

Leadership and Commitment

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A central premise of our teaching about leadership at the Yale School of Management is that true leadership – leadership that helps to address a significant problem in a new way, leadership that inspires others to act in support of an important goal or cause – is necessarily personal. Only a leader who is motivated by deeply held values and beliefs will sustain the sincerity and consistency needed to draw forth the continued efforts of others.

Although personal leadership begins with a focus on values and beliefs, it cannot end there. Everyone values and believes certain things, but everyone is not necessarily a leader. In order for a value to become a foundation for leadership, the value must become a commitment, which we define as a salient obligation that an individual consciously embraces. Commitments, in turn, serve as a fundamental basis for personal and organizational choices. In this document, we elaborate on this notion of commitment.

The Logic of Consequence vs. the Logic of Commitment

James G. March, one of the founders of the field of organizational behavior, made an important contribution to the study of leadership by distinguishing between action that is guided by a *logic of consequence* versus a *logic of commitment*.

Logic of consequence refers to action taken because of tangible benefits that will accrue as a result. Any action that involves an explicit or implicit cost-benefit calculation is guided by a logic of consequence. When an individual performs a task for compensation, decides to watch the television show he believes will be most entertaining, or selects a restaurant because he anticipates the eating experience will be more satisfying than the alternative, the action is guided by a logic of consequence. For most people, the vast majority of their actions on any given day are guided by a logic of consequence.

Logic of commitment refers to action taken because of its consistency with who that individual is – with the individual's deeply held values and beliefs, with an individual's identity. When individuals act based on a logic of commitment, they spend relatively little time deciding whether the action is justified by the consequence. The action is undertaken because the individual feels it is the right thing to do.

For example, Robert Oppenheimer's opposition to U.S. weapons policy and the arms race with the Soviet Union was clearly guided by a logic of commitment. Oppenheimer, who had been the director of the Manhattan Project and earned the title "father of the atomic bomb," criticized U.S. weapons policy after World War II and faced more and more negative consequences for his stand. Oppenheimer's political opponents began characterizing him as a Communist sympathizer and similarly branded his brother, who was subsequently fired from an academic post. The personal

attacks peaked during a Congressional hearing, which resulted in Oppenheimer's security clearance being revoked. Yet, despite the fact that the consequences became more and more adverse, Oppenheimer maintained his opposition to the arms build-up.

Importantly, the consequences from an action need not be negative in order for the action to be guided by a logic of commitment. From simply observing a single choice by an individual, it is hard to assess whether a particular action is guided by a logic of consequence or commitment. For example, one might observe a classmate entering a career with high remuneration – say, private equity – and presume that the decision is clearly based on a logic of consequence. Yet the colleague may regard private equity as a means to reallocate capital to support deeply held values or beliefs. The individual might believe passionately in the importance of preserving job opportunities for blue-collar workers in the face of globalization and view privatization as an effective means for transforming companies so as to preserve those opportunities. Only over time will it become clear whether the choices reflect a logic of commitment or a logic of consequence.

These commitments can be thought of as an unwritten contract that you make, not just with yourself but with others; they become the basis on which others can trust you to make consistent choices. There are times you will want to draw on this trust. You will want to ask others to make choices or investments from which they will benefit only if they can rely on you to carry through on your commitments. Or, stated in the negative, if your enduring commitments are not clear, it will be harder for others to know what actions that they can expect from you. Absent these commitments, it will be harder (or, at a minimum, considerably more costly) for you to encourage individuals to make investments that will be conducive to your long-term goals and aspirations.

Individuals whose actions are guided by a logic of commitment are invariably more inspiring to those around them than those whose actions are guided by a logic of consequence. Indeed, think of the most inspirational leaders that you can identify – a Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela – and it is clear that their leadership is defined by obligations to act that were formulated without regard to the personal consequence.^{*} To be clear, such leaders do not rise to prominence simply because their actions are guided by a logic of commitment; there is much the leaders must do to ensure that they and their followers are effective in executing those commitments. Nonetheless, the grounding of leadership in a logic of commitment is an important starting point. There is a strength, boldness, and integrity that seems to emanate from choices that are grounded in values and beliefs rather than in a calculation of personal consequences. Indeed, the early 20th century sociologist Max Weber saw the commitment to ideals regardless of the consequence as a central element of charismatic leadership.

Four Domains of Commitments

We divide the commitments underlying sustained leadership into four domains: (1) a commitment to purpose; (2) a commitment to self; (3) a commitment to others; and (4) a commitment to impact. Each commitment represents a personal answer to a set of key questions:

^{*} It is probably true that the leaders in world history who we find most abhorrent – a Hitler or Amin – also were ones who zealously pursue commitments, though in this case they would be commitments that the vast majority of us would not embrace. This fact does not undercut the importance of a logic of commitment to true leadership; rather, it implies that we must consider the content of those commitments, above and beyond the simple existence of commitments, in evaluating someone's leadership.

- A commitment to purpose
 - Of the significant problems and challenges confronting individuals and organizations today, which one or two are most important to you and ones with which you would like others to associate your leadership? Why?
 - What core values do you most wish to be embodied and reflected in your leadership?
- A commitment to self
 - What choices must you make and what actions must you undertake to develop the capacity for fulfilling the purpose to which you are committed? What skills and personal qualities do you most wish to exemplify?
 - What choices have you made to ensure that your commitments are consistent with one another as well as with various role demands that you regard as important – in other words, to ensure that the pursuit of some commitments does not come at the expense of others?
- A commitment to others
 - Whom must you enroll in order to be effective in addressing the problems or challenges that engage you? To whom do you (and will you) hold yourself accountable and how?
 - What standards will you employ in delivering on your commitments to colleagues, subordinates, supervisors, and external constituencies, such as customers or the broader public?
- A commitment to legacy or impact
 - What would be the characteristics and tangible evidence of a legacy that would fulfill you?
 - What does this legacy imply for the type of leadership you should cultivate today?
 - How, where, and when will others' lives be changed by virtue of your leadership?

We have broken out the commitments into four separate domains because each is important to sustained leadership. To pursue a laudable end (a commitment to purpose) is of little value if you do not make progress toward that end (a commitment to impact). Similarly, while both the end and intended progress toward that end may be praiseworthy, you can undercut the positive significance of your leadership if the purpose and impact are realized without adhering to commitments to others. Finally, if your particular commitments to purpose and impact are not consistent with one another or with the various role demands that you wish to take on (a commitment to self), then it is hard to imagine that any of the commitments will be sustainable. Accordingly, the four categories of commitments, although distinct, are obviously closely related to one another, and effective leadership will depend on formulating a set of commitments that are integrated with one another.

* “Problems and challenges” can refer both to the **goals** individuals and organizations pursue *and* to the **means** through which individuals and organizations are managed.

The four commitments reflect two dimensions along which leadership may be considered: (1) whether the leader’s focus is internal (inward) versus external (outward); and (2) whether the leader’s focus is on ends (results) versus means (ways of achieving those results). As shown in Table 1 below, commitment to purpose involves looking inward to specify the desired ends; commitment to self involves looking inward to determine what is required of oneself as a leader; commitment to others involves looking outward to determine whom a leader needs to enroll, how, and with what accountability in pursuit of his or her purpose; and commitment to legacy or impact involves looking outward to specify the tangible impact the leader wishes to leave behind by virtue of pursuing that purpose.

TABLE 1. THE FOUR COMMITMENTS

	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
ENDS	<p style="text-align: center;">PURSUIT OF PURPOSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ What issues facing individuals and enterprises today are most important to you---ones with which you’d like others to associate your leadership? ◆ What core values do you most wish to be embodied and reflected in your leadership? 	<p style="text-align: center;">LEGACY (IMPACT)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ What would be the characteristics and tangible evidence of a legacy that would fulfill you? ◆ How, where, and when will others’ lives be changed by virtue of your leadership? ◆ What does this intended legacy imply for the impact you should cultivate today?
MEANS	<p style="text-align: center;">DEVELOPMENT OF SELF</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ What choices must you make and what actions must you undertake to develop the capacity for fulfilling the purpose to which you are committed? ◆ What skills and personal qualities do you most wish to exemplify? ◆ What choices have you made to ensure that your commitments are consistent with one another as well as with various role demands that you regard as important – in other words, to ensure that the pursuit of some commitments does not come at the expense of others? 	<p style="text-align: center;">ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Whom must you enroll in order to be effective in addressing the problems or challenges that engage you? ◆ To whom do you (and will you) hold yourself accountable and how? ◆ What standards will you employ in delivering on your commitments to colleagues, subordinates, supervisors, and external constituencies?

The four domains of commitments can also be thought of as answering the fundamental questions about the development and impact of one’s leadership as shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2. THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
ENDS	Why?	What? Where? When?
MEANS	How?	Who?

- Purpose: *Why* am I leading?
- Legacy/Impact: *What am* I striving towards, *where*, and *when*? (In other words, what evidence of my leadership will I leave behind, where, and when...)
- Self: *How* am I to lead (what skills and behaviors will I need, etc.)
- Others: *Who* else must I enroll and how?

Developing Leaders by Developing the Commitments

Thinking about leadership in terms of the four commitments requires that we broaden considerably our conception of how leaders are developed. First, our emphasis on the logic of commitment places personal values and ethics front and center in the domain of leadership development. We have suggested that the logic of commitment generally offers greater potential to inspire and mobilize others than does the logic of consequences. The logic of commitment depends on leaders being perceived as authentic and credible, which in turn requires that the commitments being pursued are ones that really matter to the leader. Values and codes of ethics are not mere “constraints” on managerial decision-making; they are the platform from which credible leadership must be launched.

Commitment to self involves many of the competencies that are normally thought to represent the bread and butter of leadership development – the skills, qualities, and career choices necessary to become capable of realizing one’s leadership potential. Yet the logic of commitment expands this domain considerably. In particular, leading from a logic of commitment is problematic when the leader embraces markedly discrepant values and ethics across different roles. According to the logic of consequence, “private lives” are relevant only insofar as they affect cost-benefit calculations that leaders must make; if any risks posed by a leader’s private conduct or beliefs could be insured against, the logic of consequence would simply have us factor in the costs of such insurance into the calculus.

According to a logic of commitment, in contrast, the notion that a leader’s actions “are just business” is a *non sequitur*; the power of a commitment logic derives precisely from the fact that business *is* personal – that what a leader does, says, and stands for reflects something larger and grander than the most expedient or efficient result for the specific decision at hand. How authentic, consistent, or compelling would a civil rights leader or presidential candidate appear, for example, if it came to light that he employed Third World “house servants” at home or that she would not let her daughters engage in the

same leisure activities as her sons? Consequently, commitment to self in our framework demands that leaders examine concurrently all the social roles they occupy (or seek to occupy), to determine whether the values and ethics they embrace and the skills and personal qualities they seek to develop are consistent and compatible across these different positions.

Commitment to others highlights the importance of leaders understanding who must be enrolled in pursuit of their objectives, what sorts of appeals and ways of leading are most compelling to potential enrollees, and how the leader will hold himself or herself accountable to those constituencies. Exemplary leadership requires not only being clear and articulate about one's own purpose, but also developing mastery at identifying and resonating with the commitments to purpose of those around you.

Finally, because it is oriented to the future, commitment to legacy or impact obviously involves long-term thinking—looking beyond what is imminent and convenient, envisioning and acquiring the portfolio of experiences and capabilities that will help most in fulfilling one's purpose. But it requires much more than this. First, it requires an ability to work backward from that envisioned future impact to present actions. If one's legacy is always defined by actions that one *will* undertake, then it is possible to keep postponing the act of holding oneself accountable for actions that are consistent with the purpose. Commitment to a legacy is reflected not in our plans for the future but in our present-day actions toward creating that future. Whether we are focusing on a leader of a social movement such as Martin Luther King, or a leader of a corporation such as Fred Smith of Federal Express, the commitment to a legacy does not start with an act of leadership directed toward thousands of people or future generations; it starts with personal actions today that might be much more limited in scope. Martin Luther King needed to address small groups in churches before he could lead the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, direct significant protests and boycotts, and address hundreds of thousands on the Washington Mall. Fred Smith needed to convince a few individuals to invest in his idea of overnight delivery before he could even think about building an enduring company of global scope and over 200,000 employees. A commitment to an evolving legacy demands that someone be able to point to actions in the present that increase the likelihood that the legacy will be a reality.

Second, a commitment to legacy depends crucially on the competency we call *stewardship*, which represents a personal responsibility to take care of something that one does not own. Building a legacy involves a commitment to improve or preserve those resources that have been entrusted to one's care—not merely the financial assets of the corporation owned by shareholders, but all resources, human and otherwise, over which one has influence. By its very nature, stewardship transcends a straightforward logic of consequence; it requires commitments that transcend self-interest and the prospect of self-sacrifice. The ambiguity associated with stewardship places a premium on imagination, adaptability, and a large measure of resilience in the face of opposition, dissent, confusion, and setbacks.

Persistence in building a legacy is also facilitated by articulating specific metrics, objectives, or targets, which in turn demands focus. Some of these metrics must be realizable in the near future; others may be more distant. But all of them must be clear. Without some declaration of what a "win" might look like, the loftiest and most noble purpose is simply a platitude, with too little staying power to sustain engagement in the face of adversity, conflict, or competing claims on time and resources. "Improving humanity," educating leaders for business and society," "building a \$100 laptop," and "bringing joy to the world" are all noble aims, but they are unlikely to catalyze exemplary leadership until translated into a more specific purpose around which a legacy can be envisioned and progress assessed. For example, consider Table 3:

TABLE 3. EXAMPLES OF OBJECTIVES AND VIABLE LEGACIES

OBJECTIVE	VIABLE LEGACY
Improving humanity	Reduce the incidence of HIV-related pediatric mortality in Africa by 50% over the next decade
Educating leaders for business and society	Transform how leadership development is researched, taught, and practiced in premier academic and work organizations worldwide;
Building a \$100 laptop	Empower at least 50 million poor in developed and developing economies through access to affordable technology
Bringing joy to the world	Build a sustainable community of performers, critics, and fans in North America for a new musical genre blending Gregorian Chant lyrics, computer-synthesized bird noises, Afro-Caribbean percussion, and theme music from TV situation comedies of the 1960s.

Exemplary leaders build and sustain engagement in their purpose – for themselves and for those whom they lead – by committing to a legacy, a particular way in which the world will be left better off as a result of the leader’s cause.

A Hierarchy of Commitments

We suggest that a hierarchical relationship exists among these four domains of commitments. The commitment to purpose is perhaps the most foundational; it is an enduring, timeless rationale for action. In supplying a compelling answer to *why* an individual aspires to lead, purpose provides guidance in crafting commitments to self: the investments that the individual must make in his or her own development in order to pursue this purpose. Absent a clear articulation of purpose, there are no bounds on which skills and capabilities the individual should develop; the commitment to purpose serves as a focus for those investments.

Focused investments in self should give rise to new strengths. However, even individuals commanding a broad repertoire of strengths will generally be unable to pursue their purpose without assistance and support from others. Commitment to self brings into focus our strengths and limitations, thereby informing our leadership commitments to others: which other individuals should be enrolled and how they can be most effectively engaged.

Finally, given a well-defined purpose, a commitment to leveraging personal strengths and addressing limitations, and a commitment to engage others, a leader can more credibly envision the extent of his or her impact. This hierarchy among the four commitments is depicted in Figure 1:

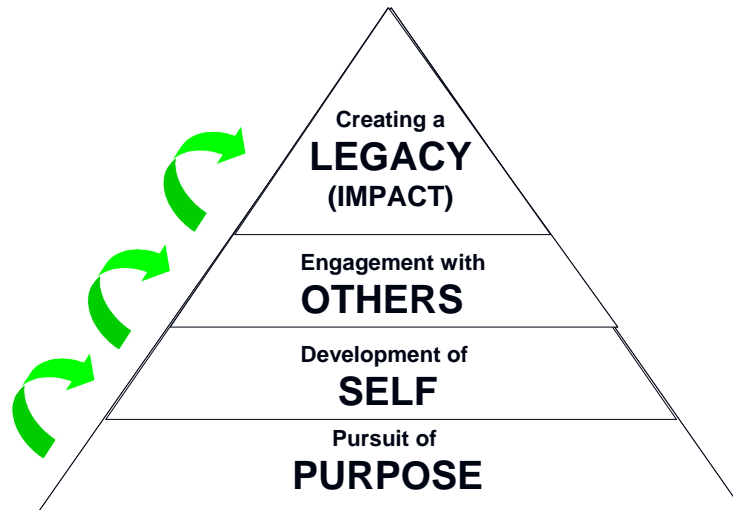


FIGURE 1. HIERARCHY OF COMMITMENTS

The Four Commitments and Your Experience at SOM

If you read the biographies of great leaders, you will be struck by the degree to which their lives and leadership can be characterized in terms of these commitments. Though these leaders may not have thought about their leadership in terms of this framework, it is clear that their actions were consciously guided by similar principles.

These commitments are relevant not only to leaders of world historical prominence, but also to those who exercise their leadership on a somewhat smaller playing field. Along with this teaching note, we are presenting you with several interviews of SOM alumni, and we will ask you to try to discern the commitments that define their leadership.

We will also ask you to focus on yourself. We have selected you for membership in the Yale School of Management community because we believe in your leadership potential. This means that you should be able both to articulate your leadership commitments and to act on them. Considering your commitments will allow you to derive as much benefit as you can from your MBA education, as it will allow you to take actions over the next two years that are consistent with those commitments. For instance, if your commitments necessitate knowing how to effectively move capital to achieve certain goals, then you should allow that commitment to guide your choices and actions – what you read every day in the newspaper, what websites and blogs you consult regularly, the conversations you have with friends and colleagues, the courses you take, the clubs you join, the lectures and learning opportunities you take advantage of outside of class.

If you are like most people, it will take some time to clearly articulate these commitments in a way that is compelling and credible for you and others. That is, it will take time to articulate commitments that you regard as meaningful and that you can clearly identify in your choices and actions. Each of the four commitments requires, in turn, a set of leadership competencies that you will want to assess and work on during your time at SOM and beyond. For instance, commitment to purpose demands passion, courage, and being values-driven. Commitment to self demands self-awareness, curiosity, and the ability to balance or integrate multiple roles. Commitment to others clearly requires the ability to excite and inspire

others, to listen acutely, and to negotiate and manage conflict among diverse groups effectively. And we have stressed the importance of such competencies as stewardship, imagination, and resilience in committing to build a lasting legacy.

We have structured the Leadership Development Program to assist you in formulating your commitments and making good on them by developing the appropriate competencies they require. But ultimately it will be up to you to decide what your commitments are and to act on them.

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Endnotes

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