

SOLVING THE COMMITMENT DILEMMA: BALANCING THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE GROUP

What is it that induces employees to commit to their organisation? The mystery remains. While commitment is a disinterested gesture that seems to emanate from an inner necessity rather than from a choice, a few fairly simple actions would furnish a response to this existential requirement. What should be avoided is the exclusive use of “open space” offices and group training.

In 1913, Sir Ernest Shackleton had just failed to beat Roald Amundsen in the race to the South Pole. He was preparing a second expedition with the even more ambitious aim of crossing Antarctica and put the following job advertisement in the papers: *“Notice: Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.”* It drew 5000 replies. And yet far more stood to be lost than gained. 5000 madmen? No, like Shackleton himself, the applicants were simply personifying commitment. Commitment means accepting the risk of losing before any gain is sought. Why commit? We do it above all for ourselves. Commitment is a disinterested gesture that seems to emanate from an inner necessity rather than from a choice. Numerous testimonies in this sense from creative individuals speak of commitment as entering into the spirit of the game, or as the act of making sense of one's existence, affirming one's individuality and standing on one's own feet. As Hemingway said, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” In the computing world, hackers are the embodiment both of commitment and its advantages; they “hack for their pleasure, for the beauty of the act or because they see programming as an art [...]. Actually they are behind a considerable number of the innovations that have enabled the development of information technology and the Internet.”¹ While initially they act as individuals, many of them later found or join successful companies – the proof that individual commitment can be well integrated into a company.

The “open space” stifles commitment because it inhibits individual work

The dilemma is how to induce employees to commit to the company knowing that their commitment is essentially to themselves. The answer is perhaps to look less for commitment to the company and rather cultivate staff commitment by measures that take more account of their special individual features. An illustration can be seen in two widespread company practices. The famous “open space” often produces the opposite of what is expected² – the closing-up of the inner space of employees forced to share their vital space permanently with a group. The open space with no alternative other than yet another open space stifles commitment because it inhibits the salutary to-ing and fro-ing between the privacy of individual work and group sharing. A more promising course of action is to give employees the possibility of alternating between working alone (in isolation so to speak) and social interaction.

Training within the company is also instructive. For the most part such training is dispensed in groups and often seems somewhat unproductive; it is, naturally, easier to organise and permits a better control of the process and of individuals. However, the policy of only providing group training, especially for “knowledge workers” who are by definition individuals, is incoherent. The organisers would do better to

combine group training with individual follow-up to enable participants to consolidate their apprenticeship by applying it in their own specific context. It should be noted that envisaging training not only as a stage in an apprenticeship but also as a means of generating proposals and images of the situation for management offers a precious opportunity for strengthening communication, links and strategies through creative dialogue. These more subtle forms of training offer better motivation because they incorporate the staff member's individuality, thus enabling him to make progress. They are, however, more demanding and therefore more risky. Taking on the demands and the risks requires commitment from those in charge. This is an additional means of stimulating the commitment of the employees since commitment is contagious.

Seeking a better balance between the individual and the group

Resolving the dilemma of commitment in the company involves the search for a better individual-group balance. Although the examples given certainly do not cover the subject, they do suggest two possible areas of reflection. How can compartmentalisation be associated with open space in such a way as to respect both the individual and the requirements of the group? In the same spirit, how is it possible to innovate with forms of training organisation and not only with the content of training programmes? The answer is to combat demands for quantitative returns, prestige or the tendency to imitate, which leads to the fabrication of immense open spaces and "entertainment" as spectacular as the Titanic, more resembling mass consumption than a response to specific needs. If indeed the concept of depth is at the heart of commitment, it should equate with elevation and not with shipwreck.

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Forthcoming events:

Claudio Chiacchiari and Erwan Bellard, team-work specialist, will lead two training sessions at HEC Geneva on 7 October and 16 November 2010, on the following topic: "*Augmenter la créativité et la performance de l'équipe*". Link: <http://ressources-humaines.unige.ch>

¹ "*Les bidouilleurs de la société de l'information*", Jean-Marc Manach, *Manière de voir – Le monde diplomatique* n° 109 : "Internet – révolution culturelle", February-March 2010

²"L'open space m'a tuer", Alexandre des Isnards and Thomas Zuber, Hachette 2008