultimately determines how we see and relate to our 'reality' (which, in turn, determines our behavior).

Creating a new cultural context requires creating new background conversations. Background conversations are obvious—so obvious, in fact, that we don't normally think about them, which is why they are in the background. If you live on a busy street, at some moment you stop noticing the noise and are even surprised when a visitor points it out to you. For example, what comes to mind when I ask, "What is it that everybody in your organization 'knows' about how to be successful here?" In a group situation, what will quickly emerge is a combination of:



- **Unspoken and often unexamined rules and assumptions.** For example, be careful, don't complain, don't make mistakes, don't park in the boss's parking spot, keep information to yourself, be sure you have a solution before you expose a problem, work very hard, write everything down (or don't write it down), put in a lot of time, be prepared, and cover your ***, and so on.
- **Interpretations about people and the environment.** For example, the managers don't care about our people, they don't listen, they only care about money, managers are always in private meetings, keep conversations private (close the door), you can trust John but watch out for Bill, you can't get a meeting with that customer, our products are too expensive, the economy is the problem, and so on.
- **Practices for getting things done (or not done).** For example, do favors for people you need, the IT department will always take 10 days to help you, you need to ask several times before they take you seriously, don't worry about some policies, speak softly, don't get angry, if you delay long enough the problem will go away, and so on.

These are examples of common background views that are widely shared and related to as 'truths' that constitute our practical realities. It doesn't matter what the facts are or whether a particular individual agrees or disagrees with a particular background conversation or is even personally aware of it. These background conversations are what constitute our cultural interpretation, an interpretation which includes everyone and becomes the prevailing shared understanding of our organizational world. Individuals who take a

contrary position will often be pointed to as the exceptions that prove the rule.

The power of viewing culture as being constituted by background conversations and practices is that it shows how we all participate in the continuation of the status quo all the time. Moreover, it opens the possibility that deep and fundamental changes can be accomplished if we adopt new competencies in how we communicate and begin to observe our conversations in a context of commitment and action. This perspective, based on research and work in the fields of language and ontology, has empowered uncounted numbers of individuals and is proving to be effective in hundreds of business organizations.

What is Commitment?

Commitment is a phenomenon that can be experienced and observed. We can remember that when we are committed we have a different mood, we observe and listen differently, we 'feel' different than we do when we aren't committed or are not aware of our commitments. We can hear someone speak a promise and listen to what they say as being a commitment. We also typically infer commitment as a source of success and accomplishment when we observe others. When we see a great performance or accomplishment in sports, we often say that the person is really committed to what they are doing. In this sense, we define commitment as a source of action and accomplishment.

But commitment is also an action itself. Commitment doesn't occur until a human being expresses the commitment—either by speaking or by doing something intentionally and directly.



Commitment is choice. Commitment is the primary cause. Commitments don't REFER to action: they are actions that transform one's relationship to the present and the past. Commitment is an action in language.

I distinguish commitment as **conscious action in the present moment**. I cannot make a commitment yesterday and I cannot make a commitment tomorrow (until tomorrow comes). This is not the same as unconscious behavior based on historical obligations—commitments made in the past—which come to us as tradition, background conversations and unexamined practices always justified and reinforced by our interpretations of the world. Historically determined and unconscious behaviors are essentially automatic 're-actions', not authentic commitments in the present moment.

From the perspective of commitment as an action, we could conclude that the answer to creating change—to living a more productive and satisfying life and being more responsible—is captured in the Nike slogan, "Just do it". Most will agree, however, that knowing what to do and doing it are not the same. Cultures are constituted to persist. The nature of this persistence can be heard in the rationale or conversations we have about why we don't "just commit" and then do whatever it takes to fulfill our commitments. For some, it is "I don't know how", for others it may be "fear of what others will think or do", and for others still it may be connected to distrust or past experiences that were unsatisfactory.

A more fundamental understanding of commitment is that it is directly related to

our "way of being" in the world—what we stand for, our core values and the integrity with which we lead our lives.

Many people do their best, behave and act in ways that are positive and intended to contribute. Few, however, consider that we also have a choice about 'who we are'. If we observe people's everyday behavior and conversations, we can see that there are many ways to answer: I am (name), I am my job, I am my family, I am my moods, I am my feelings, I am my appetites, I am my addictions, I am my money, etc.

We rarely hear people say, "I am my commitments" or "I am who and what I say I am". In part this is due to how we formulate and use the word 'commitment' in everyday conversations. We often say, "I have a commitment" in the same context as we might say, "I have a cold". This subtle formulation in everyday language is another example of how we relate to commitment as something separate and apart from ourselves, rather than an expression of who we are in action and the possibility of a future other than that available from the inertia of the past.

I am not suggesting an 'ultimate truth' here. I am saying the answer is always an interpretation we mostly inherit from our cultural practices, and that the interpretation we live will limit or open our possibilities and actions. **When a person is conscious of and responsible for the interpretation that defines their 'way of being' in the world and can stand for a more powerful interpretation such as "I am my word", they have possibilities and choices that are beyond the ordinary.** From this perspective, the future becomes a subject for action and design, rather than our having to simply cope with the generalized circumstances of life.



In our work, we do not suggest that we can or need to teach people how to be committed. Nor is it necessary to endlessly debate what are the ‘right’ commitments. If all commitments are conditional, then it becomes an academic discussion, and if one is responsible for their commitments and subsequently learns they were wrong, they always have the wherewithal to make new commitments to correct their mistakes. We believe that commitment is a natural and constant aspect of life available to all human beings. It is necessary, however, for people to ‘unlearn’ many of the unexamined concepts and assumptions about their worldview, commitments and possibilities for them to recognize this for themselves. Further, we find that when people are aware of this and are shown they have a choice and that their commitments and their relationship to commitment make a difference, they begin to exercise the choice and begin to live as their word—to be responsible.

In most organizational cultures, our practices suggest that the answer to the “Who are we?” question is that people are objects that need to be controlled to perform the functions necessary to accomplish various tasks. Even our most basic notions of management, such as their responsibility for providing motivation, is built on this assumption. And yet, if we have learned anything in the past 15 years of global competition, it is that we can no longer rely on a few leaders at the top of an organization to direct and control the work of everyone else. The whole concept of ‘empowerment’ is based in the practical recognition that an enterprise cannot survive without everyone involved self-generating results based in their own intelligence and commitments.

Powerful competitors are those that are learning to “free the human spirit”, to empower people to *be* responsible, to be committed, and to coordinate their commitments in the service of a vision worth working for.

Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meeting and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets:
“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

—W.H. Murray
Leader of the Scottish Expedition
to Mt. Everest