

THE COMMITMENT ADVANTAGE

PRACTICES THAT TURN
LEADERSHIP INTO
BREAKTHROUGH



MIKE BENNETTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Bennetts is best known as the founding Chief Executive of Z Energy, having transitioned the company from its previous global owners in 2010. In thirteen years at the helm of Z, Mike led significant corporate events, including the launch of Z as a brand, an IPO, \$3 billion of M&A deals, debt and equity raises, and a takeover response. In 2016, Mike and Z were respectively the CEO and Company of the Year in the Deloitte Top 200. Mike was the founding Convenor of the Climate Leaders Coalition from 2017 to 2022, reflecting his commitment to the energy transition and the challenges around environmental and social sustainability.

Mike developed cross-cultural leadership experience by working in Africa, Asia and Europe between 1992 to 2008. He has held governance roles since 1999 in joint ventures, private and public companies in South Africa, China, Singapore and New Zealand. Mike is currently the Chair of Punakaiki Fund Limited, a \$110-million venture capital fund, having started with an initial equity of \$1.5 million in 2014.

Throughout his two decades of experience as a CEO, Mike is recognised for his transformational leadership style and commitment to developing the people he works with.

Since mid-2023, this has been reflected in Mike's venture as an Executive Coach (Kaiārahi) at Taumata Advisory Limited. Mike's stated purpose is to "realise individual and organisational potential" through his work as an author, speaker, coach and mentor.

Mike's client base of leaders and leadership teams spans large private and public companies, as well as SMEs, start-ups, and NGOs across New Zealand, Australia, and Singapore.

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Introduction

Why Commitment Matters Now

When I look back over my years leading organisations, coaching executives, and working with a diverse range of teams, one truth has become sharper than any other – breakthroughs in performance or results are powered by commitment. I consider that to be a universal truth, given my experience across cultures, continents, and contexts, all of which point to the same conclusion.

I've seen talented leaders with smart strategies stall because their teams were merely complying – doing what was asked, delivering what was safe. And I've seen other leaders, sometimes with fewer resources or tougher conditions, achieve the extraordinary because they and their people were committed. They weren't hedging. They weren't waiting to see if things would work out. They were all in. That difference has fascinated me for years. It's why I've written this book.

I don't mean "commitment" in the shallow sense we often hear – pledging allegiance to a goal while quietly preparing excuses. I mean commitment as a way of being – the kind that says, *This is who I am, this is what we stand for, and this is the future we're creating, no matter what it takes.*

When I use the word "stand", what I mean is a clear, chosen commitment to a future or a principle – one that you hold regardless of circumstances. It's different from a goal, which is about achieving something measurable. It's different from a preference, which can change when conditions shift. It's different from an opinion, which can be debated or negotiated.

A stand is more like saying: "This is who I am, and this is what I'm about." It shapes identity, behaviour, and choices. A stand doesn't guarantee results, but it orients everything. It's the compass, not the map.

I experienced this firsthand at Z Energy. When we bought Shell's New Zealand business, it wasn't enough to run petrol stations more efficiently or rebrand a few forecourts. We were clear – we were committing to creating a different kind of energy company, one grounded in purpose, a broader definition of sustainability, and New Zealand identity. That commitment was uncomfortable – it meant questioning long-standing industry practices and putting issues like sustainability at the centre of a fuel business. Because we declared it, lived it, and recommitted when the pressure came,

the business and its people transformed. Customers noticed. Competitors noticed. Most importantly, our people knew we weren't hedging. We were all in.

However, commitment isn't just tested in the boardroom. I've felt it in the quiet, personal moments too. There was a time when the pressure of leadership at Z felt overwhelming – the variance and volatility in financial results, the relentless number of competing decisions, and the wide-ranging criticism. I remember one night asking myself, "Do I still have the energy for this? Or am I just going through the motions?" It was a moment of drift – the kind of quiet decommitment that sneaks up on leaders. What pulled me back was remembering the stand I had taken – for the people I was leading and for the future we had declared. Recommitting in that moment didn't make the challenges smaller, but it made me stronger in the face of them. And those I worked with could sense the difference.

That experience taught me something I've seen repeatedly: most leaders don't fail because they lack intelligence, frameworks, or tools. We're swimming in those. They falter because they confuse compliance with commitment, or they drift into quiet decommitment without naming it. And when that happens, their people sense it instantly. Commitment, like fear, is contagious.

McKinsey research shows that organisations that set bold, aspirational targets are two and a half times more likely to hit top-quartile performance than those that stick with safe, incremental goals. Yet most leaders avoid such commitments because they fear failure – and in doing so, they all but guarantee mediocrity.

This book is an attempt to capture what I've learned about the role of commitment in breakthrough performance. It is part reflection, part framework, and part invitation. My commitment in writing it is to challenge leaders to look honestly at where they are standing and what they are truly committed to.

Each chapter follows a rhythm. I'll introduce a concept – the core idea. Then I'll offer a metaphor, because leadership is lived in images and intuitions as much as in data, and these metaphors offer a new lens: a way of seeing things differently. I'll ground the idea with a model, drawing on research that gives the concept rigour. I'll bring in a case study – stories of leaders and organisations that lived commitments as the foundation for breakthroughs. Finally, each chapter closes with *why it matters*, practical steps you can apply immediately, and a set of provocative questions to push your thinking further.

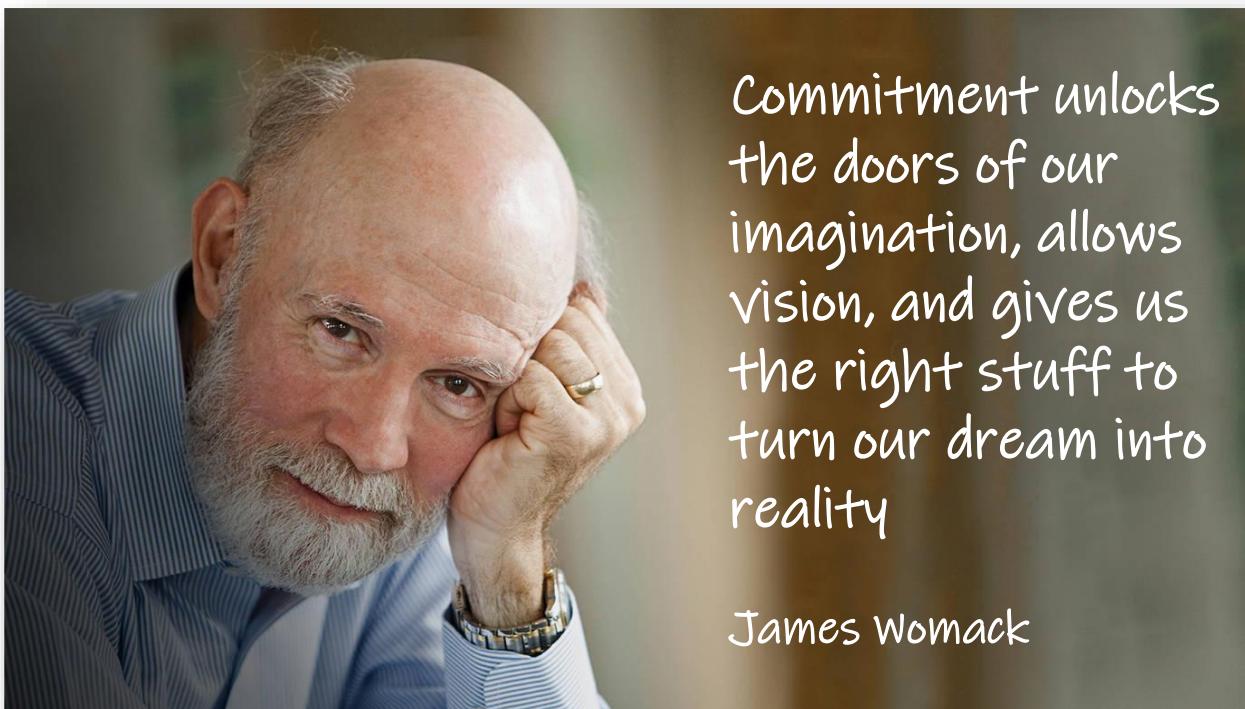
This structure matters because leadership growth rarely happens through information alone. It happens when reflection, story, and practice intersect. My aim is to provide you with more than insights; I want to give you a set of lenses you can return to whenever you feel stuck, stretched, or called into a bigger version of yourself.

This rhythm is deliberate. I don't just want you to understand these ideas; I want you to see them, feel them, and test them in your own team or organisation and through your leadership.

For me, leadership has never been about titles, control, or charisma. It has always been about commitment – and from that, the outcomes that make the biggest positive difference. The breakthroughs I've been part of, whether leading a listed company or coaching CEOs, senior leaders, and boards, all came down to one thing: what we were committed to, and whether we lived it fearlessly.

That's why this book matters to me, and why I hope it matters to you. Because without commitment, you will plateau. With commitment, you and your teams can create futures that others can't yet see – perhaps even to the extent you didn't think possible.

This is an invitation to commit – not cautiously, not conditionally, but wholeheartedly. Because with commitment, nothing is beyond reach.



Commitment unlocks
the doors of our
imagination, allows
vision, and gives us
the right stuff to
turn our dream into
reality

James Womack

Chapter 1

The Plateau Problem

Why do so many teams work harder and harder, only to stay stuck at the same level?

Every leader has felt it – the sense that no matter how hard the team works, performance refuses to move beyond a certain level. More hours, more meetings, more prioritisation, more initiatives, yet results plateau. This is the Plateau Problem – one of the most frustrating realities of leadership.

The plateau is not always immediately apparent. A company might hit early success, a team might surge with energy, or a leader might enjoy momentum in a new role. However, eventually, effort and outcomes decouple: energy in no longer equals results out. Leaders respond the only way they know – by pushing harder: more metrics, more initiatives, more pressure, more activity. Yet instead of breakthroughs, the culture breeds fatigue, cynicism, and disengagement. The *why* and bold ambition of it all get lost.

As Walt Kelly whimsically observed, “Having lost sight of our objectives, we redoubled our efforts.” Ever had that experience?

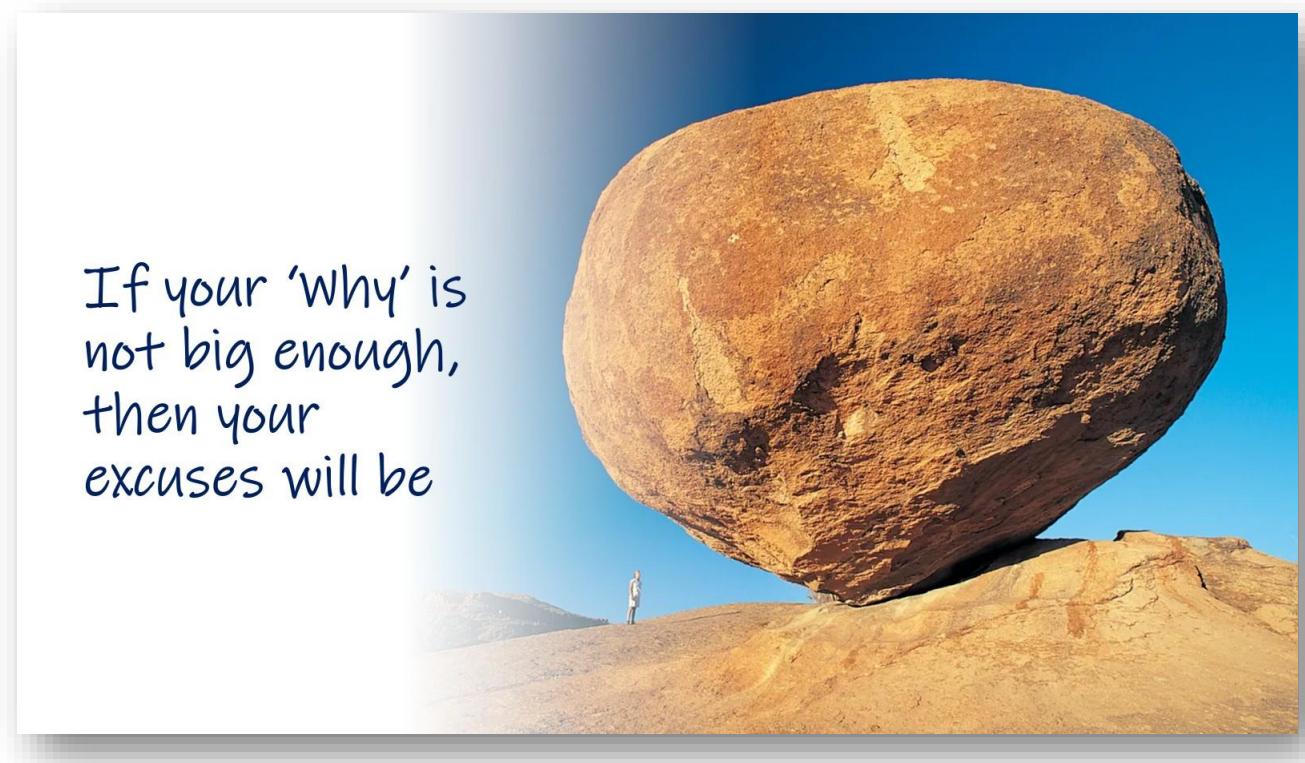
This is not a failure of intelligence or strategy. It is a failure of context. Teams plateau when they operate within the same mental models, habits, and assumptions that created their current results. Working harder inside the same frame doesn’t create breakthroughs; it simply produces diminishing returns.

Research supports this. McKinsey found that organisations setting bold, aspirational targets – so-called *stretch goals* – are two-and-a-half times more likely to achieve top-quartile performance than those that play safe. Yet most leaders shy away from such commitments, fearing they will demoralise or overextend their people. These leaders rarely acknowledge, even to themselves, that it is their view of identity that limits boldness – *If I fail, what happens to my brand, my reputation, my sense of self?* Ironically, it is precisely the absence of bold commitments that cements mediocrity and diminishes personal brand.

The plateau is not solved by incremental efficiency; it breaks only when leaders shift from managing effort to generating commitment. Compliance produces predictable results; only commitment creates extraordinary ones.

This distinction mirrors the difference between management and leadership. Management reduces volatility, increases predictability, and manages risk – naturally invoking a compliance mindset. Leadership determines *why*, designs context, generates futures, and sets boundaries and direction – a domain where compliance never moves the dial.

The core idea is simple: when leaders rely on compliance, they hit plateaus. When they invoke commitment, they break through. Context – the *why* – is the variable that determines commitment.



Shifting Context

If context is such a critical variable, how can leaders shift it? While this is not *the* list, it is a strong place to start:

- Language reframing – A few words can change everything. Calling a crisis a *test* rather than a *failure*, or describing work as *building* instead of *fixing*, reshapes how people experience the same facts.
- Declaring possibility – When a leader makes a bold declaration – “*We will be carbon-neutral by 2030*” – it sets a new field of play. The declaration doesn’t describe reality; it creates a future people orient around.

- Storytelling and metaphor – The stories leaders tell about past, present, and future become the lenses through which teams interpret their role. A metaphor such as *orchestra* or *mountaineering team* reframes interdependence and contribution.
- Altering what gets measured and noticed – Context shifts when leaders shine light on new indicators. Moving from *efficiency* to *impact* changes what people consider success.
- Embodied stance – Leaders' mood, presence, and body language set a background atmosphere. A calm leader in turbulence creates steadiness; an anxious one spreads fragility.
- Shifting time horizon – Moving the lens from quarterly results to a ten-year ambition alters what choices occur and what risks feel acceptable.
- Designing the environment – Physical space, meeting rituals, even who sits at the table carry symbolic weight. Changing them alters the context for interaction.
- Modelling vulnerability or courage – When a leader admits not knowing or makes a courageous stand, it redefines what's possible for others.

All of these levers are available if leaders stay mindful of context and consciously choose the shift that enables commitment rather than compliance.

Metaphor: The Treadmill

Think of the plateau as a treadmill. You can run harder, sweat more, and feel exhausted – but you're still in the same place. Compliance is treadmill work: people do what's required, meet metrics, yet fail to move the organisation toward a new future.

Commitment, by contrast, is stepping off the treadmill and out the door – choosing a direction, declaring a destination, and setting out on a real path. The speed may vary; the terrain may shift, but movement is genuine.

Leaders who live in compliance wear their teams out on treadmills. Leaders who generate commitment take their teams into new landscapes.

Model: The Performance Plateau Model

The model can be understood in three layers:

1. Compliance Mode – Teams deliver predictable outputs, focusing on meeting expectations and avoiding mistakes. This creates stability but caps growth.

2. Effort Escalation – Leaders sense the plateau and respond with pressure: more KPIs, tighter controls, longer hours, the seduction of “stretch” targets. For a time, results may rise, but without a context shift the gains stall and morale declines.
3. Commitment Breakthrough – Breakthroughs occur when leaders declare a stand beyond the predictable. Instead of pushing harder inside the same frame, they shift it entirely, generating fresh energy, creativity, and resilience. People see themselves not as labourers on a treadmill but as co-creators of a future.

This model aligns with McKinsey's stretch-goal data: incremental targets extend the treadmill; bold commitments anchored in purpose break the plateau. The difference is not effort but context: compliance sustains; commitment transforms.

Case Study: The Apollo Program

In the early 1960s, U.S. space exploration was plateauing. NASA had achieved impressive milestones – unmanned satellites, brief manned orbits – but progress was incremental. The Soviet Union was ahead, and the American program risked becoming an expensive treadmill: working harder, spending more, yet failing to inspire. Then, in 1961, President John F. Kennedy declared a commitment: the United States would land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth before the decade was out. It was not an incremental improvement; it was a bold leap, seemingly impossible with existing technology.

That declaration shifted the context. Suddenly, every engineer, scientist, and astronaut was not just working on isolated tasks but contributing to a shared stand: *We are going to the moon and bringing our people home safely*. The commitment reframed obstacles as problems to be solved, not reasons to retreat.

The road was not smooth. NASA faced catastrophic setbacks, including the Apollo 1 fire that killed three astronauts. Budgets were contested, schedules slipped, and public support wavered – yet the stand held. Commitment reframed breakdowns as learning fuel. “Failure is not an option” became cultural code.

On 20 July 1969, Neil Armstrong stepped onto the lunar surface. The breakthrough was not merely technological; it was ontological. The U.S. had redefined what was possible for itself – and for humanity.

The Apollo Program illustrates the anatomy of breaking a plateau. Incremental progress produced stagnation; a bold commitment generated alignment, resilience, and creativity. Compliance could have kept NASA in orbit; commitment took humanity to the moon.

Why This Matters

Leaders everywhere face plateaus. They see teams working harder yet not advancing and instinctively push for more compliance. Yet more compliance only extends the plateau.

What breaks the cycle is not effort but commitment. The difference between mediocrity and breakthrough is not hours worked but the context generated and the stand declared. This matters because plateaus erode morale. People tire of running on treadmills. When leaders invite commitment – a future worth stretching for – energy renews. Plateaus become launchpads.

Practical Application

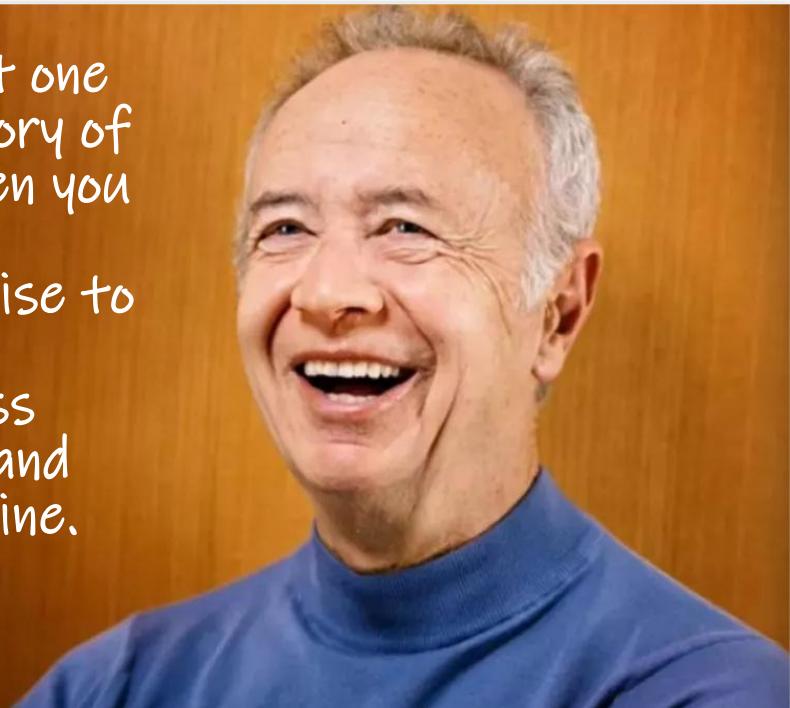
1. Name the plateau. Be honest: where are you working harder without advancing?
2. Stop escalating effort. Resist the reflex to add more KPIs, pressure, or hours.
3. Declare a stand. Articulate a bold commitment beyond the predictable – one that can't be reached by harder work alone.
4. Align practices. Create rituals that keep the stand visible daily.
5. Reframe breakdowns. Treat failures as fuel for recommitment, not reasons to retreat.

Generating Your Breakthrough

- What plateau are you tolerating that you've stopped noticing?
- Where in your leadership are you running harder but going nowhere?
- If effort alone won't get you unstuck, what new context must you create?
- Where can you stop escalating effort and instead expand commitment – and what would become possible?

There is at least one point in the history of any company when you have to change dramatically to rise to the next level of performance. Miss that moment – and you start to decline.

Andy Grove



Chapter 2

Compliance versus Commitment

Are your people truly committed, or are they just complying with your directives?

One of the most useful distinctions for any leader is the difference between compliance and commitment. From a distance, they can look similar. In both cases, people show up, do work, and produce outcomes. However, inside the lived experience of a team, they are worlds apart – and the gap between them often explains why one organisation achieves a step-change while another delivers predictable, ordinary results.

Compliance is doing what's required. It lives in rules, processes, and the fear-and-reward economy. Compliant people ask, *What does the policy say? What's the minimum standard? What will keep me safe?* Compliance is not inherently bad. In some cases, it is essential – in aviation safety, surgical checklists, and financial controls, compliance prevents harm. However, compliance is a maintenance mode. It preserves what exists; it rarely creates what does not yet exist.

Commitment is different in kind, not just degree. Commitment is a stand – a declaration that *this matters*, that I choose this future, and that I will keep going when it's hard, inconvenient, or uncertain. Committed people ask, *What am I for? Who are we, such that we will bring this about?* Commitment outlives moods. It persists when the plan breaks. It reorganises effort because energy is coming from identity and purpose – from meaning, not merely instruction.

Here's the trap: compliance often masquerades as commitment. A compliant employee can appear exemplary – responsive emails, tidy dashboards, careful adherence to procedure. Think of the last time you were short of your target, and the loudest call was to review the assumptions because the plan was not working. When reality deviates from the script, energy drains. A committed person, by contrast, might challenge, probe, or refuse a convenient shortcut. They can seem “difficult,” right up until a surprise hits. Then they generate options others can't see because the outcome – not the rulebook – animates them.

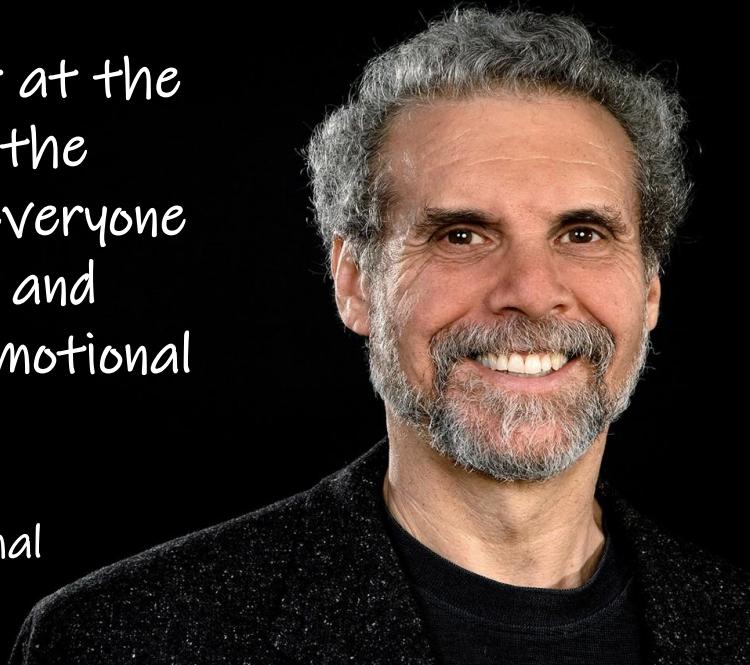
Gallup's latest global survey found that only 23% of employees worldwide are engaged – meaning truly committed. The rest are either passively complying or actively disengaged. The cost is substantial: teams in the top quartile of engagement are 23% more profitable than those in the bottom quartile.

Leaders amplify whichever mode they embody. When leaders manage according to the letter of the process, they get compliant followers. When leaders declare futures and live them consistently, they invite commitment. This is why tone, stance, and language matter so much. Teams take their cues from what the leader is **being**, not only from what the leader is saying or doing.

The payoff is simple: compliance maintains the present; commitment generates the future. In a stable world, maintenance might suffice. In a disrupted world, it will not. Breakthrough performance starts when leaders stop mistaking careful compliance for true commitment and begin structuring culture around the latter.

Moods that start at the top tend to move the fastest because everyone watches the boss and they take their emotional cues from them.

Daniel Goleman – Primal Leadership



Metaphor: On The Water

Compliance is rowing. The boat moves only while you pull. Stop rowing, stop moving. Every metre costs another stroke.

Commitment is sailing. You still rig the boat, trim the sheets, and steer with skill, but you're harnessing a larger, partly invisible force. Motion isn't coming just from muscle; it's coming from alignment – boat to wind, team to purpose.

Organisations built on compliance are rowing across a lake: predictable, exhausting, limited by stamina. Organisations built on commitment are sailing open water: adaptive,

leveraged, able to travel farther on the same human effort because they've aligned to purpose, identity, and shared stakes.

Model: Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, offers a rigorous lens for why commitment outperforms compliance. SDT holds that human motivation flourishes when three core psychological needs are satisfied:

1. Autonomy – the felt sense that I am choosing this.
2. Competence – the felt sense that I can meaningfully impact outcomes.
3. Relatedness – the felt sense that I'm connected to others who care about this with me.

When these needs are thwarted, people fall back on extrinsic motivation: rewards, threats, status, surveillance. That's the fuel of compliance. It can produce short-term effort but leads to shallow learning, low creativity, and brittle performance. Remove the carrot or the stick, and the behaviour evaporates.

When these three SDT needs are met, people act from intrinsic motivation: interest, values, identity. That's the fuel of commitment. It yields persistence under challenge, deeper problem-solving, and discretionary effort. The work itself becomes part of who you are and what you stand for.

For leaders, SDT translates into design choices:

- Autonomy: define outcomes clearly and give teams latitude in how they achieve them. Replace micromanagement with guardrails and trust.
- Competence: ensure people have the skills, feedback, and scope to make a dent. Ambitious goals without scaffolding create learned helplessness; ambition plus support builds capability.
- Relatedness: cultivate shared purpose and real belonging. People will endure a lot for a team and mission they care about, and very little for a KPI that nobody owns.

The SDT research base consistently shows that cultures meeting these needs produce higher creativity, quality, and resilience – exactly the ingredients of breakthrough. In short: engineer the conditions of intrinsic motivation, and commitment follows.

Intrinsic motivation lives at the intersection of purpose, autonomy, mastery, and belonging. Leaders can't "give" intrinsic motivation – it's an inside job – but they can create the conditions where it flourishes. Think of it like tending soil: you can't force the seed to grow, but you can make the ground fertile.

Here are the key ways leaders do this:

1. Connect work to purpose – People are most motivated when they feel their effort matters. A leader who links everyday tasks to a bigger mission (how this project reduces emissions or how this product changes lives) transforms routine work into meaningful work.
2. Grant autonomy – Micromanagement kills intrinsic motivation. Leaders who set clear outcomes but give freedom in how to get there trigger ownership. Autonomy shifts effort from compliance to commitment.
3. Build mastery – Humans are wired to enjoy getting better. Invest in learning, set achievable stretch, and celebrate progress to tap the joy of mastery.
4. Create belonging – Intrinsic motivation amplifies when people feel part of something larger than themselves. Foster trust, recognition, and psychological safety so people bring their best, not just their safest, selves to work.
5. Acknowledge, don't bribe – External rewards help, but overuse can reduce intrinsic drive (*I only do it for the money*). Authentic acknowledgement reinforces the inner fire rather than substituting for it.
6. Role-model commitment – People mirror leaders. If you show up driven by purpose and care – not only by metrics – that authenticity spreads. Motivation is contagious.

One of my best moments as CEO of Z Energy was when a young intern found the courage to email me why he loved being there: “I feel like I belong here, and I can do that by being myself.” I thought, *my work here is done!*

Case Study: Patagonia

When most apparel companies discuss responsibility, they frame it as compliance – meeting regulations, ticking boxes, minimising risk. Patagonia, by contrast, has consistently shown what it means to go far beyond compliance.

From its early days, founder Yvon Chouinard insisted the company stand for something bigger than selling outdoor gear. Patagonia committed to protecting the planet its customers explore. This wasn't a compliance mindset; it was a declaration: “We're in business to save our home planet.”

This commitment reshaped practices. Patagonia became the first major clothing company to switch entirely to organic cotton, despite higher costs and supply-chain

complexity. They encouraged customers to repair, not replace, through Worn Wear – directly at odds with compliance-based growth logic. In 2011, they ran a full-page Black Friday ad: “Don’t Buy This Jacket.”

The company faced breakdowns and trade-offs. Moving to organic cotton nearly bankrupted them in the 1990s. Activist stances have alienated some consumers. Yet Patagonia’s stand held.

In 2022, Chouinard and family transferred ownership to a trust and nonprofit dedicated to combating climate change. Patagonia would continue to sell products, but all profits not reinvested in the business would go to environmental causes. As Chouinard put it, “Earth is now our only shareholder.”

This was not compliance. No regulation required it. No competitor forced it. It was commitment – an identity-aligned stand, lived at real cost, in service of a future beyond the predictable.

Patagonia’s story highlights the essence: compliance avoids risk; commitment embraces responsibility. Compliance sustains the system; commitment transforms it.

Why This Matters

The difference between compliance and commitment is the difference between reliability and reinvention. If your world is stable, reliability may be enough – but stability is now a luxury. Markets, technology, geopolitics, and social expectations shift faster than any playbook. In that environment, compliance becomes an anchor.

Commitment creates forward pull when the map is incomplete. It keeps people engaged when setbacks arrive. It unlocks discretionary effort without burnout – because the energy comes from identity and purpose, not fear and fatigue.

If your organisation keeps “almost” breaking through – strong plans, careful execution, then a stall – don’t add more rules. **Change the fuel.** Build a culture where people choose the future with you rather than simply complying with the present.

Practical Application

- Name the mode. In meetings and reviews, ask explicitly: *Are we complying or committed?* The conversation that follows is often culture-changing.

- Declare outcomes, free the methods. Define the *why* and the *what* with precision; let teams design the *how* within clear constraints.
- Convert directives to requests. In meetings, turn one directive into a clear request and wait for an explicit commitment.
- Design for autonomy, competence, relatedness. Offer choice, build skills, and foster genuine belonging. These are not “soft” add-ons; they are the engine.
- Turn metrics into meaning. Tie KPIs and OKRs to the story of who you are becoming, not just what you’re counting. People don’t bleed for dashboards; they bleed for purpose.
- Ritualise recommitment. Create monthly or quarterly moments where individuals and teams publicly restate what they are there for – and what they’ll stop doing to serve it.

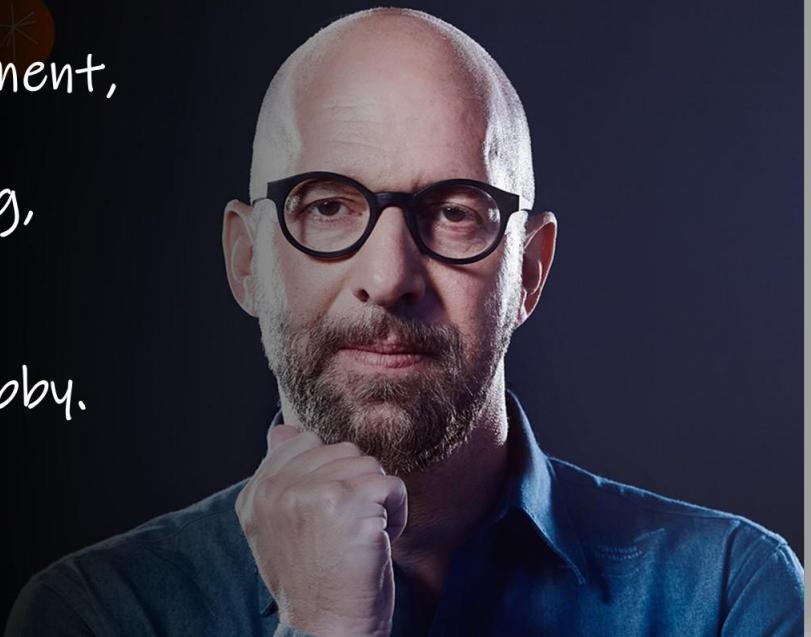
Generating Your Breakthrough

- Where are you mistaking compliance for commitment in your team?
- What would shift if you stopped rowing harder and set a sail instead?
- If your team truly operated from commitment, what “impossible” outcome would become the new normal?
- Which policies or habits protect compliance but punish commitment, e.g., zero-risk tolerance, approval bottlenecks, status hoarding?
- What declaration – if spoken clearly and lived consistently – would make your current constraints look small?



Without commitment,
you cannot have
depth in anything,
whether it's a
relationship, a
business, or a hobby.

Neil Strauss



Chapter 3

Commitment and Being

What future could you declare if you stopped waiting for certainty and started leading with commitment?

Commitment is not simply something you do; it is something you **embody**. It is not a behaviour layered on top of personality, but an orientation that arises from identity and being. Leaders who treat commitment as a checklist quickly run out of steam. Leaders who **live it** naturally inspire it in others.

This chapter explores the ontological dimension of commitment – ontology is the study of being. **It asks, not what we do, but who we are while acting.** It asks: *What kind of person am I being when I lead, decide, or relate?* In leadership, ontology matters because action flows from identity. A leader who is being defensive will produce very different outcomes from one who is being curious or committed.

Ontology shifts the focus from fixing behaviours to transforming the self that generates them. When leaders attend to being, they expand what is possible – for themselves, their teams, and their organisations. Most leadership conversations revolve around doing – the actions, strategies, and tactics that can be executed. However, these emerge from a deeper place – the commitments that shape who leaders are being in the moment.

Consider the difference between someone who says, “*I am committed to safety because that’s my job,*” versus someone who says, “*I am the kind of leader who will not trade safety for convenience – ever.*” The second statement arises from identity, and not from compliance. It expresses being. And because identity runs deeper than task, it is far more resilient under stress or uncertainty.

When commitment is rooted in being, it transcends moods, incentives, and setbacks. It is not subject to the weather of daily events. It becomes a declaration: *This is who I am, this is who we are, and this is the future we stand for.* From that stance, extraordinary performance becomes possible because the context has shifted.

Leaders often underplay this dimension because it feels intangible. Yet the most memorable breakthroughs in history come from leaders whose commitment was embodied. Think of Nelson Mandela’s reconciliation in South Africa, Malala Yousafzai’s

fight for education in Pakistan, or Greta Thunberg's climate strike in Europe. Their commitments were not tasks on a list; they were who they were.

Leaders often underestimate how their way of being interacts with how situations occur to them. This interaction is rarely conscious, yet it produces recognisable patterns of leadership. Sometimes we collapse under pressure; other times we coast in comfort. At our best, we remain grounded or fully empowered. In what I call **the Modes of Leadership Presence**, the following framework illustrates how these dynamics play out.

The modes of leadership presence

WHO I AM BEING	HOW IT OCCURS	
	Bad	Good
Positive	CENTRED LEADERSHIP <i>"This is hard, but it doesn't define me"</i> Accepts reality without collapse. Choosing a centred response despite the obvious discomfort	CONFIDENT CLARITY <i>"This is challenging, and I can lead through it"</i> Calm, grounded, constructive. Engages with others with about possibility.
Negative	COLLAPSE <i>"This is terrible, and I can't cope"</i> Defensive, blaming, withdrawn. Trapped in a past-based narrative, so no generative action.	COMPLACENT COMFORT <i>"Everything is fine, so I don't need to stretch"</i> Avoids personal growth or team development. May lack urgency or depth.

The intersection of “who I am being” and “how it occurs” produces four distinct leadership modes. Only two of these are generative; the others represent forms of drift. This framework helps make the invisible visible. When pressure mounts, do I unconsciously slip into collapse or complacent comfort, or do I choose centred leadership or confident clarity? The distinction is critical: commitments declared from collapse or complacency rarely endure. However, when leaders operate from centred or confident states, their commitments become generative and resilient.

Leaders can apply this matrix through the following questions:

- When I face difficulty, do I collapse into blame or withdrawal, or stay centred and grounded?

- When things feel “fine,” do I drift into complacent comfort, or still stretch and bring my full self?
- Which quadrant best describes how I’ve been showing up recently?
- What are the costs – to me and to others – of staying there?
- What would shift if I operated more often from centred leadership or confident clarity?

The core idea, then, is simple but challenging: to lead at the level of breakthrough, you must shift from treating commitment as an action to treating it as identity. The doing will follow, but only if the being is clear.

Metaphor: The Tree Roots

Imagine a tree in a storm. The branches whip around in the wind – sometimes bending, sometimes breaking. These are the actions, the tactics, the visible “doing.” However, the tree does not endure because of its branches; it endures because of its roots. Identity, values, and being are those roots. They run deep, anchoring the tree in soil, drawing nourishment, holding fast as the storm passes through.

A leader without deep commitments is like a tree without roots – at the mercy of the weather. A leader whose commitments are anchored in being may bend, may lose a few branches, but remains standing. Their resilience is not the result of technique; it stems from identity.

Model: The Four Ways of Being

Werner Erhard and Michael Jensen developed the Four Ways of Being framework, which is particularly relevant here. They argue that extraordinary leadership arises not from technical skills alone but from four ontological stances:

1. **Being Authentic** – telling the truth about what you see and feel, even when it is uncomfortable.
2. **Being Committed to Something Bigger than Yourself** – anchoring identity in a stand that transcends self-interest.
3. **Being Cause in the Matter** – taking ownership for outcomes, not as self-blame but as agency.
4. **Being a Person (or Organisation) of Integrity** – operating as whole and complete by keeping your word.

This model matters because it shifts the conversation from what leaders do to who they are being. A leader can adopt the same strategy as another, but if one is driven by fear and image-management while the other is anchored in authenticity and ownership, the outcomes diverge. People sense being. They detect congruence quickly; tone, timing, and presence carry meaning as powerfully as words.

The Four Ways of Being offer a practical ontology for commitment. They remind us that breakthroughs require leaders to embody stands bigger than themselves, act with authenticity, and model integrity in ways that shape culture. Commitment becomes contagious when it is lived at the level of being, not merely spoken at the level of tasks.

Case Study: Malala Yousafzai – Education as Identity

In 2012, Malala Yousafzai was a 15-year-old schoolgirl in Pakistan's Swat Valley. She had already been speaking out against Taliban bans on girls' education, blogging under a pseudonym and appearing in documentaries. Her declaration was simple: girls deserved the right to learn.

On 9 October 2012, Taliban gunmen boarded her school bus and shot her in the head. The attempt to silence her could easily have ended her commitment. Many in her situation might have chosen compliance – stay quiet, stay safe. Instead, Malala's being came to the surface. After surviving the attack, she declared with even greater clarity: *"They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed. Weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage were born."*

Her commitment was not a hobby or a task; it was her identity. Education was not what she did – it was who she was. That ontological stance transformed her from a domestic regional activist into a global icon.

The power of Malala's commitment is visible in the movements it sparked. She co-founded the Malala Fund, became the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and continues to advocate for education worldwide. Her story shows how breakthroughs arise when commitments are embodied as being. It also illustrates resilience: setbacks, threats, and even life-threatening violence did not diminish her stand because it was unconditional, not situational.

For leaders, Malala's story is a reminder that commitment gains transformative power when it fuses with identity. Teams and organisations are always watching: *Is this just rhetoric, or is it who you are?* Malala's life makes the answer clear.

Why This Matters

Most leaders underestimate how much their being sets the ceiling on their team's commitment. People sense incongruence faster than they analyse strategy. A leader who speaks about bold futures but embodies caution generates compliance at best. A leader who embodies commitment – who roots it in identity – creates a field in which others can locate their own.

In this context, the quadrants of the Modes of Leadership Presence can be restated as practical choices rather than theory.

The modes of leadership presence

WHO I AM BEING	CENTRED LEADERSHIP	CONFIDENT CLARITY
Positive	<p>Ontological maturity. The leader experiences some difficulty but chooses a constructive way of being – this is where transformation happens.</p>	<p>Ideal leadership space. The situation feels manageable, and the leader is <i>being</i> present, creative, and generative.</p>
Negative	COLLAPSE	COMPLACENT COMFORT
	<p>The breakdown quadrant. The situation occurs as threatening or overwhelming, and the leader's being reinforces that – leading to reactivity, blame, or resignation.</p>	<p>A subtle trap. Everything seems fine, but the leader isn't bringing their full self. They may coast, disengage, or miss growth opportunities.</p>

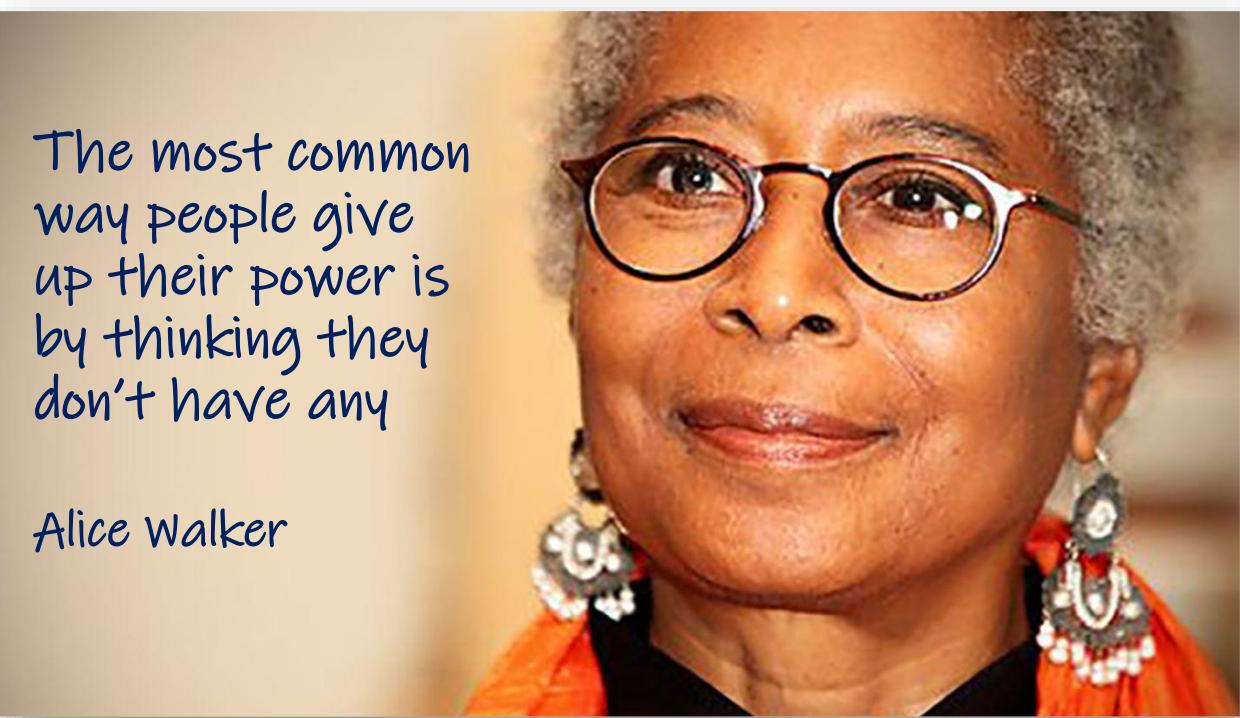
These distinctions matter because they show that commitment is never just about words – it is about being. A leader may declare a commitment, but if their way of being slips into collapse or complacent comfort, the commitment will not generate breakthrough. In collapse, the situation occurs as overwhelming, so the leader withdraws or blames; the original commitment evaporates under the weight of reactivity. In complacent comfort, everything seems fine, but the leader is not bringing full presence. The commitment becomes shallow – more compliance than conviction.

By contrast, when leaders are centred, they stay grounded even in difficulty. Their commitments hold not because conditions are easy, but because they choose a constructive way of being. In confident clarity, leaders engage challenges as

opportunities, infusing their commitments with creativity and possibility. These commitments inspire others and create alignment.

This quadrant model makes visible what is often hidden: the strength of a commitment is inseparable from the state of being that holds it. Commitment is not a task list; it is an expression of identity. Who you are being determines whether your commitments collapse, drift, or generate extraordinary results.

This matters because in complex, volatile environments, behaviour alone is not enough. Leaders cannot script every action. What sustains performance through disruption is identity. When commitment is a matter of being, not doing, it scales.



Practical Application

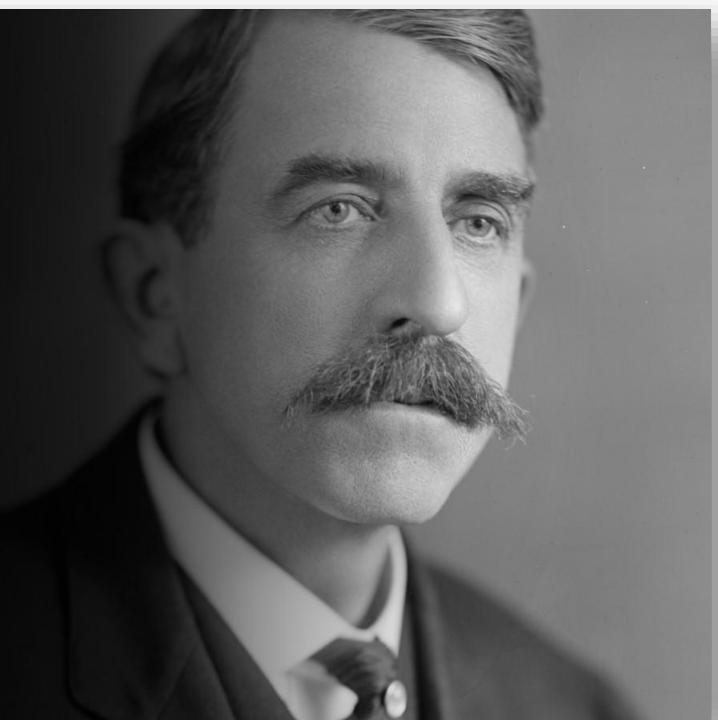
- Name your stand. Write a declaration beginning with *“I am the kind of leader who ...”*
- Audit alignment. Ask trusted colleagues: *Do my actions align with the commitments I claim?*
- Practice authenticity. Tell the truth about breakdowns, doubts, and gaps. Integrity is a form of commitment.
- Anchor in something bigger. Tie commitments to a cause beyond personal success.
- Rehearse being. In moments of stress, pause and ask: *Who am I being right now? What commitment is visible in my stance?*

Generating Your Breakthrough

- What declarations are you avoiding because they expose who you must be?
- Who are you being when you make commitments that others don't believe?
- Where does your behaviour outpace your being – actions without identity behind them?
- Where does your being outpace your behaviour – the identity you claim but have not yet embodied?
- Revisit the Modes of Leadership Presence. Which quadrant holds you most often, and what would it take to live in the upper-right quadrant more of the time?

Until one is committed,
there is hesitancy, the
chance to draw back,
always ineffectiveness.
Whatever you can do or
dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius,
power, and magic in it.

William H Murray



Chapter 4

Anatomy of Breakthrough

Do breakthroughs happen by accident, or can they be deliberately designed through commitment?

Breakthroughs are not the same as improvements. Improvements are predictable, incremental, and managed through efficiency – better processes, sharper tools, more discipline. Breakthroughs, by contrast, are leaps into the unexpected. They shatter plateaus, alter what is considered possible, and redefine the field in which you play.

When we talk about breakthrough performance in leadership, we're not describing a few percentage points of efficiency. We are describing a shift so significant that the game itself transforms: a sports team breaking a decade-long losing streak, a company reinventing its industry, a leader moving from survival to generative vision. **A breakthrough is the moment when the old ceiling no longer applies.**

What makes breakthroughs fascinating is that they rarely emerge from more of the same. They don't come from working harder, extending hours, or adding more controls. Breakthroughs occur when leaders shift the context in which work takes place. This contextual shift alters how people perceive problems, which in turn determines the actions that are possible.

This is why breakthroughs often look impossible until they happen. The conditions that make them possible do not exist within the old frame. Only when the frame shifts – when commitments stretch identity and context – do people see new actions, new creativity, and new results. There is also a tendency to downplay the breakthrough once it has been achieved, simply because the frame has shifted; what once seemed impossible now appears obvious.

Consider how breakthroughs unfold in practice. They often follow a period of intense struggle. A team tries harder – small adjustments, extra resources, escalating effort. Progress slows, then stalls. Leaders grow frustrated. Teams lose energy. This is the plateau – not a sign of incompetence but evidence of being trapped inside an existing frame.

At this moment, leaders face a choice. They can double down on incrementalism – keep squeezing harder, measuring tighter, hoping effort alone will break through. Or they can

recognise the plateau for what it is: an invitation to shift context. That shift usually comes through declaration – a commitment to a possibility that transcends current limits.

Breakthroughs have a distinctive pattern. First, they are anchored in a bold stand – a commitment beyond the predictable or comfortable. This stand is not reckless; it is specific, energising, and identity-shaping. Second, breakthroughs emerge from breakdowns. The very failures and frustrations that seem to block progress become the raw material for innovation. Leaders who treat breakdowns as data, not disasters, invite learning that unlocks new pathways. Third, breakthroughs involve alignment. It is never enough for one person to declare a commitment; teams, systems, and practices must cohere so that energy flows in one direction rather than scattering.

Importantly, breakthroughs are not one-off moments of luck or inspiration. They can be generated deliberately. Leaders who understand the anatomy of breakthrough can design the conditions for it to occur more frequently. This requires discipline in naming plateaus, courage in making declarations, and resilience in reframing breakdowns as the fuel for another possibility.

Research supports this pattern. Studies of high-performing organisations show that ambitious goals – targets beyond the predictable – correlate with extraordinary results. McKinsey's data suggests organisations with bold commitments are more than twice as likely to achieve top-quartile performance. Similarly, Angela Duckworth's work on grit shows that sustained commitment amid obstacles predicts achievement more reliably than talent or resources. Breakthrough is not accidental; it is the outcome of context, commitment, and practice.

Drawing from ontology, phenomenology, and transformational leadership practice, a breakdown doesn't mean failure in the everyday sense. It's not simply "something went wrong". A breakdown is when the world stops working inside the frame you've been using – when your current way of seeing, acting, or organising no longer produces expected results.

In everyday language, a breakdown is perceived as a problem, an interruption, or a crisis: the product launch flops, a competitor overtakes you, the strategy that once worked suddenly doesn't. In transformational language, a breakdown is a signal. It reveals the limits of your current commitments, assumptions, or identity. It's the moment when the "old game" shows its cracks.

If you treat breakdowns as disasters, you retreat, blame, or lower the bar. If you treat them as data – even as leading indicators – you can use them as leverage points, places where context can be reframed and new commitments made. Many breakthroughs are born from breakdowns because they force you to see differently – if you let them.

Think of it this way: with an improvement mindset, a breakdown is a problem to be fixed. With a breakthrough mindset, it is an opening to create something new.

There is a distinctive anatomy to breakthrough, beginning with a shift in context. Context is the lens through which people interpret reality. In one context, a problem feels impossible; in another, solvable. For example, a team stuck in “cost-cutting” mode sees every idea as an expense. Shift the context to “investing in growth,” and the same ideas look like opportunities.

The second ingredient is a bold declaration. Breakthroughs don’t emerge from cautious goals; they come when someone declares a future that doesn’t yet exist but insists on treating it as possible. Declarations reframe what people pay attention to, how they allocate resources, and how they see themselves.

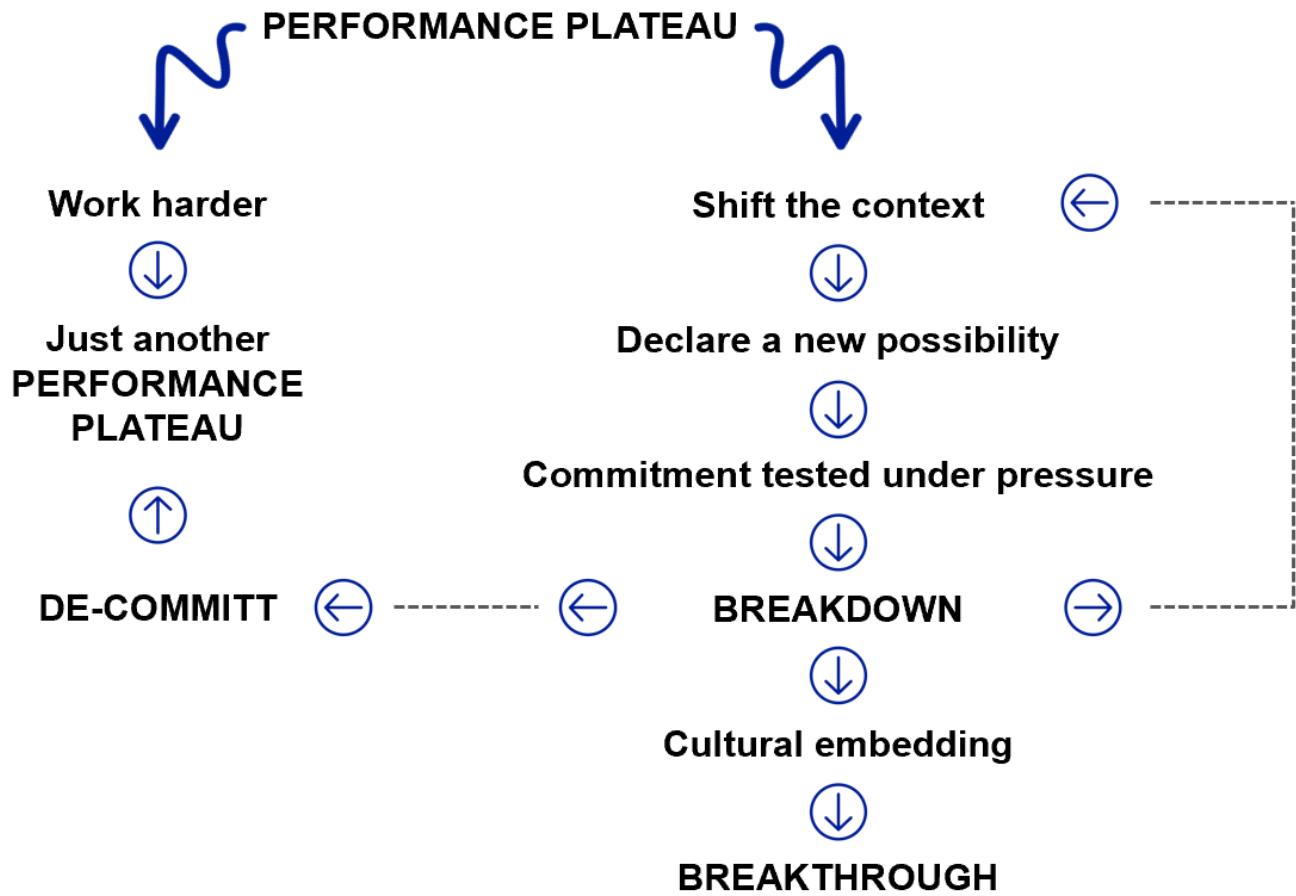
Next comes commitment under pressure. Every bold stand attracts breakdowns – resource shortages, sceptics, crises, competitor moves. The anatomy of a breakthrough includes these breakdowns by default. What distinguishes breakthrough teams is that they don’t interpret breakdowns as impossibility. They treat them as data, feedback, and opportunities to invent new pathways. In other words, if you want to play the game called *Breakthrough*, expect to face plenty of breakdowns.

Finally, breakthroughs require cultural embedding. A one-off achievement is impressive but not transformative. When a new way of being becomes normal – through rituals, language, and identity – the breakthrough endures.

When you reach a breakdown, you can choose to de-commit – often unconsciously. As later chapters explore, that choice guarantees another plateau, much like the “work harder” option would have produced.

The alternative is to embrace the breakdowns within the already shifted context and declared stand. This prompts you to generate possibilities for that stand – a conversation about how it might be fulfilled. That usually leads to identifying opportunities within those possibilities – a conversation for the pathways you must invent to deliver. Once those are clear, you can plan actions. Sometimes even that is insufficient, and you must shift the context again and declare another possibility – back to step one.

This anatomy can be graphically illustrated as follows.



This anatomy is not theoretical. It is visible across industries, eras, and cultures. The moon landing, Toyota's lean production system, and Mandela's reconciliation all share a similar sequence: context shift, bold declaration, persistence in the face of breakdown, and cultural embedding.

This explains why breakthroughs are rare and powerful. They demand leaders willing to leave the safety of compliance and comfort, and step into a space where the future is not guaranteed but generated. They require leaders who see that context is more powerful than effort – that context shapes content.

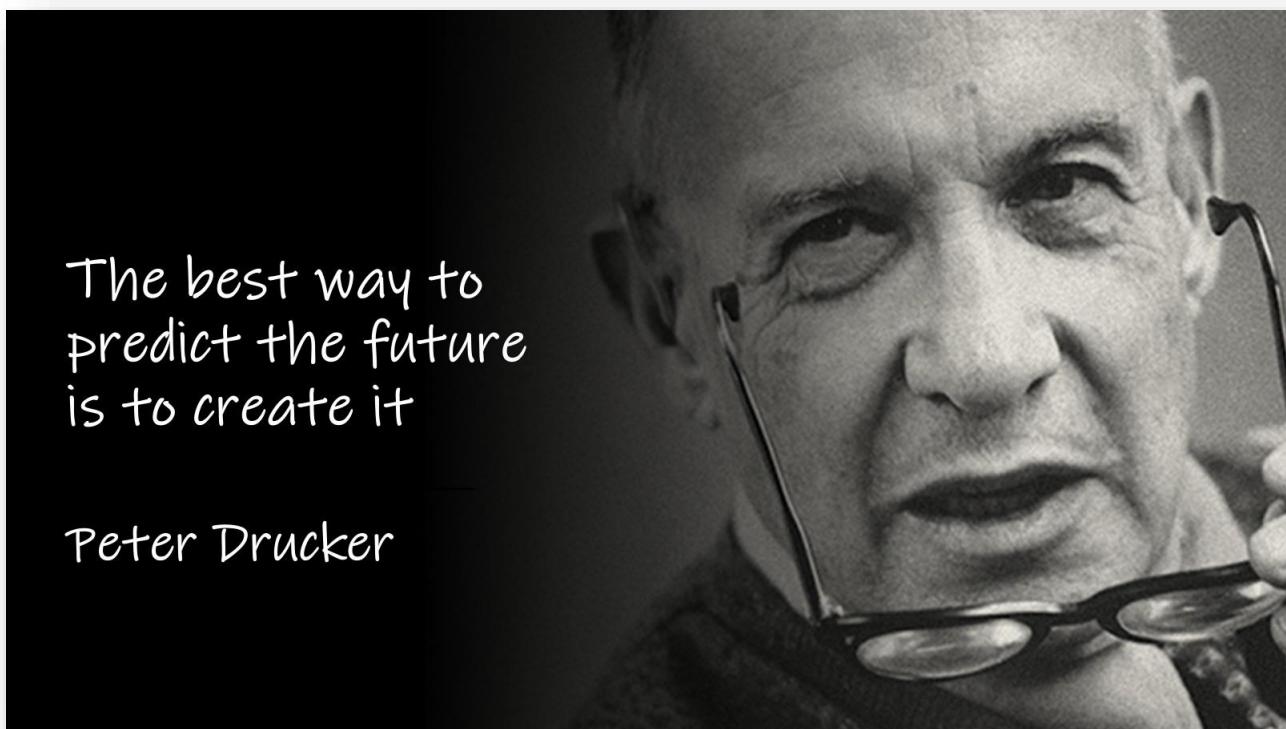
For those willing to lead this way, breakthroughs become not occasional miracles but repeatable possibilities. The plateau becomes not a trap but a signpost – a signal that the current frame is exhausted and it's time to expand. Leaders who act from this understanding find themselves not merely improving within old rules but rewriting them.

Leaders who grasp this anatomy stop treating breakthroughs as lucky anomalies; they become architects of possibility.

Metaphor: The River

Think of a river breaking through a dam. At first, the water swirls against the barrier, building pressure – that's the context shift, recognising the old structure no longer fits. Then comes the crack: a declaration that this wall can break. Water pushes through, small at first, then widening. Those are the breakdowns – resistance, debris, turbulence. Finally, the river flows freely, carving a new channel. Over time, that channel becomes the new landscape.

Breakthroughs follow the same anatomy. They're not magic; they're the physics of commitment meeting resistance until the future carves its place.



Model: Change Mastery

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's work on change mastery provides a useful model for understanding the anatomy of breakthroughs. She observes that every major change process follows a predictable emotional arc:

1. Initial Enthusiasm – the thrill of a new idea or declaration.
2. Reality Hits – obstacles, costs, and resistance surface.
3. The Valley of Doubt – fear, cynicism, and fatigue threaten to derail progress.

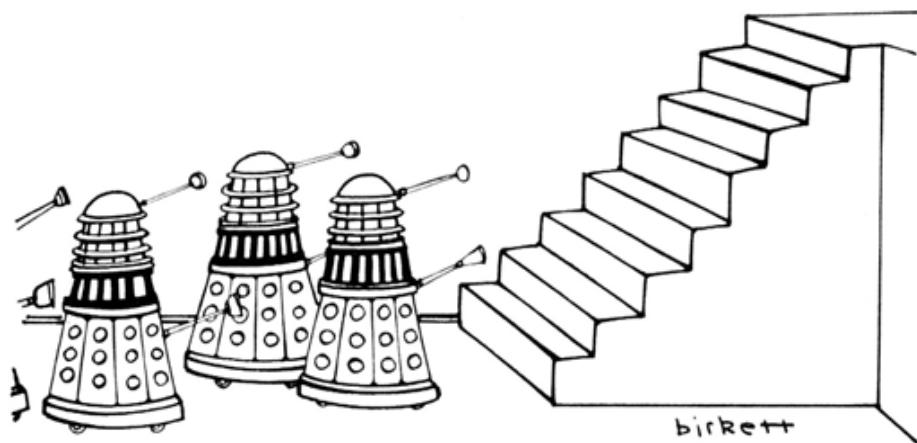
4. Renewal of Commitment – leaders persist, reframe, and adapt.
5. Breakthrough and Normalisation – the new practice embeds into culture.

Kanter notes that most initiatives fail not because the idea was flawed but because leaders misinterpret the Valley of Doubt. They treat breakdowns as signs of failure rather than as natural phases of change.

The model highlights the anatomy of breakthrough as both **structural** and **emotional**. Structurally, breakthroughs move from declaration to embedding. Emotionally, they move from enthusiasm to doubt to renewed commitment.

For leaders, the implication is simple: expect the valley. Anticipate resistance and fatigue as part of the anatomy, not as evidence of futility. Equip teams with rituals, stories, and practices that sustain commitment through the valley. The anatomy of breakthrough is as much about emotional endurance as strategic clarity.

There's something predictable about making a bold stand or declaring an ambition beyond what seems achievable. You can safely assume things will not always go your way – through Reality Hits or the Valley of Doubt. Whenever I think of these phases, I'm reminded of a cartoon I once saw on the wall of the Boulcott Street Bistro in Wellington.



“Well, this certainly buggers our plan to conquer the Universe.”

Case Study: Toyota and the Birth of Lean

In the 1970s, Toyota was still a modest automaker compared with U.S. giants like GM and Ford. The oil shocks of 1973 created new market conditions as demand for smaller, fuel-efficient cars surged. Toyota saw an opportunity – but only if it could radically reduce waste, improve quality, and speed up production.

The context shift was bold: rather than chasing scale through mass production, Toyota reframed manufacturing as a learning system. The declaration was equally audacious: *We will build cars with higher quality, lower cost, and faster delivery than anyone else.*

The breakdowns came swiftly. Workers were used to keeping the line running despite defects. Managers struggled with empowering shop-floor teams. Western competitors ridiculed the “just-in-time” system as impractical, but Toyota persisted. Instead of abandoning the vision, they treated every breakdown as data.

The breakthrough came in the form of the Toyota Production System (TPS), also known as lean manufacturing. Over time, it became cultural. Concepts like *kaizen* (continuous improvement) and *jidoka* (automation with a human touch) were not add-ons; they were integral to identity. Employees internalised them as “the Toyota Way.”

The results transformed the global auto industry. Quality soared, costs dropped, and Toyota overtook American giants. More importantly, the breakthrough endured because it was embedded in the organisation’s DNA.

Toyota’s story mirrors the anatomy: context shift (oil shock and reframing), declaration (quality + cost + speed), persistence through breakdowns (worker resistance and scepticism), and cultural embedding (TPS as identity).

Why This Matters

Without understanding the anatomy of breakthrough, leaders misread the signs. They declare bold futures but panic when breakdowns arrive. They misinterpret the Valley of Doubt as a verdict instead of a stage. The result is aborted breakthroughs and reinforced cynicism.

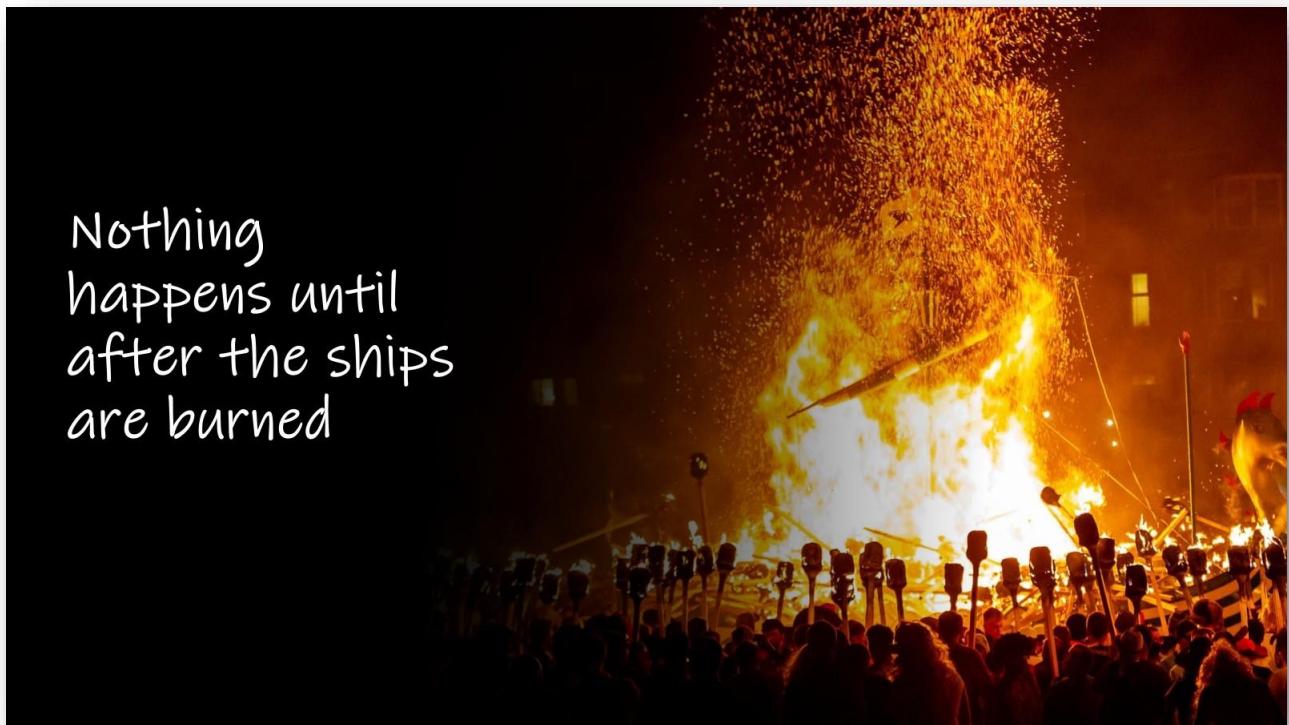
Understanding the anatomy gives leaders a roadmap. It legitimises struggle, normalises resistance, and sustains effort long enough for embedding. This matters because organisations don’t need more slogans or short-lived initiatives; they need leaders who can midwife real breakthroughs – ones that endure and compound.

The image of Vikings burning their ships is more myth than fact, but like all good myths, it carries a sharp edge of truth. There’s little evidence Vikings regularly destroyed their own ships; their longboats were precious, central to power and identity. Destroying them would be like a Formula 1 team torching its cars after a race. Not smart.

The story is more closely linked to other historical figures – Hernán Cortés in 1519 being the most famous. He ordered his men to scuttle or burn their ships upon arriving in

Mexico, making retreat impossible. That dramatic gesture symbolised total commitment: no way back, only forward.

The core lesson is psychological and strategic: destroy the escape hatch, and people fight harder. Leaders throughout history (real and fictional) have used the “burn-the-ships” metaphor to show the power of removing fallback options, thereby forcing full commitment to the mission. Safety nets keep you safe, but they also keep you small.



Practical Application

- Map the anatomy. For any new initiative, outline the likely phases: enthusiasm, breakdown, doubt, renewal, embedding.
- Normalise resistance. Teach your team that breakdowns are data, not failure.
- Recommit publicly. When doubt arises, restate the stand or context with clarity.
- Embed rituals. Use recurring practices – retrospectives, storytelling, visual reminders – to integrate commitment into culture.
- Celebrate embedding. Mark the moment when the breakthrough becomes “how we do things here.”

Generating Your Breakthrough

- Where in your work is the Valley of Doubt showing up right now?
- Where are breakdowns that could be reinterpreted as feedback rather than failure?
- What cultural practices embed old plateaus instead of new breakthroughs?
- How would your leadership change if you treated breakdowns as evidence you're on the right path?

A bird on a branch
never fears that
the branch will
break, because it
backs itself it can
fly out of trouble.

Charles Wardle



Chapter 5

The Language of Commitment

When pressure mounts, will you stand in your commitments or step back into safety?

Commitment is not only embodied; it is also spoken. The way leaders use language determines whether commitment becomes visible, contagious, and enduring. Every breakthrough begins with words – a declaration, a promise, a generated context, a conversation that shifts what is possible. Yet leaders often underuse or misuse the language of commitment, leaving their teams unclear, uninspired, or hedging.

Commitment language differs from descriptive or predictive language. Descriptive language says, “*Here’s what’s happening.*” Predictive language says, “*Here’s what will probably happen.*” Commitment language says, “*Here’s what we will make happen.*” It creates a future not yet visible and invites others to stand inside it.

This kind of speaking is **generative** – it doesn’t just describe reality; it creates it. When John F. Kennedy said in 1961 that America would land a man on the moon before the decade was out, he wasn’t reporting facts; he was creating a commitment. When Jacinda Ardern said, “*They are us*” after the Christchurch mosque attacks, she wasn’t describing demographics; she was declaring identity.

The problem is that many leaders muddy the waters. They hedge with conditional language (“*We’ll try our best*”), dilute declarations with caveats (“*depending on budget*”), or confuse compliance with commitment (“*You must do this*”). The result is erosion of trust and enthusiasm.

Clean commitment language has three qualities:

1. Clarity – no hedging, no ambiguity, no fine print.
2. Ownership – spoken in the first person, not outsourced to “they” or “the organisation.”
3. Future-shaping – it creates a stand that alters what people see as possible.

Leaders who master the language of commitment mobilise energy even in adversity. They give voice to futures that feel out of reach and invite others into them. Leaders who fail at this trap their teams in cautious compliance.



The future is not the result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created ... first in the mirror and will, and next in activity. The future is not some place we are going but one we are creating. The paths are not found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.

John Schaar

Metaphor: Sparking the Tinder

Words are like sparks in dry grass. Some fizzles harmlessly; others ignite wildfires. Compliance language is a damp match – lots of friction, little flame. Commitment language is a spark in tinder – precise, hot, and able to spread rapidly when oxygen is present.

A leader's words can burn away apathy and kindle conviction – or sputter out, leaving people unmoved. The difference lies not in eloquence but in whether the words are clean commitments or hedged half-promises.

Model: Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, pioneered by philosophers John Austin and John Searle, provides a framework for understanding the language of commitment. They argued that language does not merely transmit information; it **performs actions**. Saying “*I promise*” is not a description – it is the act of making a promise.

From this perspective, leaders' words fall into four categories:

- Assertions – statements of fact.

- Declarations – speech acts that change reality by being spoken (“*We are committed to ...*”).
- Promises – commitments to future action.
- Requests – invitations that elicit commitments from others.

Breakthroughs emerge when leaders use declarations and promises with precision. A declaration shifts identity or future – “*We are the company that will ...*” A promise binds behaviour to that future. Requests, when made cleanly, generate promises from others.

The danger lies in muddy speech acts – promises never meant to be kept, vague declarations no one believes, or requests that sound like demands. These corrode trust.

Speech Act Theory shows that leadership language is not ornamental; it is the operating system for commitment. Leaders must speak carefully because every promise shapes trust, and every declaration shapes culture.

Let's look at an example. A **muddy directive** sounds like this:

“We really need to improve our customer response times. Can you look into this and get something moving?”

At first glance, it seems like direction, but it's actually muddy. What does “*look into*” mean? Who exactly is responsible? By when? What counts as “*improve*”? Everyone hears the words, but nobody leaves with a clean promise. Compliance may follow, some activity happens, but commitment will not.

In contrast, a clear request sounds like this:

“Sarah, will you please analyse our customer-response data this week and come back to the team on Monday by 5 p.m. with three concrete recommendations to cut average response times by at least 20%?”

Now there is:

- A named receiver (*Sarah*).
- A specific action (*analyse data; generate recommendations*).
- A timeframe (*by Monday 5 p.m.*).
- A clear standard of satisfaction (*reduce response times by 20%*).

Sarah can respond with a clear *yes, no, or counteroffer*. Once accepted, it becomes a commitment – not just an instruction floating in the air hoping to land on a cushion of compliance.

Case Studies: The Declaration

On 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and declared, *“I have a dream.”* He did not describe present reality – segregation and injustice were rampant. He did not predict the future with probability. He **declared** a vision of racial equality as though it were already unfolding.

The power of King’s words lay in their clarity, ownership, and future-shaping force. They created a context in which countless people could see themselves. The speech was not just an inspiration; it was a **linguistic act of commitment** – one that mobilised a movement and shifted cultural imagination.

Decades later, at the UN Climate Action Summit (2019), Greta Thunberg’s words cut like a scalpel: *“How dare you... You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.”* This was not compliance language; it was commitment language. Her words declared a stand – that young people would not accept hedging, delay, or conditional promises on climate.

Though she lacked formal authority, Greta Thunberg’s clean language generated commitment across a generation. Her declarations sparked strikes, activism, and shifts in corporate and political discourse. The clarity of her words – stripped of politeness and hedging – was precisely why they spread.

Why This Matters

In leadership, **language is leverage**. Teams don’t just follow what leaders do; they follow what leaders say and believe they mean. When commitment language is clear, it creates alignment, energy, and resilience. When it is muddy, teams default to compliance.

This matters because most organisations are drowning in empty words – strategies nobody believes, values posters nobody feels, goals padded with caveats. Clean commitment language cuts through the noise. It names futures worth working for. It mobilises identity, not just effort. It restores trust in leadership.

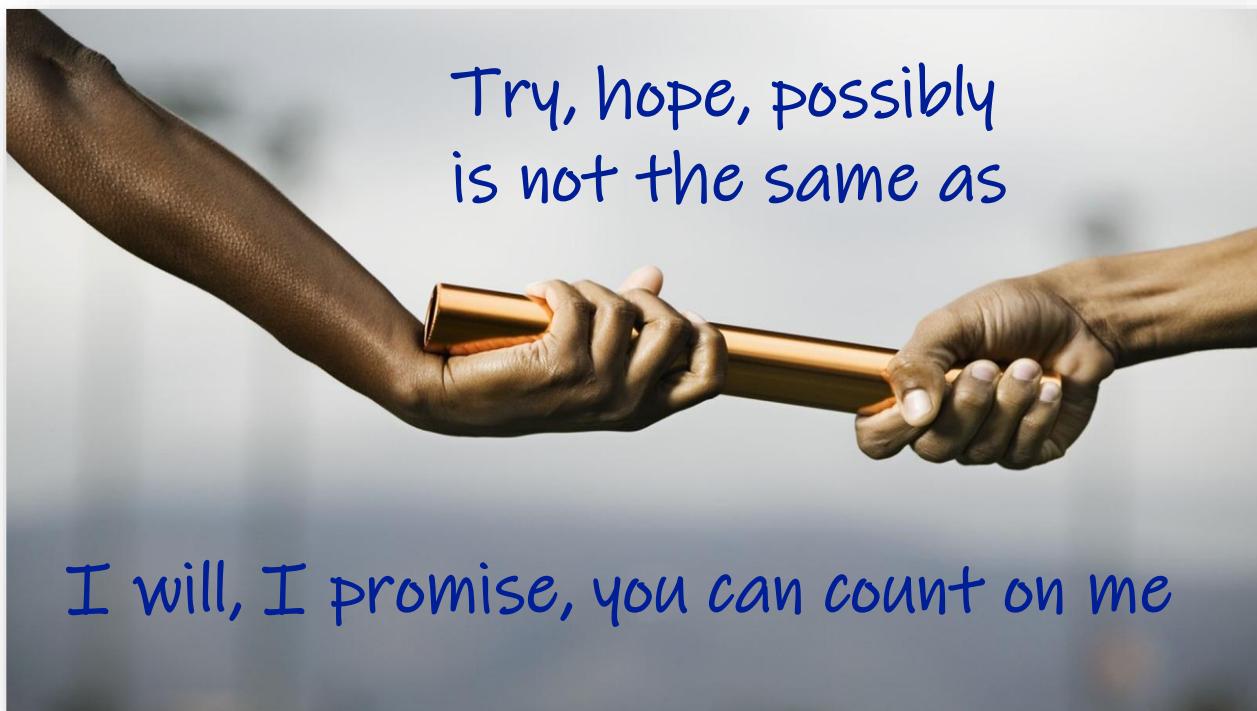
Practical Application

- Audit your language. Record a meeting. Notice how often you hedge (“*maybe*” or “*try*”) instead of declaring.
- Use “*I*” and “*we*.” Own commitments instead of outsourcing them to “the company.”

- Be explicit. Say, “*This is a promise*” or “*This is a declaration*.”
- Practice public commitments. Speak goals aloud; invite accountability.
- Retire empty words. Ban vague phrases like “*We’ll try our best*” and replace them with clean commitments.

Generating Your Breakthrough

- Where are you speaking vaguely when clarity would change your team’s trajectory tomorrow?
- What requests do you need to make cleanly but haven’t yet dared to?
- What commitments have you spoken that your team quietly treats as optional?
- If your people only had your words – not your intentions – what future would they believe you are committed to?



Chapter 6

Practices That Generate Commitment

What small, repeatable practices will keep the fire of commitment alive when enthusiasm fades?

Commitment is not just a flash of inspiration. It must be **generated, sustained, and renewed** through practice. Just as athletes train their bodies, leaders must cultivate disciplines that keep commitments alive. Without practice, commitments drift into slogans; with practice, they become lived realities.

Practices are deliberate, repeatable actions that reinforce identity and stand. They signal what matters, build resilience under pressure, and keep commitments visible. Think of them as **rituals that make the invisible tangible**.

In organisations, the absence of commitment practices creates fragility. Leaders declare bold futures, but without regular reinforcement, people revert to compliance. It's like planting a seed without watering it – initial enthusiasm withers. By contrast, when leaders design rituals that embody commitment, the culture itself becomes the custodian.

Practices operate on three levels:

1. Individual – habits leaders and employees adopt to align daily behaviour with commitments.
2. Team – shared rituals that build trust, alignment, and accountability.
3. Organisational – cultural practices that embed commitments into *how we do things around here*.

Individual Practices

1. Daily recommitment ritual – Begin each day by writing one commitment to embody, e.g. *I am leading with courage; I am stewarding safety*. This simple habit keeps identity and commitment alive.
2. Daily reminder ritual – read the stands or promises you have already made to yourself or others. This simple habit keeps you connected to the energy and identity that ensures commitments live.
3. After-action reflection – Five minutes at day's end to note: *Where did I honour my commitments? Where did I drift?* This builds self-awareness and integrity muscles.

Team Practices

1. Red/Green check-ins – At meeting starts, each member says whether they're *green* (fully present) or *red* (distracted/struggling). This normalises honesty and accountability.
2. Commitment reviews – Instead of status updates, teams revisit the commitments from the last cycle and discuss where they honoured or drifted. The focus shifts from task-tracking to accountability for stands. If everyone in the team is not clear on the state of individuals' commitment, then the discussion on tasks does not have a clear enough context for anyone to be confident that the right conversation is being had.
3. Failure postcards – After projects, teams share “failure postcards”: one thing they'd do differently and one thing they recommit to. A playful yet powerful way to embed learning.

Organisational Practices

1. Storytelling rituals – Regularly share internal stories of people who embodied commitments – acts of service, sustainability choices, courageous decisions. Stories keep commitments alive through narrative, not policy.
2. Symbolic acts – Create visible rituals that embody values. A tech company rings a bell when a customer signs a pilot contract – a shared symbol of mutual commitment.
3. Commitment anchors – Integrate commitments into onboarding by asking new hires: “*What stand are you taking by joining this organisation?*” This makes commitment identity-based, not contractual.

Examples abound. The All Blacks sweep their locker rooms after games to embody humility and stewardship. Pixar runs post-mortems on every film to institutionalise learning. NASA rehearsed failures relentlessly to uphold its commitment to astronaut safety. These aren't gimmicks; they are rituals that make commitments visible and sticky.

The core idea is simple: commitment is not self-sustaining. Leaders who treat it as a one-off declaration soon feel disillusioned. Leaders who design practices – rituals of recommitment – create the conditions for breakthroughs that endure.

Metaphor: The Fire

Commitment is like a fire. A spark may ignite it, but without fuel and tending, the flame dies out. Practices are the wood, kindling, and oxygen. They don't create the spark but

keep the flame alive long enough to warm a village, guide travellers, and survive the night.

Leaders who declare commitments without practices are like campers who light a match and walk away. The flame flickers briefly and goes out. Leaders who pair commitments with practices build a fire that sustains life and draws others near.

Agile as Commitment in Practice

Many practices within Agile ways of working are designed to keep commitments present and visible. Unlike compliance-driven project management, Agile rituals bring commitments into daily view and refresh them regularly.

At the individual level, the daily stand-up is a recommitment ritual. Each person shares what they achieved yesterday, what they plan today, and any blockers. It's not merely a status update – it's a micro-declaration of commitment, witnessed by peers and displayed on a Kanban board.

At the team level, retrospectives are structured moments of reflection and recommitment. Teams examine what's working, where drift has crept in, and make new commitments to improve. This builds integrity and learning – commitments are renewed in cycles, not assumed.

At the organisational level, Agile embeds commitment through backlog and sprint cadence. Instead of long, compliance-heavy plans, Agile organisations work in short bursts of clear, achievable commitments. The sprint review becomes a ritual of accountability: *Did we do what we said we'd do? If not, what will we recommit to next?*

The power of Agile lies not in sticky notes or ceremonies but in how those practices embody commitment. Teams move from passively completing tasks to actively owning outcomes. Stand-ups, retros, and sprints prevent drift, renew clarity, and anchor identity as a team that keeps its word.

Model: Atomic Habits

James Clear's *Atomic Habits* framework offers a powerful model for how practices sustain commitment. He argues that small, repeatable habits compound into identity.

Key insights:

1. Identity-based habits – Behaviour anchored in identity is more resilient. Saying “*I'm trying to run*” is weak; saying “*I'm a runner*” anchors the habit in being. Similarly, leaders who frame rituals as identity statements – “*We are a learning organisation, so we debrief every project*” – generate stronger commitment.
2. Cue → Craving → Response → Reward loop – Habits stick when they follow this neurological pattern. Example: for the All Blacks, the cue is the end of the match; the craving, to honour the jersey; the response, cleaning the locker room; the reward, alignment with identity.
3. Environment design – Commitment thrives when the environment makes desired behaviour easy and visible. Posters fade; embedding values into hiring, rituals, and meetings makes them culture.

This model shows that practices are not about willpower alone; they are about structure. Leaders who want lasting commitments must design small, repeatable rituals that align identity with environment.

Case Study: The All Blacks – Ritualising Commitment

The New Zealand All Blacks are the most successful rugby team in history. Their win record is unmatched despite being drawn from a small nation. Analysts often credit strategy, training, or talent. Yet those who look closer see something deeper: the All Blacks are masters of practices that generate commitment.

One of their most famous rituals is the haka. Performed before every match, it is not theatre for spectators; it is a recommitment ceremony. Players declare through movement and voice who they are, what they stand for, and the future they intend to create on the field. It fuses identity, history, and intent.

Another practice is sweeping the locker room. No matter how big the victory, players clean up after themselves – a ritual of humility and stewardship: *leave the jersey better than you found it*. The act reinforces the stand that no one is above the team.

Storytelling is another anchor. Senior players share with newcomers the lineage of the jersey, recounting legends of past games and leaders. This embeds cultural memory and connects present players to a larger narrative.

These rituals may look small, but they are profound. They keep commitment alive daily, making abstract values tangible. They turn *being an All Black* into a lived identity, not a slogan.

The result is sustained excellence. Even as rosters change, the culture persists because the underlying practices endure, evolving to match each generation. Commitment is not left to moods or speeches; it is tended like a fire.

For leaders outside sport, the lesson is clear: design rituals that embody your commitments. Don't assume people will remember – give them practices that make remembering unavoidable.

Why This Matters

Without practices, commitments evaporate. Teams start strong but slip into old habits. Cultures grow cynical about leadership promises. Leaders grow frustrated that declarations don't stick. Nothing ever goes entirely as planned.

Practices solve this by anchoring commitments in action. They provide repetition to embed identity. They create visible signals that align behaviour with the stand. They keep the fire burning through storms.

Angela Duckworth's long-term studies of cadets, teachers, and executives show that *grit* – sustained commitment over time – predicts achievement more reliably than IQ or talent. People with high grit scores were up to 60 percent more likely to achieve difficult goals than their peers. The data underscores a simple truth: practices of commitment matter more than raw ability.

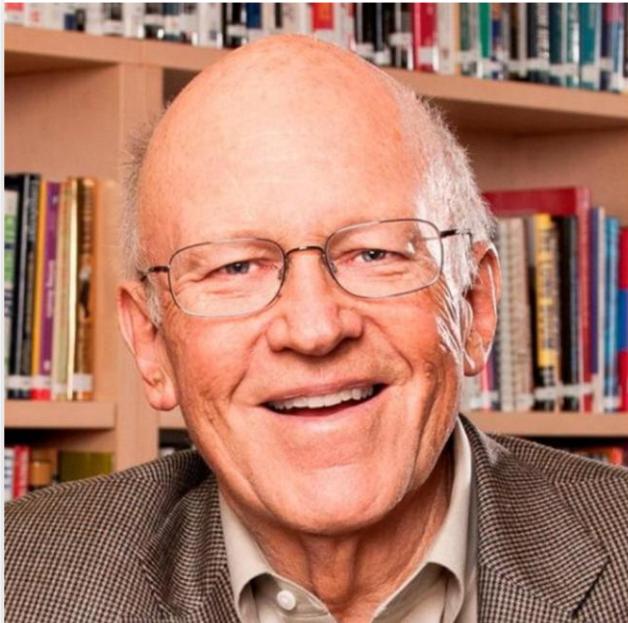
This matters because organisations rarely fail from lack of strategy; they fail from drift – the slow erosion of commitment. Practices are the antidote. They keep commitments alive long enough to generate breakthroughs.

Practical Application

- Audit existing practices. Which of your individual, team, or organisational rituals reinforce compliance rather than commitment?
- Design for identity. Build practices that reflect who you are, not just what you do.
- Start small. Choose one simple, repeatable action and sustain it.
- Use cues and environments. Tie rituals to existing rhythms – team meetings, launches, debriefs.
- Tell the story. Pair every practice with meaning. Rituals without story become hollow; story without ritual stays abstract.

Generating Your Breakthrough

- Which of your leadership practices are tending the fire, and which are letting it burn out?
- What ritual could you introduce tomorrow to keep commitments alive?
- Which organisational habits are eroding commitment rather than reinforcing it?
- If someone observed your team's daily rituals, what commitments would they infer?
- What single ritual, done consistently, would most powerfully embody your stand?



When you are committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.

Ken Blanchard

Chapter 7

Case Studies of Breakthrough Through Commitment

What can stories of Starbucks, Mandela, Kurosawa, and Serena Williams teach us about the anatomy of commitment?

Concepts and models give us clarity, but stories give us conviction. Nothing illustrates the anatomy of commitment better than the lived experiences of people and organisations that embody it.

Breakthroughs are not confined to one field. They appear in business, politics, sport, and the arts. They happen under favourable conditions – but also, more powerfully, under immense pressure. What unites these stories is not circumstance but **the force of commitment itself**.

Breakthroughs usually begin with an improbable declaration. Starbucks recommitting to its purpose in the face of financial decline. Nelson Mandela, after twenty-seven years in prison, declared reconciliation rather than revenge. Akira Kurosawa, after bankruptcy and despair, declared himself still an artist. Serena Williams, after two decades of dominance and numerous setbacks, declared that she would continue to redefine what greatness looks like.

Each story follows a pattern: a leader or group takes a stand beyond the predictable, embodies it, persists through breakdowns, and embeds it culturally until the impossible becomes the new normal.

For leaders today, these stories matter because they show that breakthroughs are not random miracles; they are cultivated through bold, embodied, and enduring commitment.

Metaphor: The Flowing River

Commitment is like a river flowing through different terrains. In one valley, it carves a canyon; in another, it nourishes farmland; in another, it powers a mill. Each outcome looks different, yet the source is the same – water that will not stop flowing.

Breakthroughs across industries look different on the surface, but underneath they share the same current: commitment. Without it, the river dries up. With it, the flow reshapes landscapes.

Model: Patterns of Transformation

Gary Hamel and Rosabeth Moss Kanter both studied transformation across industries. Their research points to a consistent anatomy in breakthrough cases:

1. A declared stand – a bold, improbable future articulated clearly.
2. Identity alignment – the commitment becomes part of who people are, not just what they do.
3. Persistence under pressure – setbacks are absorbed, reframed, and leveraged.
4. Cultural embedding – practices, rituals, and stories anchor the commitment until it becomes *how we do things around here*.

Toyota's lean production, Mandela's reconciliation, Kurosawa's artistic revival, and Serena Williams' redefinition of greatness all exemplify this pattern. Their breakthroughs weren't accidents; they were the fruit of commitments embodied and reinforced until they reshaped identity.

This model matters because it shows leaders what to look for: breakthroughs are not wishful thinking; they emerge when commitments are declared, embodied, persisted with, and embedded.

Case Study: Starbucks – Recommitting to Purpose in a Crisis

By 2008, Starbucks was in trouble. Once a symbol of aspirational coffee culture, the company had expanded rapidly but lost its way. Stores were oversaturated, experiences were transactional, and competitors like McDonald's and Dunkin' were closing in. The financial crisis pushed matters to breaking point: Starbucks' stock price had fallen nearly 50%, and many analysts predicted collapse.

Howard Schultz, who had stepped down as CEO in 2000, returned to lead the turnaround. What he found wasn't a lack of effort – employees were working hard – but a loss of commitment. Starbucks had slipped into compliance: hitting metrics, chasing growth, pushing products. What was missing was the original stand that defined the brand: creating a “*third place*” between home and work, a place of connection and community.

Schultz's approach was not tactical but **ontological**. He began by recommitting to Starbucks' core identity. This wasn't about compliance with business standards; it was about restoring meaning. In his first memo to employees he wrote, *"The company must shift its focus away from bureaucracy and back to customers. We must reignite the emotional attachment to our brand and the trust of our people."*

He followed words with bold action. In 2008, Schultz closed all 7,100 U.S. stores for a day of retraining baristas in the art of espresso. Financially, it cost millions; symbolically, it was a declaration. Schultz was saying Starbucks existed not to sell coffee, but to create experiences – and quality would not be compromised.

He also halted store expansion, reversing the growth-at-all-costs mindset. By slowing down, Starbucks recommitted to depth over breadth. Investments followed in coffee quality, digital engagement, and employee benefits such as healthcare and education – far beyond compliance norms in retail.

The turnaround wasn't immediate. Starbucks endured criticism and financial strain, but recommitment to identity gradually restored trust. By 2010 the company was profitable again. Over the next decade it became one of the world's most respected consumer brands, valued at over US\$100 billion.

The lesson is not that retraining or slowing growth automatically saves companies; it is that recommitment to a **clear stand** transforms a culture stuck in compliance. Schultz didn't simply fix operations – he reignited purpose. The effect was contagious: employees felt renewed pride, customers rediscovered loyalty, and investors regained confidence.

Starbucks' breakthrough illustrates the anatomy of commitment. Compliance sustains decline; commitment to a stand – embodied through bold actions and reinforced by culture – restores vitality and unlocks extraordinary results.

Case Study: Nelson Mandela – Reconciliation Over Revenge

When Nelson Mandela walked free in 1990, South Africa was on the edge of civil war. Decades of apartheid had produced hatred and fear. Many expected vengeance. Instead, Mandela declared reconciliation.

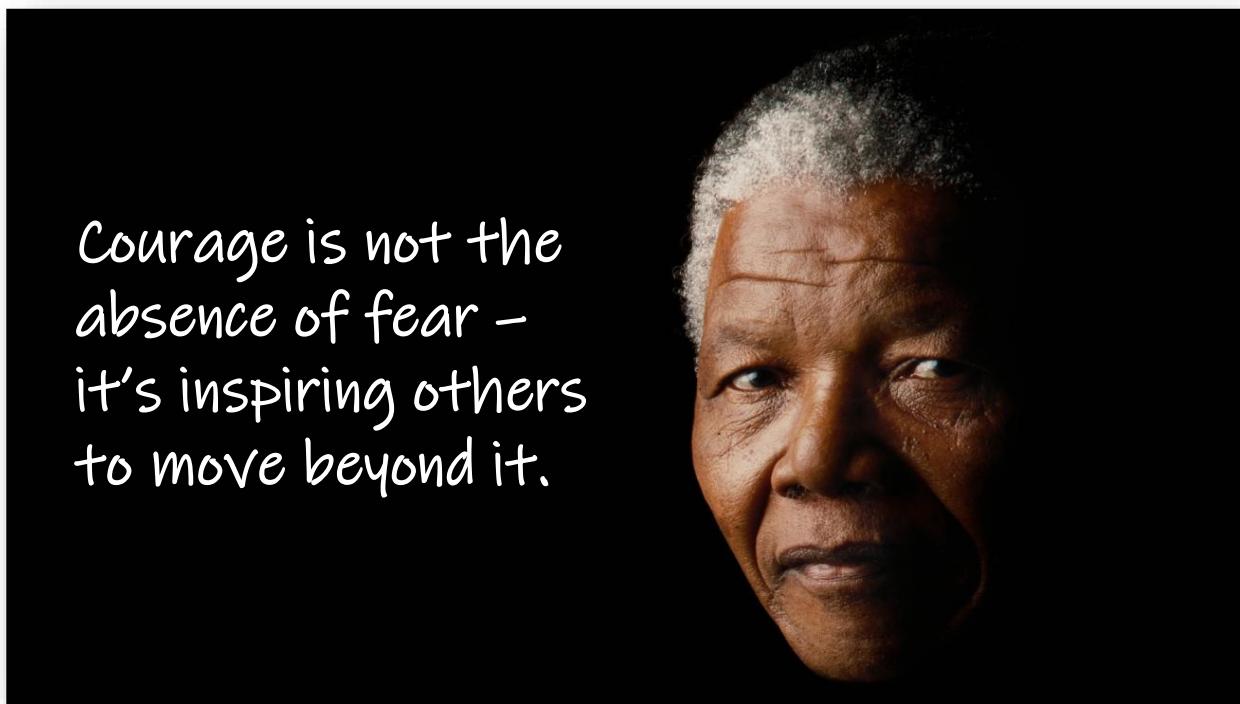
This was not tactical; it was **ontological**. Mandela embodied forgiveness. He knew that if he carried bitterness into the new South Africa, the nation would collapse. His commitment was unconditional: the future would be built on unity, not revenge.

He backed this stand with action – inviting former enemies into government, supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and even wearing the jersey of the Springboks, once a symbol of white supremacy, to unite the country at the Rugby World Cup.

Mandela faced breakdowns constantly – assassinations, extremist attacks, political resistance – but never abandoned his stand. He reframed setbacks as evidence of the work still to do.

The breakthrough was profound: South Africa avoided the bloodbath many feared. The world witnessed reconciliation on a national scale.

Mandela's story shows that commitment is not just about words. It is about embodying a stand so deeply that even prison, loss, and hatred cannot shake it. He became the context in which others found the courage to commit.



Case Study: Akira Kurosawa – Transforming Failure Into Art

By the mid-1970s, Akira Kurosawa, director of *Seven Samurai* and *Rashomon*, was in crisis. His films were failing commercially, studios had abandoned him, and in 1971 he attempted suicide. Many thought his career finished.

But Kurosawa **recommitted**. He refused to let failure define him. His declaration was simple: *I am a filmmaker*. That identity was non-negotiable.

Support came from unlikely allies. Younger directors such as George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola admired him and helped secure funding. In 1980, *Kagemusha* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes; five years later *Ran* stunned the world with its scale and artistry.

The breakthrough was not only artistic but existential. Kurosawa transformed despair into renewed creativity. His recommitment to being an artist enabled a late-career renaissance.

For leaders, his story illustrates that breakthroughs are rarely about timing or resources; they are about recommitting to identity when everything else collapses.

Case Study: Serena Williams – Redefining Greatness in Sport

Serena Williams' career exemplifies sustained commitment. Over two decades she didn't just dominate tennis – she transformed it. Her story is not only about skill but about **relentless recommitment** to a stand: *I will not accept limits – on myself, on women, or on what is possible in this game*.

From her early years, Serena faced racism, sexism, and class barriers. Alongside her sister Venus, she broke into a sport defined by exclusivity. Every serve, every victory, was a declaration that talent and identity could no longer be confined by tradition.

Her commitment showed most in adversity. She endured injuries that ended others' careers, fought autoimmune illness, and faced scrutiny. After giving birth in 2017 and suffering life-threatening complications, she returned within a year, reaching four Grand Slam finals as a mother.

Her rituals reinforced the stand. Serena continually re-engineered her training and mental practices, allowing her to compete at the top well into her late 30s.

Her influence extended beyond sport. She became a cultural icon for women's empowerment, equity, and authenticity – expanding greatness beyond trophies to legacy.

Serena's breakthrough wasn't just in records – 23 Grand Slam singles titles, 319 weeks as world number one – but in redefining what commitment can achieve. For leaders, her story shows that commitment sustains performance and expands what is possible for those who follow.

Why This Matters

These stories show that breakthroughs aren't the privilege of the lucky; they are cultivated through bold, embodied, and enduring commitment. Starbucks, Mandela, Kurosawa, and Serena Williams all faced immense resistance. Their breakthroughs share the same DNA: **declaration, identity, persistence, and cultural embedding**.

The BCG Global Innovation Study found that companies investing in innovation during downturns are three times more likely to achieve breakthroughs. That's what Toyota did when it doubled down on lean production through crisis years – and what Serena did when she reinvented her training after setbacks.

For leaders, the lesson is clear: commitment is not optional. It is the engine of transformation. Without it, even the best strategies stall. With it, even harsh conditions can be transformed into extraordinary outcomes.

Practical Application

- Study widely. Look beyond your industry for stories of commitment.
- Extract principles. Ask: What stand was declared? How was it embodied and embedded?
- Tell the stories. Share examples with your team to illustrate commitment in action.
- Capture your own. Document moments of commitment in your organisation as cultural anchors.
- Embed rituals. Pair stories with daily practices that keep commitments tangible.

Generating Your Breakthrough

- Which of these stories mirrors the breakthrough you most need to lead?
- If you declared that kind of stand today, what would it demand of you?
- What practices could you embed to make your commitments as durable as theirs?
- If future leaders studied your organisation, what story of commitment would they tell?

The only limit to
your impact is
your imagination
and commitment

Tony Robbins



Chapter 8

The Shadows of Commitment

When does commitment cross the line from powerful to dangerous?

Commitment is powerful, but like any powerful force, it casts shadows. When misapplied, distorted, or left unexamined, commitment can produce outcomes as destructive as its healthy form is transformative.

One shadow is **overcommitment**. Leaders and teams sometimes mistake busyness for devotion. They scatter energy across too many priorities, driven by ego or fear of missing out. The result is exhaustion, mediocrity, and erosion of trust when promises outpace delivery. Commitment is not about saying yes to everything; it is about saying no to everything that distracts from the stand.

Another shadow is **fanaticism**. Commitment, when divorced from reflection, can calcify into rigidity. Leaders insist on *staying the course* even when evidence screams for adaptation. History is littered with movements and organisations that pursued commitments blindly, mistaking stubbornness for courage. True commitment is not obstinacy; it is fidelity to a stand while remaining responsive to reality.

A subtler shadow is **commitment as image management**. Leaders sometimes use the language of commitment to signal virtue while avoiding genuine cost. They perform commitment for recognition but retreat when sacrifice is required. This is the shadow side of empty pledges, slogans, or performative culture campaigns.

Finally, there is the dark shadow of **destructive commitments**. People and organisations can commit to futures that cause harm – ideologies of exclusion, business models that sacrifice sustainability, leadership cultures that lead to burnout. The human capacity for commitment is neutral; it amplifies whatever it is attached to. Without conscious reflection, it can amplify harm.

The Edelman Trust Barometer reports that 62% of employees don't trust their leaders to keep commitments long-term. This is the slow poison of drift: when commitments are broken or quietly abandoned, trust evaporates – and with it, performance.

The purpose of this chapter is not to diminish commitment but to acknowledge its dual edge. Leaders must be vigilant: *What am I committed to? Is this stand energy-giving or energy-draining? Is it opening a possibility or closing it?* Shadows appear where leaders

ignore these questions. Breakthroughs require not just commitment, but wise commitment.

Metaphor: A Garden

Commitment is like a garden. With care, attention, and the right conditions, it produces nourishment and beauty. Seeds of intention, when tended patiently, grow into strong plants that sustain life.

But every garden has weeds. Left unchecked, they choke the plants and steal nutrients. Over-watering drowns roots. Neglect hardens soil. Even too much sunlight can scorch what was once thriving. Similarly, commitment can become distorted: overcommitment drains energy, rigidity hardens the soil, and performative gestures become weeds that sap vitality.

A gardener knows that tending is not just planting but pruning. It is the humility to recognise what no longer serves, to cut back when needed, and to protect what remains fragile. Leaders, too, must treat their commitments like gardens – watchful, discerning, open to change.

Commitment is powerful, but without balance and care, its shadows can suffocate what it was meant to grow.

Model: The Commitment Pendulum

Commitment is rarely still. Leaders often imagine it as a steady flame or fixed anchor, but in practice it behaves more like a pendulum – swinging, sometimes subtly, sometimes violently, between extremes. On one side lies overcommitment, on the other undercommitment. Healthy commitment lives not at the edges but at the centre – a space of balance, clarity, and authenticity.

Overcommitment is the shadow of too much. Leaders take on every initiative, say yes to every demand, or set ambitions so inflated that delivery becomes impossible. In the short term, overcommitment looks like energy: the organisation hums with activity, goals multiply, and people run fast. However, over time cracks appear – exhaustion, confusion, cynicism. When people repeatedly see promises broken because the system was overloaded, trust erodes.

Undercommitment is the shadow of too little. Leaders hedge their language with *maybe*, *if possible*, or *depending on circumstances*. Declarations are diluted, actions

half-hearted, and commitments quietly abandoned. This, too, corrodes trust. Employees sense that bold words are not backed by resolve; instead of being inspired, they protect themselves by lowering standards.

This mix can be visualised as follows:



This model serves as a **self-check for leaders** to see where their commitments may be slipping into the shadows. Map current projects or goals into the quadrants. If you find yourself in *high-cost undercommitment*, notice where hesitation or delay is creating risk. In *high-cost overcommitment*, check whether you're spreading too thin, risking burnout or credibility loss. In the *low-cost* quadrants, watch for drift: are you quietly undercommitting to standards or overcommitting to low-value activity?

The point is not to judge but to see clearly. By plotting commitments, you can ask: *What matters most – and where must I rebalance?* Used regularly, this self-check helps leaders hold commitments at the right level – stretching where it matters, simplifying where it doesn't.

The pendulum metaphor is apt because the swing is natural. Pressure, ambition, fear, and ego constantly tug at leaders. A new opportunity appears, and leaders rush toward overcommitment. A setback strikes, and they retreat into undercommitment. Unless leaders are vigilant, the pendulum never rests for long.

The centre is where healthy commitment lives. Here, leaders make clear, authentic stands. They choose commitments that stretch the organisation without scattering it. They speak boldly yet honestly about costs and risks. They align commitments with identity and values, so the energy is sustainable. In this middle zone, commitments create momentum rather than fatigue, and credibility rather than cynicism.

Managing the pendulum requires self-awareness and feedback. Leaders must ask regularly: *Where is my swing today? Am I promising too much, or hedging and drifting?* Just as a pendulum can be slowed by careful adjustments, leaders can bring commitments back into balance by naming drift, pruning excess, and recommitting cleanly.

The Commitment Pendulum reminds us that shadows are not failure – they are natural movements. The question is whether leaders notice the swing and recalibrate, or let momentum carry them to extremes. Extraordinary leadership is not about eliminating the pendulum but about holding commitments steady enough to generate light rather than shadow.

Case Study: The 2008 Financial Crisis

The global financial crisis exposed the destructive potential of unchecked commitments. Leading up to 2008, financial institutions were fiercely committed to growth, profit, and short-term shareholder returns. Entire incentive systems reinforced it. Leaders and employees worked with extraordinary energy toward that goal.

But the commitment was misdirected. It wasn't tethered to sustainability or social responsibility. Banks committed to complex products that generated profit but obscured risk. Compliance structures kept the machine moving instead of questioning incentives.

Warning signs were everywhere – rising mortgage defaults, opaque instruments, systemic fragility. Yet the culture of commitment had shadowed into fanaticism. Leaders defended their strategies, dismissed concerns, and reinforced their positions. The commitment to growth at all costs blinded the industry to collapse.

The result was catastrophic: trillions in lost value, millions of foreclosures, and a global recession. This was commitment operating in the shadows – powerful, disciplined, and destructive.

The lesson is sobering. Commitment is not inherently virtuous. What matters is the object of commitment and the willingness to examine it critically. Leaders who fail to interrogate their commitments risk turning a powerful force into a destructive one.

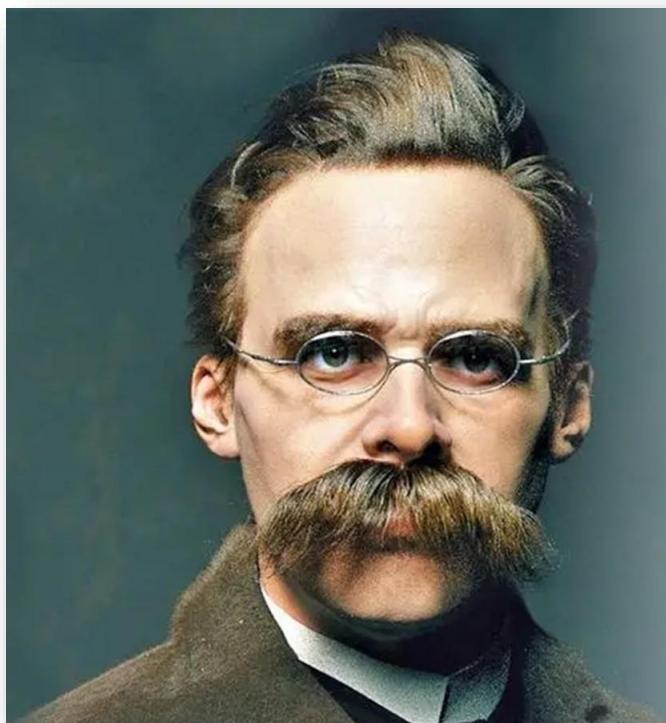
For today's leaders, the case warns: don't confuse energy and focus with virtue. Ask not just "are we committed?" but "to what – and at what cost?"

Why This Matters

The shadow side of commitment matters because it reveals the danger of leadership without reflection. Commitment can amplify courage – but it can also amplify denial. It can generate breakthroughs – but it can also generate collapse.

Leaders cannot hide behind passion or persistence. They must ask harder questions: *Is this aligned with our values? Does it open futures or close them? Does it generate life or extract it?*

Recognising shadows doesn't weaken commitment – it strengthens it. By naming risks, leaders ensure their commitments are clean, sustainable, and transformative rather than destructive.



To predict the behaviour of ordinary people in advance, you only have to assume that they will always try to escape a disagreeable situation with the smallest expenditure of intelligence

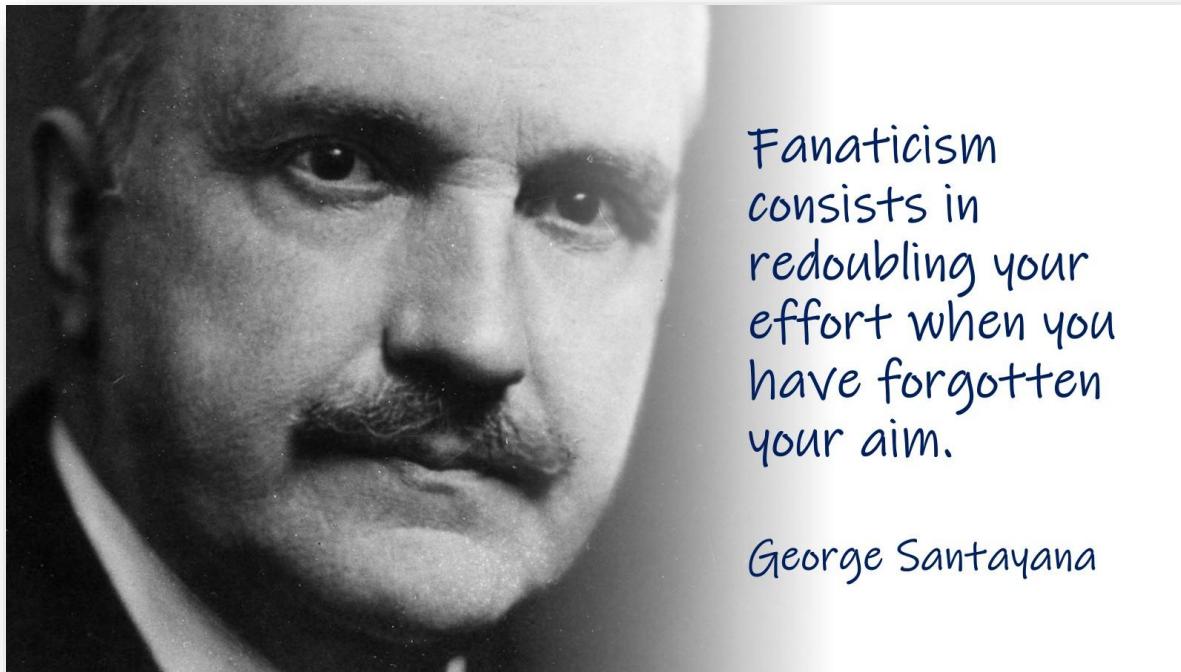
Frederick Nietzsche

Practical Application

- Audit commitments. List your top five commitments. For each, ask: what shadow risks are present?
- Check for overcommitment. Are you scattering energy across too many fronts?
- Use the Pendulum. Plot commitments: where are you overextending or hedging?
- What does this reveal about your culture?
- Name rigidity. Where are you mistaking stubbornness for courage?
- Spot performance. Where are you performing commitment for optics while withholding genuine commitment?
- Invite feedback. Ask your team where they see commitments drifting into shadow.

Generating Your Breakthrough

- Where are you overcommitting and burning trust – or undercommitting and eroding it?
- What is the cost of not noticing the pendulum's swing in your leadership?
- If history judged your current commitments, would they be remembered as life-giving or destructive?
- What shadows are visible to your people that you have not yet acknowledged?



Chapter 9

Commitment and Leadership Identity

What if your leadership commitments are only as strong as the identity you live from?

Leadership is not first about skills or strategies; it is about identity. Who you understand yourself to be determines what you commit to, and what you commit to shapes how others experience you. **Identity and commitment are inseparable.**

A leader who sees themselves as a caretaker will commit to stability and protection. A pioneer commits to exploration and calculated risk. A servant commits to empowering others. None of these identities is inherently right or wrong, but each generates a distinct pattern of commitments.

The danger arises when identity is unconscious. Leaders who don't examine their self-concept are ruled by it. They may insist they are open-minded innovators while unconsciously clinging to an identity as *the one with all the answers*. Their commitments reveal the truth: control, approval-seeking, or self-protection masquerading as vision.

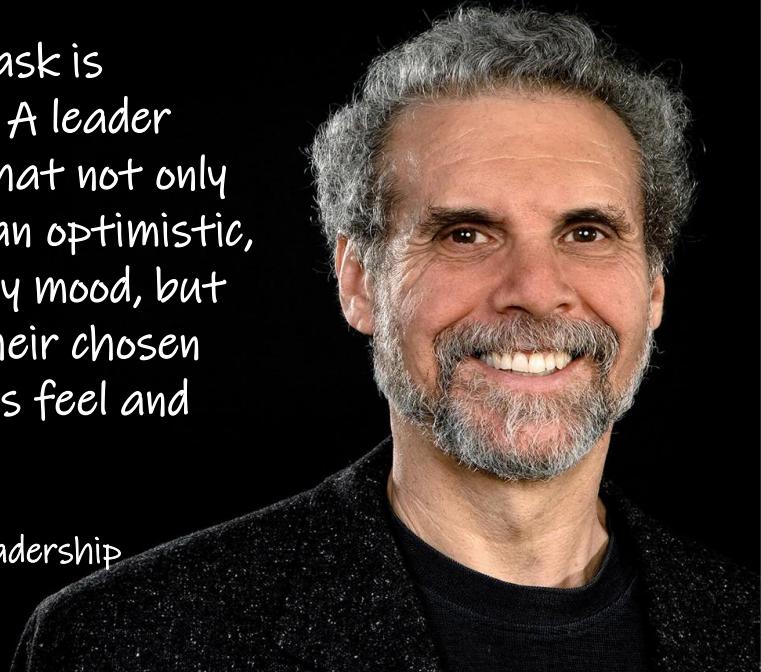
Breakthroughs demand leaders who **consciously shape identity**. Extraordinary results emerge not when leaders adopt the latest management trend, but when they stand in an identity aligned with their commitments. For example, a leader who declares a commitment to sustainability but secretly identifies as *the cost-cutter* will eventually undermine that stand.

Identity is also contagious. Teams take cues not only from what leaders do but from who leaders are. If a leader embodies curiosity, courage, or integrity as part of their identity, those qualities ripple into the culture. Conversely, if a leader embodies fear, image management, or cynicism, that too becomes the cultural norm.

The core idea is simple: **your leadership identity is the soil in which your commitments grow.** If the soil is shallow, commitments wither. If the soil is rich and intentional, commitments take root, flourish, and bear extraordinary fruit.

The leader's primal task is emotional leadership. A leader needs to make sure that not only are they regularly in an optimistic, authentic, high-energy mood, but also that, through their chosen actions, their followers feel and act that way too.

Daniel Goleman - Primal Leadership



Metaphor: Frame of the House

Leadership identity is like the frame of a house. You can paint walls, rearrange furniture, or upgrade appliances – the skills, strategies, and tools – but the frame dictates the building's shape.

Commitments are the rooms built within that frame. A leader with a cramped frame limits what commitments can flourish. A leader who expands the frame, who claims a larger identity, creates space for greater commitments to grow.

Breakthroughs require rebuilding the frame, not just redecorating the rooms.

Model: Immunity to Change

Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey's *Immunity to Change* theory illuminates the link between identity and commitment. Their research shows that leaders struggle not from lack of willpower but from hidden identity commitments that conflict with declared goals.

A leader might declare a commitment to empowerment yet remain unconsciously committed to being seen as competent. That hidden identity drives micromanagement and undermines empowerment.

Kegan and Lahey call this an *immunity to change* – an internal system that protects identity at the expense of growth. The way through is to surface and examine those hidden commitments, asking: *What am I unconsciously protecting? What identity am I unwilling to risk?*

Their model reminds us that leadership breakthroughs are not technical but adaptive. They require **shifts in identity** – from protecting the self to expanding it, from unconscious commitments to intentional ones.

This aligns with the broader thesis: clean, conscious identity produces clean, powerful commitments; shadow identity produces drift, sabotage, or collapse.

Case Study: Angela Merkel – Identity as Steady Stewardship

Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany from 2005 to 2021, offers a clear example of identity shaping commitment. She did not fit the stereotype of a European power broker – she was understated, pragmatic, reserved – yet her identity as a scientist-turned-leader shaped commitments that helped steer Germany through multiple crises.

Merkel's self-concept rested on patience, evidence, and calm reasoning. Critics called her cautious; admirers, steady. That identity anchored her commitments and produced extraordinary resilience.

During the Eurozone debt crisis, Merkel's commitment to European stability was tested repeatedly. Rather than yield to populism or retreat to nationalism, she held a steady stand: Germany would safeguard the euro while insisting on reform. Her stance reflected stewardship, not gambling.

During the 2015 refugee crisis, she declared “*Wir schaffen das*” – “*We can do this.*” Opening Germany's doors to more than a million refugees shocked many and provoked backlash, yet it was consistent with her identity: pragmatic humanitarianism – balancing compassion with responsibility.

Her scientific identity also guided her pandemic response. Merkel explained COVID-19 policies through data, graphs, and probabilities. Citizens saw not just a politician but a leader whose commitments were anchored in evidence and calm.

Merkel's example shows that leadership identity need not rely on charisma or theatre. By standing consistently in her identity as a steward – patient, evidence-driven, pragmatic – she embodied commitments that outlasted moods and crises. Her long tenure and enduring trust attest to the power of identity-aligned commitment.

Why This Matters

Commitments fail when they clash with identity. Leaders cannot sustain commitments that contradict who they believe themselves to be. This is why organisational transformation is ultimately identity work.

When leaders consciously align identity with declared commitments, they generate coherence – words, actions, and presence line up. Teams sense congruence, and trust follows. When identity is unconscious or fragmented, commitments falter.

In volatile environments, only identity-aligned commitments endure. Leaders who do the work of identity – naming it, expanding it, aligning it – unlock performance that technical fixes alone can't deliver.

Practical Application

- Name your identity. Complete the sentence: *I am the kind of leader who ...*
- Write three such statements; circle the one you actually lived last week.
- Check for clashes. Do your current commitments align with this identity or contradict it?
- Surface hidden commitments. Reflect on which identities you may be protecting – approval, control, competence.
- Experiment with new frames. Try adopting a larger identity (*I am a generative leader, I am a steward of the future*) and note what new commitments become possible.
- Invite reflection. Ask trusted colleagues: *What identity do you see me leading from?*

Generating Your Breakthrough

- How does your current identity limit what you believe you can commit to?
- Who would you need to be to make – and keep – the commitments that matter most?
- Where are your commitments clashing with hidden identity needs?
- If you expanded your leadership identity, what larger commitments would become possible?
- What story of your identity will your people tell when you are gone?

One of the most difficult things is not to change society – but to change yourself.



Chapter 10

The Drift of Decommitment

Where are you quietly shrinking from your commitments – without admitting it to yourself or others?

Commitment is rarely lost in a single dramatic moment. More often it erodes quietly, almost invisibly, until one day the promise that once felt alive is nothing more than a slogan. This is the drift of de-commitment – a shadow that creeps in not through betrayal or defiance, but through subtle shifts of attention, energy, and will.

Leaders usually imagine de-commitment as something overt: a resignation letter, a broken contract, an outright no. In reality, it is most dangerous when it operates beneath the surface. It shows up as half-hearted follow-through, diluted language, or the gradual lowering of standards. It looks like nodding in agreement at the table and quietly hedging later; enthusiasm in the launch meeting and silence in the weeks that follow. It looks like yes spoken with the lips but maybe lived in behaviour.

The loudest thing a leader ever says is what they do next.

The drift of de-commitment is insidious precisely because it is rarely intentional. People don't wake up deciding to betray their word; they are pulled by competing priorities, fear of failure, or the seduction of comfort. The original commitment remains in theory, but in practice it has been hollowed out.

Leaders themselves are not immune. A CEO declares a bold vision at the annual meeting but allows it to fade under quarterly pressure. A manager commits to developing their people but becomes too busy with urgent tasks. A team agrees to collaborate differently but slips back into habit. None of this happens through a single decision – it happens through drift.

De-commitment often masquerades as pragmatism. Leaders tell themselves they are being *realistic* or *strategic* when, in truth, they are shrinking the commitment. The organisation senses it immediately. People who were once inspired grow cautious; they mirror the leader's hedging. Energy leaks. Culture flattens. Performance plateaus.

Why does drift matter so much? Because commitment is not only about outcomes – it is about trust. When commitments erode silently, so does credibility. People may still work and deliver tasks, but the deeper sense of shared purpose fractures. Colleagues learn to discount words; customers learn to doubt promises; organisations become places of cautious compliance rather than vibrant commitment.

The psychology of drift is subtle. It begins with rationalisations such as “*We'll recommit later when things calm down*,” or “*It's not the right time to push this*.” These stories disguise the fact that commitment has already shifted. Before long, the original stand has been replaced by a compromise – and eventually forgotten.

The danger is not only external. Quiet de-commitment corrodes identity. Leaders start doubting themselves: *Am I still the kind of person who keeps my word?* That internal erosion weakens presence and power more than open failure ever could.

Recognising drift is a discipline of awareness. It requires noticing the gap between what has been declared and what is being lived. It means listening not just to words but to tone, body language, and energy. Drift is often felt before it is spoken – a loss of vitality in meetings, silence where courage once was, or the pattern of unkept micro-promises that everyone pretends not to see.

Preventing drift is less about enforcing compliance and more about sustaining context. When commitments are revisited, embodied, and made visible, they stay alive. When they are left unattended, they fade. Just as fire needs tending, commitments need **rituals of renewal**. Without them, even the boldest declaration withers into a line on a slide.

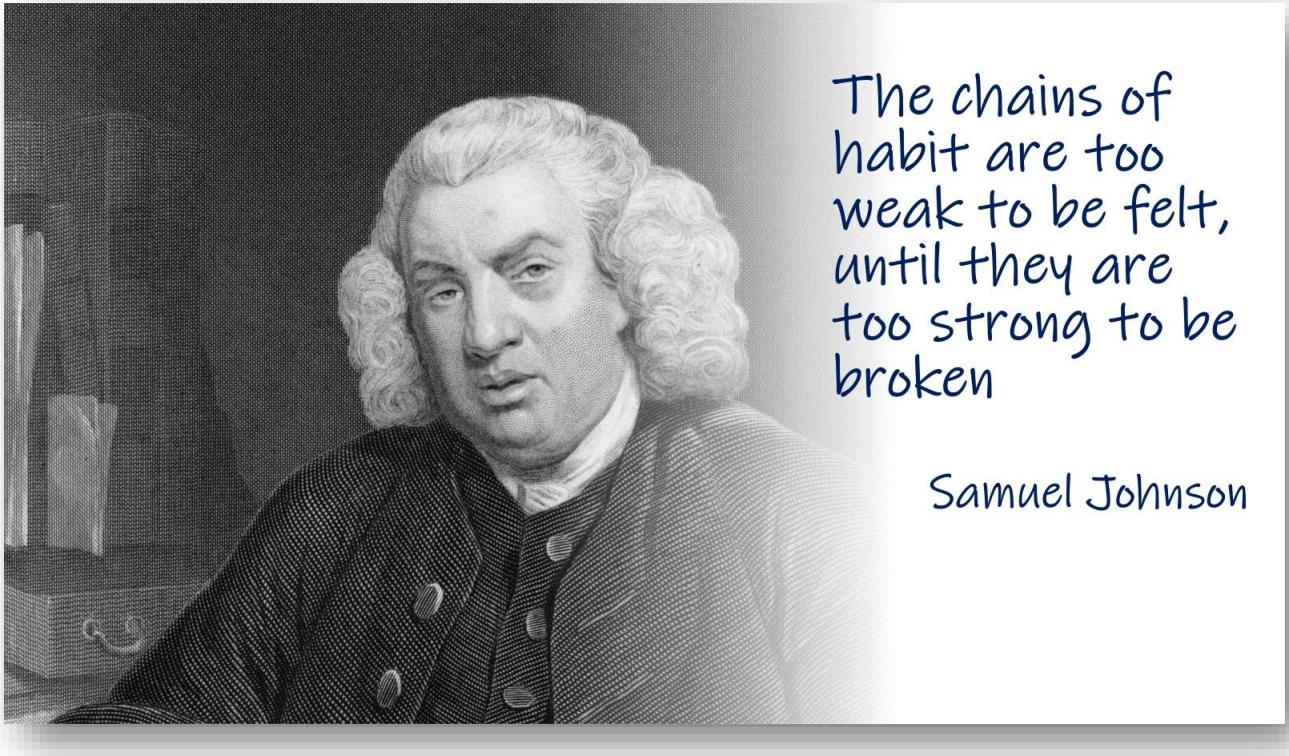
Drift is not a moral failing; it is a human tendency. Habit, comfort, and competing demands pull everyone off course. However, leaders who fail to notice or challenge it pay a heavy price – they lose not only momentum but trust. Once trust is gone, extraordinary results become impossible.

The core idea is this: **commitments seldom collapse – they simply fade**. The work of leadership is to notice the drift, name it without blame, and recommit publicly. Breakthrough performance depends not just on bold declarations but on the daily practice of holding commitments steady when the currents of drift would quietly carry them away.

Metaphor: The Leaky Boat

De-commitment is like a slow leak in a boat. At first it seems harmless – a few drops, barely noticed. Over time the leak grows; the boat sits lower, paddling becomes harder, and eventually it sinks.

Leaders often believe they're still afloat because they haven't capsized. However, the leak is real: hedged language, postponed promises, diluted focus. Unless patched through honesty and recommitment, the drift of de-commitment quietly sinks what once looked unsinkable.



Model: Fearless Leadership

Loretta Malandro, in *Fearless Leadership*, provides a sharp lens on de-commitment. She notes that leaders unconsciously slide into behaviours that undermine commitments without naming them. Common patterns include:

- Hedging – softening declarations with “if possible”, “maybe,” or “depending on circumstances”.
- Withdrawing – reducing engagement when things get hard, without telling the truth about it.

- Over-promising – saying yes to too much, ensuring some commitments will inevitably be broken.
- Blaming – deflecting responsibility to circumstances or others instead of owning the commitment.

Malandro argues that fearless leadership demands ruthless honesty. Leaders must call out their own drift, acknowledge when they are de-committing, and either recommit or cleanly renegotiate. Silence and self-deception corrode trust faster than open failure.

Her model reminds us that de-commitment is not merely a behavioural lapse but a **breakdown of integrity**. The remedy is not more discipline but more honesty – naming what is true and choosing freshly.

Malandro also observes that more than 70% of leadership failures stem not from lack of vision or skill but from the inability to keep commitments. Leaders rarely fail because they don't know what to do; they fail because they don't do what they said they would do.

Find your own version of *ringing the bell*. In my final year at Z Energy, our executive team used that language deliberately. We confronted our covert behaviours by saying, "*I'm ringing the bell on that*," and sometimes asking one another, "*Are you ringing the bell on that?*" It gave colleagues permission to name drift without shame.

The phrase originates in the U.S. Navy SEALs' Hell Week. Recruits who can no longer continue ring a brass bell three times, symbolically ending their training. It is a visible opt-out ritual – a moment of clarity and honesty. The bell-ringing honours those who recognise their limit with honour, courage, and commitment.

While ringing the bell is difficult, it is also cleansing. It transforms failure into integrity. Leaders can adopt similar language to surface drift, restore truth, and recommit.

Case Study: Kodak – From Commitment to Drift

For most of the twentieth century, Kodak was synonymous with photography. Its engineers even invented the digital camera in 1975. Yet instead of committing to that new future, Kodak drifted. Leaders feared cannibalising film profits and made cautious, hedged commitments – small digital experiments, half-hearted launches, repeated promises to balance the old with the new.

Externally, Kodak appeared committed to innovation. Internally, drift was obvious. Executives protected film margins; engineers felt ignored; the heritage of invention

eroded. Each quarter's target chipped away at the stand of *pioneering photography for everyone*.

By the time Kodak finally declared digital as its future, competitors like Canon, Sony, and Nikon had surged ahead. In 2012, Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

The tragedy wasn't lack of foresight – Kodak saw the future early. The tragedy was drift. Small acts of de-commitment, disguised as pragmatism, hollowed out the company's capacity to lead.

Kodak's story is a cautionary tale: the greatest danger isn't being blindsided by disruption; it's quietly de-committing from your own stand until others overtake you.

Why This Matters

Breakthroughs are fragile. They rely on commitments that stretch beyond the predictable. The drift of de-commitment is the silent assassin of those breakthroughs. Left unchecked, it doesn't merely stall progress; it erodes identity and culture.

People rarely abandon bold commitments directly. They quit slowly – by hedging, delaying, diluting, and excusing inaction as prudence. Leaders who normalise drift create organisations where passion leaks out, trust weakens, and compliance replaces commitment.

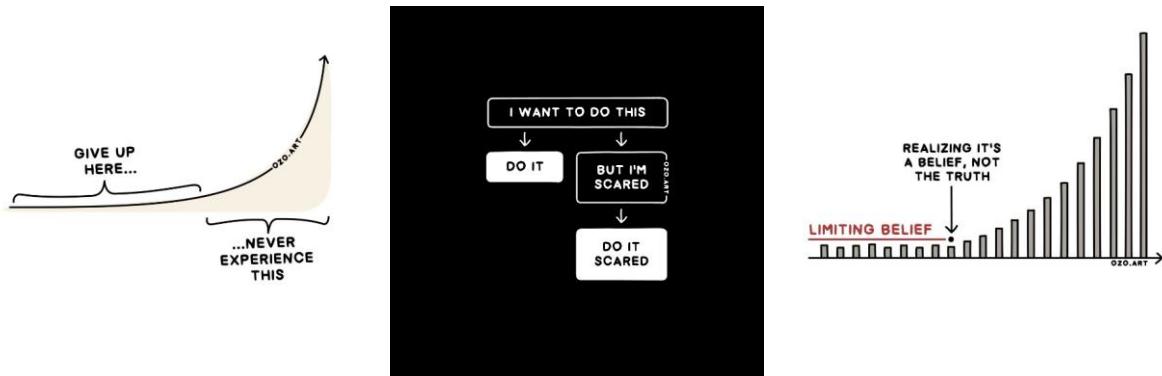
To generate extraordinary results, leaders must become vigilant against drift – noticing it, naming it, and recommitting – or consciously releasing the commitment. Anything less corrodes the possibility of breakthrough.

Practical Application

- Name the drift early. In meetings, ask: *Where are we drifting? What's predictable for us here?*
- Practice recommitment. Don't assume a one-time declaration suffices; create rituals for restating commitments.
- Renegotiate honestly. If a commitment can't be kept, acknowledge it, reset, and *ring the bell*.
- Audit promises. Keep a visible list of commitments and review progress regularly.
- Model integrity. Admit when you've drifted personally and recommit publicly.

Generating Your Breakthrough

- Where are you saying *yes* with your lips but *maybe* with your actions?
- Which commitment must you either recommit to or close cleanly?
- What commitments have you shrunk under the guise of “being realistic”?
- Which promises in your organisation are quietly leaking credibility?
- If your team matched your level of commitment, would you breakthrough or drift?



Janis Ozolins explains ideas visually and can be accessed at www.ozo.art

Epilogue

Commitment as the Engine of Breakthrough

What stand will you take, such that the future is altered because you committed?

When I began writing this book, I set out with a simple observation: extraordinary results are not the product of luck, genius, or perfect planning. **Extraordinary results are the entirely predictable outcomes of sustained commitment.**

Across these chapters, we have travelled many landscapes – plateaus and breakthroughs, compliance and identity, practices and shadows. We've seen commitment ignite revolutions, save companies, and carry leaders through storms. We've also seen how its misuse or drift can quietly undo decades of progress.

What strikes me most, after all of this, is how deeply human the journey is. Commitment is not an abstract idea. It is visible in how people speak, in the courage it takes to make a stand, in the persistence shown when circumstances change and tasks become more demanding, and in the choices made when shortcuts would be so much easier.

You always have
two choices –
your commitment
versus your fear.

Sammy Davis Jr

Commitment Is a Way of Being

The most important lesson is that commitment is not merely something we *do*. It is something we *are*. When leaders embody commitment, they shift the field around them. Teams sense it. Cultures internalise it. Futures bend under its weight.

This is why commitment cannot be reduced to KPIs or compliance checklists. Those are useful, but they are not the source. The source is being. **Leaders become the commitments they declare.** They become the stand that others locate themselves within.

Commitment Creates Context

Commitment also functions as context. In one context, a problem is insurmountable; in another, it is solvable. A declaration of commitment creates a new lens, a new field of possibility.

When Kennedy declared the moon landing, when Mandela declared reconciliation, when Serena Williams declared she would not accept limits – each shifted context. What had looked impossible began to appear inevitable.

Commitment Requires Renewal

Commitment is not self-sustaining. It leaks, drifts, and distorts. That is why leaders must cultivate practices of renewal – rituals, conversations, audits, and recommitments that keep the fire alive. Without them, even the boldest declarations fade into slogans. With them, commitments endure across generations.

Commitment Is Contagious

Perhaps the most hopeful truth is that commitment spreads. Just as fear is contagious, so is commitment. When one person stands clearly, others find courage. When one team recommits in the Valley of Doubt, others follow. When leaders embody commitment, they create ripples that move outward – into culture, into community, and sometimes even into history.

Your Commitment

So the question becomes: **What is your stand?**

Not your strategy, not your five-year plan, not your KPIs or OKRs. What is the future you are declaring, such that your *being* aligns with it? What stand are you willing to embody, recommit to, and defend against drift?

For those of you who appreciate equations or mathematics: Action = Function (Being x Occurrence). In simple language, the actions that are available to you are a function of who you are being and how the situation occurs to you. If the situation occurs as restrictive and your being is negative, then the actions are way less than if the situation occurs as expansive and your being is positive.

$$\begin{aligned}
 & k \frac{q_1 q_2}{r^2} \quad \text{CH}_4 + 2\text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{CO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad PV = nRT \quad \frac{dy}{dx} \ln x = \\
 & \Delta T \quad \log_a(\frac{1}{x}) = -\log_a x \quad T = \frac{2\pi}{\omega} \quad v = v_0 + a \\
 & \text{im } \frac{(1+x)^n - 1}{x} = n \quad \text{OH} \quad H \quad P = m \\
 & \rightarrow \quad v^2 - v_0^2 = 2a(x - x_0) \quad \text{H} \quad v = \omega \\
 & \sin \frac{a}{r} = \frac{\sin \beta}{b} = \frac{\sin \gamma}{c} \quad H \quad v = \omega \\
 & a^2 + b^2 - 2ab \cos \gamma = c^2 \quad H \quad v = \omega \\
 & E = mc^2 \quad F = \frac{\Delta P}{\Delta t} \quad \sin^2 + \cos^2 \\
 & mv^2 \quad y = x^2 + a \quad v = f\lambda \quad P = IV \quad = \frac{V^2}{R} \\
 & \text{gas law} \quad PV = nRT \quad \lambda \rightarrow \text{v} \quad = \frac{V^2}{R} \\
 & f_2 + \text{O}_2 \Rightarrow 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad \omega = 2\pi f \quad F = \frac{G m_1 m_2}{r^2} \\
 & K_{eq} = \frac{[\text{H}_2\text{O}]}{[\text{H}_2]^2 [\text{O}_2]} \quad \Delta E = h\nu
 \end{aligned}$$

Universal formula

Occurring
X
Being
equals
Action

Your actions are solely determined by how it occurs and who you are being in the face of how it occurs to you

Nothing changes without action. Therefore, if you don't have access to meaningful actions, then you go back to the equation and determine how you can change one of the two variables – how it occurs and who you are being.

This book is not an instruction manual. It is an invitation – to step beyond compliance into commitment; to see breakdowns as part of the anatomy of breakthrough; to watch for shadows and drift, and recommit when they appear; to treat your leadership identity not as a constraint, but as the soil in which larger commitments can grow.

Ultimately, leadership is not about being right, popular, or safe. **It is about being committed.**

Looking Forward

The leaders who will shape the decades ahead are not those with the best predictions, but those with the clearest commitments. They will declare futures others cannot yet see, embody them relentlessly, and invite others into them.

And here is the good news: that possibility is open to you. You don't need perfect conditions, unlimited resources, or flawless track records. You need the courage to stand and commit, the honesty to name drift, the humility to renew, and the persistence to keep the fire burning.

Breakthroughs are waiting to be made – in teams, in organisations, in communities, in nations. The question is not whether the world needs them. The question is whether we will commit to them.

So, I leave you with this:

- Do not settle for compliance
- Do not confuse activity with commitment
- Do not drift quietly into mediocrity.

Commit. Fully, clearly, and relentlessly.

Commitment is the foundation on which all breakthroughs are built and sustained – and nothing less than 100% commitment at the decisive moments will do.



The key to success in any endeavour is commitment; when we commit 100% to a goal, it's as if the universe lines up to support our intent 100%. Inconceivable material outcomes and synchronicities are presented to help us achieve the outcome. But sometimes we say we are committed to doing or achieving something, but a filament of doubt holds us back. This subtle apprehension, or opportunity to use the 'back door', detracts from our focus and diminishes the energy and intensity we have available to complete the task. In these cases, we really aren't committed 100% and, unfortunately, 95% is about as good as 0%. It just doesn't work.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe



Realising Individual and Organisational Potential

Mike completed his global executive career in March 2023 and has since established his own coaching and consulting practice.

Visit Mike's website (www.taumataadvisory.com) and explore:

- Coaching – Mike can mentor or coach for any individual leadership circumstances and diverse business contexts. This mentoring or coaching can be delivered in various formats, including one-to-one sessions, team meetings, development programs, and workshops.
- Consulting – Mike can enable and support transformational outcomes for projects, teams or the entire organisation. This is based on a proprietary and proven methodology, underpinned by transferring mindsets and practices that enhance a leader's capability to deliver extraordinary results in any future commitments.
- Speaking – Mike has a reputation for being an authentic and engaging storyteller and is available as a conference speaker or for presentations in smaller team settings.
- Videos – see Mike in action on a range of leadership topics.

For more information, please contact Mike at mike@taumataadvisory.com, including options for workshops, based on the contents of this book, that enable you and your team to develop the practices that turn your leadership into a breakthrough.

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