

# THE COMMITMENT ADVANTAGE

PRACTICES THAT TURN  
LEADERSHIP INTO  
BREAKTHROUGH



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## 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

# What Future is Already Organising You

Let me begin with a question that is more confronting than it first appears.

Not: *What future do you want?*

But: *What future is your current behaviour already producing?*

Those are not the same question. Most leadership conversations live in the first. This book lives in the second.

You have probably been in this organisation.

The executive team was talented. The ambition was genuine. The declared future was not incremental improvement – it was transformation. A more adaptive, commercially courageous organisation. Faster decisions. Real accountability. Leaders who operated with enterprise thinking rather than functional protection. A culture capable of generating its future rather than defending its past.

For a period, that future occurred as possible. You could feel it in the room.

Then, quietly, something shifted. Not the strategy. The conversations around it.

Questions that had once been *What must fundamentally change?* became *How do we roll this out safely?* Confronting reality gave way to managing perception. Surfacing tension gave way to protecting cohesion. The organisation remained polite, aligned, and constructive – and stopped telling itself the truth.

Nobody decided this. Nobody announced it. It happened the way drift always happens – gradually, then invisibly, then completely.

The transformation continued. Strategy decks, culture statements, leadership principles, capability programmes, and transformation workstreams. The language remained visible long after the Commitment had hollowed out.

What the organisation became was more structured, more coordinated, more measured – but not materially more courageous, adaptive, or generative. The future had been quietly redesigned into a version the existing Context could survive without fundamentally changing itself.

The result was not failure. In many respects the organisation improved. However, it gradually adjusted to a smaller future than the one it had briefly been capable of generating.

That is the cost nobody puts in the quarterly update or the Annual Report. Not a crisis, not a collapse, and not a singular moment of failure.

Just the slow, socially comfortable trade of transformation for survivability.

I have seen this pattern more times than I can count. In all sorts of organisations across all sorts of geographies and cultures. In leadership teams that were genuinely reaching for something – renewal, relevance, a sense that their work still mattered beyond operational maintenance. And in every case, the same mechanism was at work.

They were solving for comfort instead of consequence.

Not laziness. Not cynicism. Not a lack of intelligence or effort. Something more subtle and more dangerous: they had unconsciously made circumstances sovereign over Commitment.

It sounded sophisticated. Responsible, even.

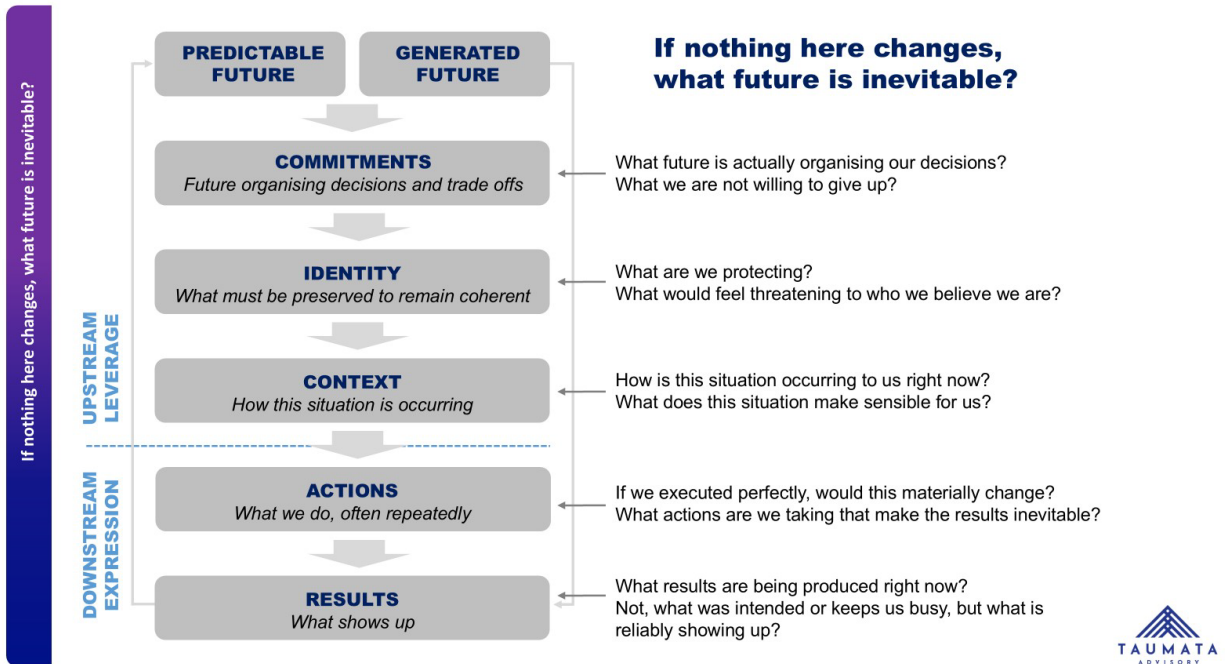
*"Once we get alignment..." "When the Board is clearer..." "After the restructure..." "If the market settles..."  
"We need more certainty first..."*

Every one of those statements means the same thing structurally:

“The future will determine my Commitment”, rather than “My Commitment will determine how I engage the future.”

That single distinction is the fault line this book is built on.

There is a framework I use in my practice that makes this visible. I call it the Operating Primer, and it looks like this.



The Primer draws a line between two zones.

Below the line: Actions and Results. What we do, and what shows up. This is where most leadership energy goes – more KPIs, tighter execution, better processes, sharper accountability frameworks.

Above the line: Context, Identity, and Commitments. How this situation is occurring to us. What we are protecting in order to remain coherent. And what future is actually organising our decisions and trade-offs.

The Primer asks one question that most leadership conversations avoid: **If nothing here changes, what future is inevitable?** This is what I call the Predictable Future.

That is not a strategic planning question. It is a confrontation.

It exposes the fact that your organisation already has a future. It is already being produced – by your recurring patterns, your tolerated behaviours, your resource allocation, your emotional reactions, your risk appetite, your language, and what remains consistently unsaid.

You did not choose it consciously. But you are living into it daily.

The Predictable Future is not a forecast. It is an operating system – running quietly beneath strategy, beneath ambition, beneath every declared Commitment to change.

The leaders in that organisation I described were not failing to execute. They were executing perfectly –

against the wrong future. The Predictable Future was doing exactly what Predictable Futures do: reproducing itself, wearing the language of transformation, surviving every intervention intact.

That is why working harder below the line never breaks a plateau. Effort applied inside the existing Context simply accelerates the production of the same future.

The leverage is always upstream.

A word on language that runs throughout this book. When I use the phrase "how it occurs" or "how this situation is occurring to you," I am not asking about external facts. I am asking about your lived interpretation of those facts – how the situation shows up for you, what it means to you in this moment, and what it makes possible or impossible as a result.

Two leaders can face identical circumstances and experience them entirely differently. One interprets the situation as threatening; the other as challenging. One sees a crisis; the other sees an inflection point. The external facts are the same. What differs is how those facts are occurring – how they are landing, what they are generating in terms of emotion, interpretation, and available response.

This matters because people do not act on reality. They act on how reality occurs to them. And how a situation occurs is not fixed. It can be examined, questioned, and shifted – which is precisely why it is one of the two most important variables in the equation that runs underneath this entire book.

This book is about what happens when leaders shift from the Predictable Future to the Generated Future. Not by wanting it more. Not by planning it better. But by understanding the mechanism through which Commitment – real Commitment, not aspirational language – changes the Context from which Action emerges.

There is an equation that runs underneath everything in these pages:

**Action = f(Being × Occurrence)**

The Actions available to you at any moment are a function of who you are Being, and how the situation is occurring to you. Change neither variable, and your Actions – however energetic – remain inside the same frame. Change one, and new possibilities emerge. Change both, and the ceiling disappears.

The chapters that follow unpack each part of that equation in the context of Commitment. Not Commitment as a personality trait or a motivational state – but Commitment as the upstream force that alters Context, shapes Identity, and generates futures that the predictable version of you and your organisation could not produce.

Each chapter follows a deliberate structure: a concept, a metaphor, a model, a case study, and practical questions to apply the thinking directly to your leadership. But Chapter 3 breaks that structure deliberately – because the relationship between Commitment and Being cannot be fully understood from the outside. It has to be encountered.

That is also the invitation of this book.

Not to acquire better tools. Not to refine your strategy.

But to see clearly which future is already organising you – and to decide, with full awareness, whether that is the future you are willing to keep producing.

That is the question this book is built on. And it is more confronting than it first appears.

***My Commitment will determine how I engage the future.***

# Chapter 1

## The Plateau Problem

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

I know this problem from the inside.

In 2016, Z Energy completed the acquisition of Caltex New Zealand. By any measure, it was a success. The integration delivered its synergies ahead of the original timeframe. The combined business had genuine scale – more sites, more customers, more capability than either company had independently. We had every reason to expect that scale would unlock the next level of performance.

It did not, beyond the obvious synergies.

Instead, we found ourselves in a funk. Scale, which should have felt like leverage, felt like friction. Pace slowed. The initiatives we were most excited about - customer experience, human-centred design, ways of working, genuine innovation – were being pushed hard, but against something that was not moving. More effort. Same place. The classic plateau.

What I did not fully see at the time – and what I have seen repeatedly since in my work with other leaders and organisations – was that we were solving downstream, below the line.

We were working on Actions and Results while the real governor of our performance sat upstream, largely unexamined.

The presenting problem looked like Context. We were in a post-acquisition funk about scale and pace. That much was visible and nameable. But underneath the Context question was an Identity question we had not confronted: *Who are we now?*

Not Z as it was before the acquisition. Not Caltex absorbed into Z's model. Something new – a company that needed to genuinely interrogate why Caltex had operated so differently: different channels, different pricing logic, different go-to-market assumptions. Not to validate those differences, but to understand what they revealed about what a company at our new scale could become.

Instead, the implicit logic of the acquisition created an Identity hierarchy. Z bought Caltex, therefore Z's model was sovereign. The question "*what must we learn from how Caltex operated, and what does that demand of who we need to become?*" was structurally almost impossible to ask – not because people were closed-minded, but because the Identity logic of acquisition makes that question nearly unspeakable.

Insights were generated – channel analyses, pricing models, go-to-market data. However, because Identity had not shifted, those insights could not organise new Action. The data existed, but the confrontation did not.

That is the plateau problem in its deepest form. Not a failure of effort or intelligence. A failure of upstream confrontation.

Every leader has felt this. The sense that no matter how hard the team works, performance refuses to move beyond a certain level. More hours, more meetings, more initiatives – yet Results plateau. Energy in no longer equals Results out.

The instinctive response is to push harder. More metrics, more pressure, more activity. And for a time, that can produce movement. But without shifting the upstream variables – Context, Identity, Commitments – the gains stall. The culture breeds fatigue and cynicism. The *why* gets lost.

As Walt Kelly observed, "Having lost sight of our objectives, we redoubled our efforts."

Most leaders recognise that experience. Few recognise what it is actually telling them.

***The plateau is not a performance problem.***

***It is a Context problem.***

Teams plateau when they operate within the same mental models, habits, and assumptions that created their current Results. Working harder inside the same frame does not create breakthroughs – it produces diminishing returns, and eventually, exhaustion.

The Operating Primer makes this structural. Downstream, below the line – Actions and Results – is where effort lives. It is also where most leadership attention goes: better execution, tighter

accountability, sharper KPIs. These matter, but they are downstream expressions of something more fundamental.

Above the line, three variables govern what is possible:

- Context – how this situation is occurring to us right now. What interpretation of reality is dominant, and what does that make possible or impossible?
- Identity – what must be preserved for us to remain coherent. What are we protecting? What would feel threatening to who we believe we are?
- Commitments – what future is actually organising our decisions and trade-offs. Not what we say we want, but what our behaviour is already producing.

Context is usually the most visible entry point – the one leaders can feel and name when it is pointed to. However, Context is rarely the deepest cause. Above it, Identity is often the real governor, and above Identity, Commitments determine which future the system keeps reproducing.

This is why the most important question in the Primer is not *"What are your goals?"*

It is: **"If nothing here changes, what future is inevitable?"**

That question collapses abstraction into consequence. It bypasses aspiration and exposes the future already embedded in behaviour, language, attention, and tolerated reality.

At Z Energy in 2017, the honest answer to that question – had we asked it clearly – would have revealed that we were producing a future in which Z's pre-acquisition Identity remained sovereign, Caltex's insights remained underutilised, and the plateau persisted. Not because anyone chose that future, but because the Identity logic of the acquisition was quietly organising everything downstream.

**The plateau breaks when leaders shift from managing effort to confronting upstream causes.**

This is the distinction between management and leadership that matters most. Management reduces volatility and increases predictability – a compliance mindset that stabilises the present. Leadership confronts Context, interrogates Identity, and declares Commitments that generate a different future.

Compliance produces predictable Results. Only Commitment creates extraordinary ones.

## Shifting Context

Context is the most accessible upstream lever – the one most leaders can begin working on immediately. While not the deepest cause, it is often the most visible entry point, and shifting it creates conditions in which Identity and Commitment work can follow.

Context shifts through:

- Language reframing – calling a crisis a *test* rather than a *failure* reshapes how people experience the same facts.
- Declaring possibility – a bold declaration sets a new field of play. It does not describe reality; it creates a future people orient around.
- Altering what gets measured – moving from *efficiency* to *impact* changes what people consider success.
- Embodied stance – a leader's presence sets the atmospheric conditions. Calm in turbulence creates steadiness; anxiety spreads fragility.
- Shifting time horizon – moving from quarterly Results to a ten-year ambition alters what choices occur and what risks feel acceptable.
- Modelling vulnerability – when a leader admits not knowing, it redefines what is possible for others.

These levers are available immediately. But leaders who stop at Context without confronting Identity will find the plateau reasserts itself.

***Context is the entry point. Identity is the work.***

## Metaphor: The Treadmill

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

Commitment 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 will shift. But the movement is genuine.

Leaders who live below the line wear their teams out on treadmills. Leaders who confront what is upstream take their teams into new landscapes.

## Model: The Performance Plateau Model

The plateau can be understood in three layers, each corresponding to a zone in the Operating Primer:

- Compliance Mode – Teams deliver predictable outputs, focusing on meeting expectations and avoiding mistakes. This creates stability but caps growth. The Predictable Future is fully in charge.
- Effort Escalation – Leaders sense the plateau and respond with pressure: more KPIs, tighter controls, longer hours. For a time, Results may rise. But without an upstream shift, gains stall and morale declines. The Predictable Future reasserts itself wearing the language of ambition.
- Commitment Breakthrough – Breakthroughs occur when leaders confront Context, interrogate Identity, and declare Commitments beyond the predictable. Instead of pushing harder inside the same frame, they shift it – generating fresh energy, creativity, and resilience. People see themselves not as labourers on a treadmill but as co-creators of a different future.

The difference is not effort. It is what leaders are willing to confront upstream.

## Case Study: SpaceX and the Fourth Launch

In 2008, SpaceX was not plateauing. It was failing.

Three consecutive Falcon 1 rocket launches had ended in destruction. The company had burned through most of its capital. NASA had not yet committed to a contract. Investors were losing confidence. The engineers were exhausted. By any conventional measure, the evidence pointed in one direction: the effort had been extraordinary, the commitment genuine, and the result was three failures in a row.

The instinctive response in that situation is to do what most organisations do at a plateau – review the assumptions, tighten the process, escalate the pressure, and try harder inside the same frame. SpaceX had already done all of that. The technical improvements between each launch were real. The effort was not the problem.

What Elon Musk declared internally was not a new strategy. It was a Context shift. In the weeks before the fourth launch, the internal declaration was unambiguous: this company exists to make humanity multi-planetary. That future is not negotiable. We are going to make this work, or we are going to run out of money trying. There is no pivot.

That declaration did something the technical improvements had not. It reframed what the three failures meant. They were no longer evidence that the future was impossible. They were the predictable cost of attempting something that had not been done before by a private company. Breakdowns reinterpreted not as disconfirmation but as structural inevitability – the price of entry for the stand that had been declared.

On 28 September 2008, the fourth Falcon 1 launch succeeded. It was the first privately developed liquid-fuelled rocket to reach orbit in history. The NASA contract followed. SpaceX went on to fundamentally reshape the economics and ambitions of space exploration.

The breakthrough was not produced by the fourth launch being technically superior to the third by a sufficient margin. It was produced by a Context in which the failure of the third launch could not become a reason to retreat. The declaration had made retreat structurally unavailable. Which meant the only available Action was to keep going.

That is what a bold Commitment does to a plateau. It does not remove the obstacles. It reframes what the obstacles mean – and in doing so, it changes what Actions occur as possible in response to them.

Compliance would have reviewed the third failure, produced a more cautious fourth attempt, and most likely concluded that private orbital launch was not yet commercially viable. Commitment took humanity one step closer to becoming a multi-planetary species.

## Commitment Breaks What Effort Cannot

Leaders everywhere face plateaus. The instinct is always to push for more compliance – more effort, more pressure, more execution discipline. Yet more compliance only extends the plateau.

What breaks the cycle is not effort but Commitment. And Commitment begins upstream – with an honest answer to the question the Predictable Future most wants to avoid:

*If nothing here changes, what future is inevitable?*

## Practical Application

1. Ask the Primer question. In your next leadership conversation, ask: If nothing here changes, what future are we producing? Notice the discomfort. That discomfort is the plateau speaking.
2. Name the plateau honestly. Where are you working harder without advancing?
3. Identify the upstream cause. Is it Context, Identity, or Commitments that is most obviously governing your current Results?
4. Stop escalating effort. Resist the reflex to add more KPIs, pressure, or hours below the line.

5. Declare a stand. Articulate a Commitment beyond the predictable – one that cannot be reached by harder work alone.

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- What plateau are you tolerating that you have stopped noticing?
- If nothing in your organisation changes, what future is already inevitable?
- Is your plateau a Context problem, an Identity problem, or a Commitments problem – and how do you know?
- Where are you escalating effort below the line while the upstream cause goes unfronted?
- What unspoken conversation in your leadership team is the plateau protecting?

## Chapter 2

# Compliance versus Commitment

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

Here is a scene you will recognise.

The leadership team has just agreed on a bold direction. The meeting was energised. People nodded. The language was ambitious. Someone used the word "transformational." As people filed out, there was a genuine sense of momentum.

Three weeks later, nothing has materially changed.

Not because anyone disagreed. Not because the strategy was flawed. But because the nodding was compliance – responsive, socially comfortable, and entirely compatible with doing nothing differently. The Commitment that looked unanimous in the room had no roots beneath it. When the next urgent priority arrived, the bold direction quietly moved down the list. Then off it.

This is the most common leadership failure I encounter. Not resistance. Not sabotage. Just the slow, invisible substitution of compliance for Commitment – so gradual that by the time anyone notices, the original stand has been replaced by a more survivable version of itself.

### The Distinction That Changes Everything

Compliance and Commitment can look identical from a distance. In both cases people show up, do work, and produce outcomes. However, inside the lived experience of a team, they are worlds apart.

Compliance is doing what is required. It lives in rules, processes, and the fear-and-reward economy. Compliant people ask: What does the policy say? What is the minimum standard? What will keep me safe? Compliance is not inherently bad – in aviation safety, surgical checklists, and financial controls, it prevents harm. But 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 is 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.

Returning to the Operating Primer from the Introduction: compliance is a below-the-line operating system. It governs Actions and Results while leaving Context, Identity, and Commitments untouched. That is precisely why it cannot generate breakthroughs. It executes inside the existing frame without ever questioning whether the frame is the right one.

Commitment, by contrast, is upstream. It begins with a declaration about the future – one that alters Context, shapes Identity, and determines which Actions become available. The Actions available to committed people are genuinely different from those available to compliant ones – not because they work harder, but because the situation occurs differently to them. That distinction will be explored fully in Chapter 3. For now, the point is structural: compliance and Commitment are not on the same spectrum. They are different operating systems.

## The Trap: Compliance Masquerading as Commitment

Here is what makes this dangerous. Compliance often masquerades as Commitment.

A compliant employee can appear exemplary – responsive emails, tidy dashboards, careful adherence to procedure. In a performance review, they look excellent. But notice what happens when reality deviates from the plan. When the quarter comes in short, the loudest call is to review the assumptions. When a bold initiative meets resistance, the first instinct is to reframe it as a pilot. When a difficult conversation is required, the meeting gets postponed.

None of this is cynical. It is simply what compliance produces under pressure: a search for the survivable version of the original Commitment.

A committed person behaves differently. They might challenge, probe, or refuse a convenient shortcut. They can seem difficult – right up until a crisis hits. Then they generate options others cannot see, because the outcome – not the rulebook – animates them.

Gallup's research shows that only 23% of employees worldwide are genuinely engaged – meaning truly committed. The rest are either passively complying or actively disengaged. The cost is not merely cultural: teams in the top quartile of engagement are 23% more profitable than those in the bottom quartile. In New Zealand and Australia, engagement figures track similarly, with Gallup's State of the

Global Workplace report consistently showing APAC engagement rates below the global average – making the compliance trap a particularly acute regional challenge.

## Why Not Way: A Thirteen-Year Commitment

The most instructive case study I know on this distinction is not from a business school curriculum. It is from my own experience leading Z Energy – and specifically from a decision made not once but four times over thirteen years.

When Z Energy was established in 2010, we were buying Shell's New Zealand downstream business and transforming it into something genuinely different. Not a rebranded Shell. Not a more efficient version of what had existed. Something new – a New Zealand company, built on New Zealand Identity, committed to a broader definition of what an energy company could stand for.

We needed a document that captured that Identity. Most companies in our position would have written a values statement, a code of conduct, or a ways-of-working guide. We deliberately did none of those things.

We called it Our Why – not Our Way.

That single word carried the entire distinction this chapter is about. The Way tells people what to do and how to do it. The Why tells people who they are and what they stand for. As the document stated directly: "Only offering the way without the why significantly limits what our people can contribute and in doing so, would result in our people only operating as simple cogs in a machine."

The opening paragraph of that document read:

"Z is a distinctive company. The people are different, the way stuff gets done is different, and what we aspire to is different. Being distinctive enables us to achieve a range of extraordinary outcomes. Together, we can realise an extraordinary future."

That paragraph was not aspirational decoration. It was a Commitment – one that would be tested almost immediately.

## The IPO: When the Predictable Future Came Knocking

In 2013, Z Energy listed on the New Zealand and Australian stock exchanges. With the IPO came something we had not fully anticipated: a powerful, institutionally legitimate alternative Identity.

The capital markets logic was not hostile. It was reasonable, well-intentioned, and entirely predictable. It sounded like this:

"The market will not tolerate short-term earnings volatility." Leaders begin optimising for quarterly predictability rather than strategic transformation. Decisions become filtered through anticipated investor reaction rather than long-term value creation.

"We need to look like a mature listed company now." The organisation unconsciously shifts from entrepreneurial adaptability toward governance-heavy professionalism. Process quality improves, but speed, experimentation, and courage decline.

"We cannot afford mistakes in public." Learning behaviour contracts. Risk appetite narrows. Innovation becomes incremental because reputational exposure now feels permanent and externally visible.

"The Board and market expect certainty." Leadership teams start over-weighting assurance, consensus, and carefully staged execution. Ambiguity becomes something to minimise rather than navigate productively.

Every one of those statements was reasonable. Every one of them was also a Predictable Future – one that, if left unchallenged, would have quietly colonised Z's Identity and replaced our Generated Future with a more survivable, more conventional version of itself.

So we revised Our Why.

We kept the opening paragraph exactly as written. "Z is a distinctive company. The people are different, the way stuff gets done is different, and what we aspire to is different."

For a company entering public markets – where the entire institutional logic is standardisation, comparability, and predictable returns – retaining that as our opening statement was a declaration. We were saying to the market, before they had bought a single share:

***You are investing in our Identity.***

***We are not adopting yours.***

That is not a culture statement. That is Commitment under pressure – the precise moment when the Predictable Future arrives wearing the clothes of institutional legitimacy, and a leader has to choose which future will organise the organisation's decisions.

We revised Our Why again after the Caltex acquisition in 2016 – new scale, new complexity, a new Identity question that Chapter 1 has already named honestly. And again when we confronted the gaps that acquisition had exposed. Four editions. Thirteen years. The same opening paragraph throughout.

*The document was not the Commitment.*

*It was the evidence of it.*

Howard Schultz's return to Starbucks in 2008 illustrates the same dynamic at a different scale. The company had not failed strategically, but it had drifted from its Identity. The response was not a new strategy but a recommitment to the original stand: Starbucks existed not to sell coffee but to create human connection. Closing 7,100 stores for a day of retraining was not an operational decision. It was a declaration – costly, visible, and Identity-restoring. The strategy recovered because the Identity was restored first. Below-the-line interventions followed from the upstream shift, not the other way around.

## The Intern

Several years into Z's life as a listed company, I received an email from a young intern. He had found the courage to write to the CEO directly. His message was simple: "I feel like I belong here, and I can do that by being myself."

I remember reading it and thinking: my work here is done.

What he was describing – without using the language – was the lived experience of the three conditions that Self-Determination Theory identifies as the foundation of intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

- Autonomy – he felt he was choosing this, not performing for it.
- Competence – he felt he could make a genuine contribution.
- Relatedness – he felt connected to people and to something larger than his role.

These conditions do not emerge from a perks package or an engagement survey. They emerge from an Identity architecture that makes them possible. Our Why created the conditions, and the intern lived them. The IPO had tested whether they would survive contact with a powerful competing Identity. They had.

Belonging by being yourself is only possible inside an organisation that has committed to distinctiveness over conformity – and kept that Commitment when conformity would have been easier, more credible, and more immediately rewarded.

That is the difference between compliance and Commitment at the organisational level.

## What Leaders Amplify

Leaders do not generate Commitment through instruction. They generate it through Being.

When leaders manage according to the letter of the process, they produce compliant followers. When leaders declare futures and live them consistently – when their Actions are organised by the same Commitment they ask of others – they invite Commitment in return.

This is why tone, stance, and language matter so much. Teams do not take their cues primarily from what the leader says. They take them from what the leader is Being. Compliance is contagious. So is Commitment. The question is which one the leader is spreading.

The payoff is structural rather than motivational.

*Compliance maintains the present.*

*Commitment generates the future.*

In a stable world, maintenance might suffice. In a disrupted world – and every leader reading this is operating in a disrupted world – it will not.

Breakthrough performance starts when leaders stop mistaking careful compliance for true Commitment, and begin building the upstream conditions in which Commitment can take root.

Model: Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, provides the research grounding for why Commitment outperforms compliance at the psychological level. SDT holds that human motivation flourishes when three core needs are met: autonomy – the felt sense that I am choosing this; competence – the felt sense that I can meaningfully impact outcomes; and relatedness – the felt sense that I am connected to others who care about this with me.

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

When these three needs are met, people act from intrinsic motivation – interest, values, and Identity. That is the fuel of Commitment. It yields persistence under challenge, deeper problem-solving, and discretionary effort. The Z Energy intern who wrote to say he belonged because he could be himself was describing all three conditions simultaneously – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – made possible by an Identity architecture that the Our Why had deliberately created. SDT confirms what the Z Energy story illustrates: engineer the conditions of intrinsic motivation, and Commitment follows.

## 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 are harnessing a larger, partly invisible force. Motion is not coming just from muscle; it is 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 have aligned to purpose, Identity, and shared stakes.

Z rewrote its Our Why four times. It never rewrote its opening paragraph. That was the sail.

## Commitment Is the Only Fuel That Compounds

The difference between compliance and Commitment is the difference between reliability and reinvention. In a stable world, reliability may be enough. Stability is now a luxury.

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 – do not add more rules. Change the fuel. Build a culture where people choose the future with you rather than simply complying with the present.

And ask yourself the question Z asked four times in thirteen years: does our Why still describe the future we are committed to – or has it quietly drifted into describing the future that is merely comfortable?

## Practical Application

- Name the mode. In meetings and reviews, ask explicitly: are we complying or committed? The conversation that follows is often culture-changing.
- Distinguish Why from Way. Does your culture document describe what people do, or who they are? If it is the former, it is generating compliance.
- 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.
- Ritualise recommitment. Create regular moments where individuals and teams publicly restate what they are there for – and what they will stop doing to serve it.
- Ask the IPO question. What is the institutionally legitimate alternative Identity that is quietly colonising your culture right now? Name it. Then decide whether to resist 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?
- What is the institutionally legitimate Predictable Future that is currently competing with your Generated Future – and what would it take to interrupt it?
- Does your organisation have a Why or just a Way – and how do you know the difference?
- If someone joined your organisation tomorrow and read everything you have written about your culture, what future would they believe you are committed to?

## Chapter 3

# Commitment and Being

### *The Mechanism: Why Effort Without Occurring Change Produces Nothing New*

In July 2017, I was frustrated.

Not mildly concerned. Not strategically dissatisfied. Genuinely frustrated – with the pace of corporate and political Action on climate change, and with my own position inside that inaction. I was the Chief Executive of Z Energy, a company that sold fossil fuels representing approximately nine per cent of New Zealand's emissions. I cared deeply about climate change. I was also, by any honest accounting, part of the problem.

That frustration could have stayed where frustration usually stays – as a background condition, occasionally voiced, never acted on. Instead, I looked across New Zealand to see whether other business leaders were experiencing the same thing. Partnering with Abbie Reynolds, Executive Director of the Sustainable Business Council, we organised a dinner to explore what was possible beyond our individual Actions.

That dinner eventually became the Climate Leaders Coalition – a CEO-led community of nearly 100 organisations representing 34 per cent of New Zealand's GDP and more than 210,000 employees. I served as its Founding Convenor for five years.

But before any of that, there was the moment before yes. And in that moment, the situation was not occurring as opportunity. It was occurring as a series of contractions.

What if I cannot get enough momentum, and I am closely associated with yet another climate change response that failed to deliver? I am the Chief Executive of a company selling fossil fuels. Am I not just setting myself up for a greenwashing beating and becoming the public face of hypocrisy? How can I lead something effectively where I do not have formal authority over 100 other organisations? How can I give this the right energy while leading Z through its own very challenging period?

Each of those concerns was legitimate and none of them was fabricated. However, notice what they were doing structurally. Each one was contracting the field of available Action. Not by eliminating options objectively – those options still existed – but by making them psychologically, socially, and existentially unavailable.

When a situation occurs as reputationally fatal, the Actions that become available are self-protection, caution, and silence.

When a situation occurs as structurally impossible, the Actions that become available are delay, delegation, and managed distance.

When a situation occurs as Identity-threatening – I am a fossil fuel CEO, I have no business leading this – the Actions that become available are performance, deflection, and the careful management of appearances.

None of those would have built the Climate Leaders Coalition. Something had to shift. What shifted first was not who I was Being. What shifted first was how the situation occurred.

## The Equation

This is the point at which I want to name something I have been working toward since the Introduction.

There is an equation that runs beneath everything in this book – beneath the Operating Primer, beneath the compliance/Commitment distinction, beneath every practical application section you have encountered so far.

$$\mathbf{Action = f(Being \times Occurrence)}$$

The Actions available to you at any moment are a function of who you are Being, multiplied by how the situation is occurring to you.

The multiplication is deliberate. This is not addition. If it were addition – Action = Being + Occurring – the two variables would compensate for one another. Strong Being would partially offset a restrictive occurring. Expansive occurring would partially offset collapsed Being. Leaders could rely on one variable to carry the load when the other faltered.

That is not what I observe in practice.

The multiplication means the variables interact. When either approaches zero, the available Action space collapses – not partially, but dramatically. A leader may have tremendous capability, intelligence,

experience, and genuine Commitment. However, if the situation occurs as impossible, politically fatal, humiliating, or Identity-threatening, the field of available Action contracts to almost nothing. Not because the Actions objectively disappear, but because they no longer occur as available.

Phenomenologically, the Action space collapses.

The reverse is equally true. A leader may interpret the situation expansively – seeing genuine possibility, real options, a future worth reaching for. However, if their Being is resigned, approval-seeking, defensive, or emotionally overwhelmed, the same contraction happens. The Actions may intellectually exist but the leader cannot reliably inhabit them.

I have seen this repeatedly.

A Board transition occurs as "I am about to lose credibility" – and an otherwise highly capable leader loses access to leadership agency altogether. Their available Actions narrow to self-protection and management theatre.

A market disruption occurs as "we are already too late" – and a leadership team that was generative and adaptive becomes passive and reactive overnight.

A necessary confrontation occurs as "speaking honestly here is career suicide" – and the conversation that would have unlocked everything never happens.

Equally, I have worked with leaders who were intellectually committed but conflict-avoidant. Strategically insightful but emotionally fragile under pressure. Deeply values-driven but unable to tolerate the uncertainty that values-led leadership always produces. In those cases, the occurring was expansive – they could see the possibility – but their Being could not stabilise the Action. The result was bursts of momentum, inspirational language, repeated restarts, and what I can only describe as performative transformation without sustained execution.

This is partly why leadership development so often underperforms. Most development focuses on capability, knowledge, frameworks, communication techniques, and strategic tools. However, the decisive variable under pressure is rarely competence. It is how the situation occurs, and who the leader is Being in the face of that occurring. That combination determines what Actions become available – psychologically, emotionally, socially, and existentially.

Which is why the equation is useful not just philosophically, but diagnostically.

When Action is absent, delayed, distorted, or repetitive, the intervention is rarely "try harder." The inquiry becomes: how is this occurring? Who is the leader Being? Which variable is collapsing the Action space?

## The Intervention Sequence

Here is something I have learned from practice that is not in any framework I was taught.

When a leader cannot access the Actions their situation requires, the entry point is almost always occurring – not Being.

This is counterintuitive. Most leadership development works from the top down: change who you are Being, and the world will occur differently. That is true, and important, but it is not where most leaders can enter. Being is often opaque to the person inhabiting it. Occurring is more visible – leaders can usually describe how a situation feels before they can articulate who they are Being inside it.

So, the intervention sequence I use begins with occurring.

Step 1: Name the occurring. How is this situation occurring to you right now? The act of naming makes the invisible visible. The leader can now see the interpretive filter through which they have been engaging reality. Threatening. Impossible. Humiliating. Unwinnable. Simply naming it creates distance between the leader and their interpretation.

Step 2: Examine the occurring. Why does it occur that way? What story are you telling yourself? What assumption are you making that may not be true? This loosens the grip of the occurring without dismissing it. The concerns are real. The interpretation generating them may not be the only available one.

Step 3: Expand the occurring. How else could this occur? How would someone you respect see this situation? This opens alternative interpretations. Not positive thinking – not the instruction to feel better about something difficult. Genuine phenomenological expansion. The situation has not changed. The field of available Action has.

Step 4: Show the consequence of the occurring. If this occurs as threatening, what Actions make sense? If it occurs as challenging, what Actions become available?

This fourth step is the most powerful – because it makes the equation visible in real time. The leader can see directly how their occurring is producing their Action space. It is not abstract. It is immediate and causal. Leaders who have never thought about phenomenology in their lives understand this

instantly, because they can feel the difference in their body between threatening and challenging – even when the external facts are identical.

When the occurring shifts, new Actions become available. Often the leader can inhabit them immediately, because their Being was never the primary constraint.

But sometimes the occurring will not shift. The situation continues to occur as impossible, or Identity-threatening, regardless of how many alternative interpretations are offered. When that happens, the block is upstream. It is in Being – specifically in an Identity that cannot accommodate the occurring the situation requires.

At that point, the intervention goes to a different question: Who would you need to be for this to occur differently?

That question is not about personality or style. It is about Identity – the self-concept that is determining which futures can occur as possible and which cannot. A leader who is Being a protector of the past cannot inhabit a future that requires relinquishing it. A leader who is Being an approval-seeker cannot inhabit a future that requires sustained unpopularity. A leader who is Being a competence-performer cannot inhabit a future that requires visible uncertainty.

***The Identity must expand before the occurring can shift. And the occurring must shift before the full Action space becomes available.***

That is the upstream sequence. And it is why transformation is always, at its root, Identity work.

## The Four Ways of Being – and a Fifth

Werner Erhard and Michael Jensen's Four Ways of Being framework sits inside the equation rather than alongside it. The equation – Action = f(Being × Occurrence) – is structurally generative. It explains the mechanism: where Action comes from, and why it contracts or expands.

The Four Ways of Being are normative and developmental. They answer a different question: what kinds of Being most reliably expand the available Action space, particularly under pressure?

- Being Authentic – telling the truth about what you see and feel, even when uncomfortable. Authenticity expands occurring because it interrupts the self-protective narratives that make situations occur as more threatening than they are.
- Being Committed to Something Bigger than Yourself – anchoring Identity in a stand that transcends self-interest. This is precisely what shifted my occurring in the CLC moment. When the situation occurred as "what if I fail publicly?" the response from Commitment to something bigger was: "this matters more than my reputation." The occurring shifted. The Action space opened.
- Being Cause in the Matter – taking ownership for outcomes, not as self-blame but as agency. This directly expands the occurring: if I am cause, then the situation cannot occur as something happening to me. It occurs as something I am participating in generating.
- Being a Person of Integrity – operating as whole and complete, keeping your word. Integrity expands the Action space because it eliminates the energy drain of managing inconsistency. Leaders operating with full integrity have more of themselves available for the situation.

Nelson Mandela's twenty-seven years of imprisonment represent perhaps the most extreme test of Being committed to something bigger than yourself. The future he was committed to – reconciliation, not revenge – did not waver because conditions were favourable. It held because it was anchored in Identity rather than circumstance. His Being stabilised the occurring of imprisonment itself, producing Actions – patience, strategic clarity, moral authority – that would not have been available from a different Being.

These four are powerful, but they are, as I noted earlier, phenomenologically thin. A leader can embody all four while still inhabiting a deeply restrictive occurring of reality. The Board will never change. There are no good options. The market has already decided. People cannot be trusted.

In those cases, the Four Ways stabilise Being without shifting occurring. The Action space remains contracted.

Which is why I believe there is a fifth way – not a replacement for Erhard and Jensen's framework, but an extension of it.

## Being Generative Towards Occurring.

This is the capacity to actively work on how situations appear – to treat occurring not as a fixed given but as a variable that can be examined, questioned, and shifted. It is the meta-capacity that makes the intervention sequence possible. Without it, leaders remain trapped inside their current interpretation of reality, however authentically or courageously they inhabit it.

Being Generative Towards Occurring means asking: how is this occurring, and is that the only way it can occur? It means holding interpretations lightly enough to examine them. It means treating the phenomenological field – the world as it appears – as something leaders have a hand in shaping, not merely receiving.

This is not optimism. It is not reframing for comfort. It is a disciplined, honest inquiry into whether the occurring that is collapsing your Action space is the only available occurring – or whether it is an interpretation that can be examined, loosened, and shifted.

In the CLC moment, this is what happened. For me, the situation was occurring as reputationally dangerous, structurally impossible, and Identity-contradicting. I did not ignore those concerns. I examined them. I asked how else it could occur. I asked what assumption I was making that might not be true. I asked what Actions would become available if it occurred differently.

And gradually – not instantly – it began to occur as a genuine possibility. Not safe. Not certain. But possible.

***From possibility, Commitment followed. From Commitment, the Actions that built the Coalition became available.***

That sequence – occurring shifts, Being stabilises, Actions expand – is the anatomy of every breakthrough I have been part of or witnessed.

## The Modes of Leadership Presence

Leaders do not inhabit one fixed state. The interaction between Being and occurring is dynamic – shifting with pressure, Context, relationship, and circumstance.

The Modes of Leadership Presence framework maps four distinct states produced by that interAction.

## The modes of leadership presence

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

When Being collapses and occurring is restrictive, leaders enter Collapse – withdrawal, blame, reactivity. Commitments declared from this state rarely endure. The Action space has contracted to survival.

When Being is stable but occurring is restrictive, leaders enter Centred Leadership – grounded, clear, able to hold the stand even in difficulty. This is the state from which most genuine breakthroughs are navigated. Not comfortable. But workable.

When Being is stable and occurring is expansive, leaders enter Confident Clarity – generative, creative, able to see and inhabit possibilities that others cannot access. This is the state from which bold declarations are made and sustained.

When Being collapses but occurring is expansive, leaders enter Complacent Comfort – things seem fine, the situation looks positive, but the leader is not bringing full presence. Commitments made from this state are often shallow – more aspiration than stand.

The practical implication is direct: the strength of a Commitment is inseparable from the state from which it is made. Commitments declared from collapse or complacent comfort rarely generate breakthroughs – not because the words are wrong, but because the Being behind them cannot stabilise the Action the Commitment requires.

This is why the first question when a Commitment is failing is not "what should we do differently?" It is: "from which quadrant is this Commitment being held?"

## Why This Chapter Broke the Format

Leadership growth rarely happens through information alone. It happens when reflection, story, and practice intersect at a point of genuine personal relevance.

The equation – Action =  $f(\text{Being} \times \text{Occurrence})$  – is not a model to be understood. It is a lens to be applied, repeatedly, in the moments that matter most. The moments when Action is absent and you cannot immediately see why. The moments when Commitment is declared but the Actions that should follow do not materialise. The moments when a leader who is trying hard is producing Results that suggest something is fundamentally misaligned.

In those moments, the inquiry is always the same:

- How is this occurring?
- Who am I Being?
- Which of those two variables is collapsing the available Action space?
- And – most importantly – what shift, however small, would begin to open it?

## Practical Application: The Occurring Inquiry

When you or your team are stuck – when Action is absent, delayed, or repetitive – work through this sequence before attempting any strategic intervention:

- Name the occurring. Ask: how is this situation occurring to me right now? Say it plainly – threatening, impossible, humiliating, unwinnable. Name it without justification.
- Examine the occurring. Ask: why does it occur that way? What story am I telling myself? What assumption am I making that may not be true?
- Expand the occurring. Ask: how else could this occur? How would someone I respect see this situation?
- Show the consequence. Ask: if it occurs as threatening, what Actions make sense? If it occurs as challenging, what Actions become available? Feel the difference. It is immediate and causal.
- If occurring will not shift, go upstream. Ask: who would I need to be for this to occur differently? That is the Identity question. Answer it honestly before attempting any further Action.

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- How is your most significant current challenge occurring to you right now? Name it precisely.
- What Actions does that occurring make sensible – and what Actions does it make unavailable?
- How else could it occur – not as wishful thinking, but as a genuinely available alternative interpretation?
- Which quadrant of the Modes of Leadership Presence have you been leading from most consistently this month?
- If your Being were fully aligned with your declared Commitments, what Actions would immediately become available that currently feel out of reach?
- What is the Commitment you are avoiding declaring – because of how the act of declaring it occurs to you?

## Chapter 4

# Anatomy of Breakthrough

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

Let me begin with what breakthroughs are not.

They are not the product of better strategy. They are not unlocked by tighter execution, more sophisticated governance, or additional management capability. They do not arrive because conditions finally become favourable, the market shifts in your direction, or the right framework is applied with sufficient discipline.

I know this because I have watched organisations do all of those things – sometimes brilliantly – and remain fundamentally unchanged.

Breakthroughs begin somewhere quieter and more personal. They begin in the moment a leader can no longer comfortably maintain the separation between "the organisation is stuck" and "my current way of Being is reproducing the stuckness."

Everything else – the strategy, the structure, the cultural change programme – follows from that moment. Or it does not happen at all.

### The Case: What Transformation Actually Requires

The organisation had declared a genuine future.

Not incremental improvement. Not operational optimisation. A materially different company – more adaptive, more commercially courageous, more capable of generating its future rather than defending its past. The executive team was talented. The ambition was real. For a period, the future occurred as genuinely possible.

Then, without drama, the shift began. It happened through increasingly reasonable operational decisions. As market conditions tightened and investor scrutiny increased, meetings became more

financially defensive. Transformation conversations became increasingly tied to quarterly deliverables. Executive attention drifted back toward operational certainty.

No one consciously abandoned the future.

But the emotional centre of gravity changed. The executive team slowly became more concerned with avoiding failure, maintaining credibility, and reducing organisational discomfort than with generating the future they had declared.

The key moment came during a strategy review. One executive proposed a major structural simplification – redistributing power, removing duplicated leadership layers, confronting long-standing underperformance. The room agreed intellectually. No one moved. Over the following weeks the conversation was reframed into sequencing, stakeholder management, communication planning, and implementation risk. Eventually the proposal disappeared entirely.

Later, in coaching, one executive said:

***"I realised we all still wanted the future, as long as none of us had to become different people to get there."***

That was the inflection point – not the moment it was spoken, but the moment it became true. The future had stopped occurring as possibility and started occurring as threat. Not threat to the organisation. Threat to Identity.

For different executives, the transformation increasingly occurred as loss of control, exposure of capability gaps, political vulnerability, reputational risk, or destabilisation of relationships they depended on. Their public language remained highly transformational. Their lived occurring had quietly shifted.

The organisation responded by unconsciously translating transformation into something survivable.

Over the next 18 months, the company became more aligned, more governed, more disciplined, and operationally tighter. New frameworks. Updated operating rhythms. Leadership principles. Transformation offices. Cultural measurement. Clearer KPIs.

Externally, the organisation appeared increasingly sophisticated.

Internally, it had not become materially more adaptive or courageous. Decision-making remained cautious. Cross-functional tension remained unresolved. Innovation remained incremental. Senior leaders still protected their domains under pressure.

The transformation had become operational rather than ontological. The company improved without fundamentally changing.

## The Coaching Room

I was working with the CEO during this period.

The conversations followed a pattern I have encountered repeatedly. Initially, the CEO described the challenge in organisational terms – capability gaps, structural constraints, stakeholder complexity, cultural resistance. The language was sophisticated and accurate. The organisation did have those problems.

However, at some point in every genuine coaching conversation, the inquiry turns.

It turns toward avoidance. Toward fear. Toward image management, approval, control, certainty, self-protection.

The question that shifted the conversation for this CEO was not clever. It was direct: "What future is your current leadership perfectly designed to produce?"

That question moves the conversation from intention to causality. It does not ask about the organisation. It asks about the leader's own role in producing the current Results. The abstraction collapses. What remains is personal.

The deeper shift came one layer further in, through a question that tends to produce the first genuinely reflective silence: "What are you protecting that makes this future difficult to fully commit to?"

Or sometimes: "What would you have to stop Being in order for this future to become possible?"

That is the moment the executive stops relating to transformation as strategic, organisational, or operational – and starts experiencing it as personal, Identity-level, and existentially costly.

The emotional energy in the conversation changes. Longer pauses, less polished language, and increased self-awareness. And then, often, the first genuinely honest statement the leader has made in months.

For this CEO it came as: "I have been waiting for the organisation to become ready before fully committing myself."

That sentence matters. It names the structure precisely: the leader has been making their Commitment conditional on organisational readiness – which means the Predictable Future has been governing their behaviour while the Generated Future has been governing their language. In the equation from Chapter 3, their occurring of the situation had been quietly collapsing the Action space while their declared Being remained aspirationally intact.

The shift that followed was not motivational. It was not a surge of energy or a moment of liberation.

It was experienced first as discomfort. Then as something closer to grief.

Because the CEO realised they had been simultaneously sincere, intelligent, hardworking, and even courageous in some areas – while preserving parts of themselves that made the declared future structurally impossible. They had been organised around surviving the current Identity while declaring Commitment to a different one.

I want to name that experience directly, because most leadership books do not. Genuine breakthrough is not primarily experienced as empowering. It is experienced first as loss – of certainty, of control, of the self-concept that has organised behaviour until now. Leaders who have been doing everything right discover that doing everything right is insufficient if the Identity generating their Actions is still organised around the Predictable Future.

That is not a comfortable discovery. But it is the only one that produces genuine and enduring breakthrough. The discomfort is not a sign something is going wrong. It is the most reliable signal that something is finally going right.

## The Session That Shifted the Room

Several weeks later, the organisation experienced a major operational setback.

Historically, the response would have been predictable: blame execution, tighten governance, add controls, escalate reporting. The system would have produced its standard Actions because the situation would have occurred in its standard way – as an operational failure requiring an operational remedy.

Instead, the CEO – having already shifted their own occurring of the situation – asked a different question in the leadership session: "What if this problem is not evidence the transformation is failing? What if it is evidence that we are still relating to the company as the old organisation?"

The room went quiet. One executive eventually responded: "I still fundamentally behave as if my job is to protect my function rather than generate the enterprise."

That changed everything – not because it was a strategic insight, but because it shifted the occurring of the situation for the entire room. The operational setback no longer occurred as failure. It occurred as evidence of an inherited Identity. And that new occurring required a different way of Being in response.

Over the following months, leaders became more direct. Accountability became more personal. Political avoidance reduced. Harder conversations happened earlier. Decisions accelerated.

Not because they had acquired new management tools. Because the future had stopped occurring as dangerous, politically costly, or Identity-threatening. The Action space expanded – and the Actions that became available were precisely those the transformation had required from the beginning.

Returning to the equation: the occurring shifted first, in the coaching room. The Being then stabilised around the new occurring, in the leadership session. The available Actions expanded as a direct consequence. Not through effort, but through the upstream variables finally moving.

At the final offsite, the CEO summarised the learning with a precision I have not heard bettered:

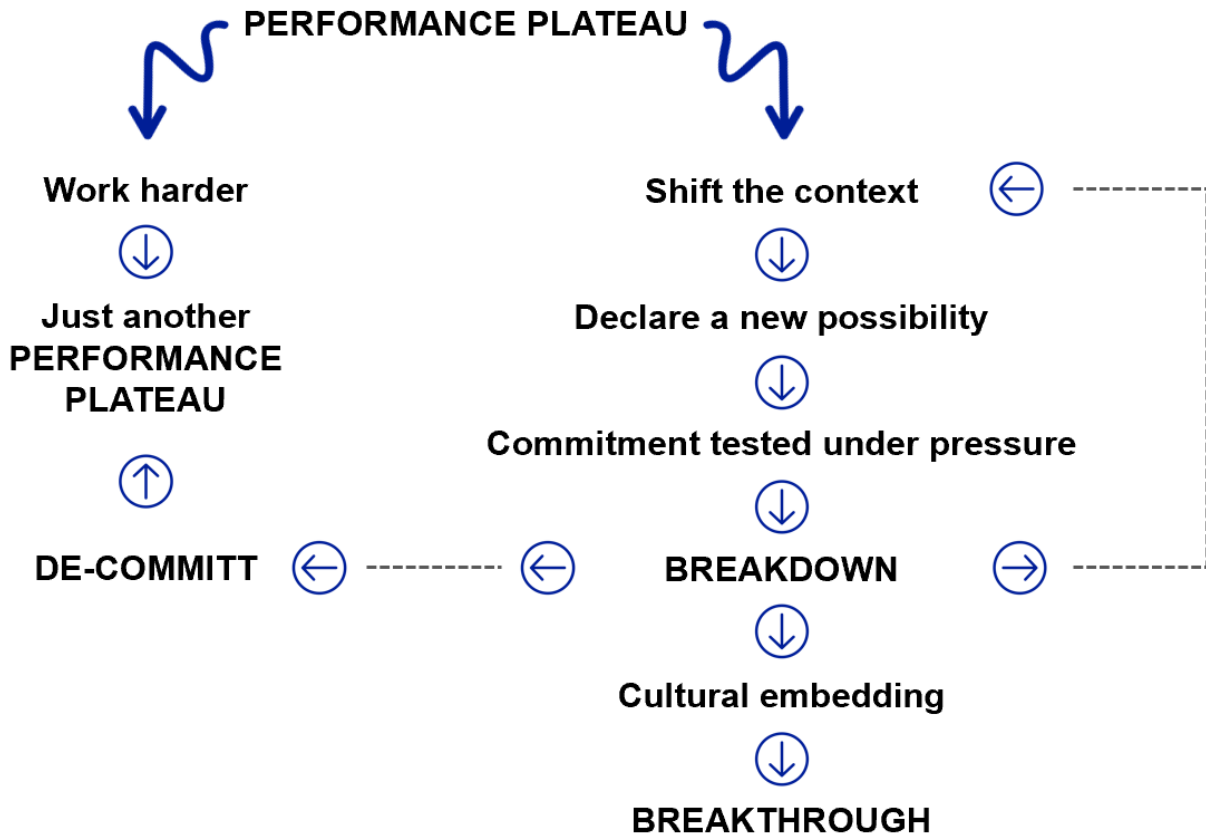
***"We thought transformation required better execution.  
What it actually required was becoming people capable of  
living inside a different future before there was evidence it  
would work."***

The Identity expansion is not the destination. The declared future is. Identity must expand to hold what Commitment requires – not the other way around.

## The Anatomy: Two Paths from Every Plateau

Every performance plateau presents leaders with a choice. Most frameworks show only one path – the successful route to breakthrough. The model below shows both, because the left path is where most transformation efforts actually end.

From the performance plateau, two paths diverge immediately.



The left path is the more travelled one. Leaders work harder inside the existing frame. More KPIs, tighter controls, longer hours, escalating pressure. For a time this can produce movement – but without shifting the upstream variables, gains stall. The culture breeds fatigue. And quietly, almost invisibly, de-Commitment sets in. The original stand is replaced by a more survivable version of itself. The organisation returns to a new plateau – often more sophisticated in its language and governance than the previous one, but equally stuck.

This is not failure in the dramatic sense. It is the slow, socially comfortable trade of transformation for survivability. Most organisations cycle through this path repeatedly, each time with better frameworks and more refined language, each time ending in the same structural place.

The right path begins with a different response to the plateau. Instead of escalating effort below the line, leaders shift the Context – which, read through the Operating Primer and the equation, means shifting how the situation is occurring. From that shifted occurring, a new possibility can be declared. Not an incremental goal. A stand beyond the predictable, one that requires becoming different people to inhabit.

That declaration is then tested under pressure. This is where the anatomy gets honest: the testing is not optional. Every bold declaration attracts breakdowns – resource shortages, sceptics, crises, capability gaps, the inevitable moment when reality stops affirming the future. The model names this not as an exception but as a structural inevitability. If you are playing the game called Breakthrough, breakdowns are included in the price of entry.

At the breakdown, a second decision point arrives. Two options:

- De-commit – interpret the breakdown as evidence the future is impossible, retreat to the Predictable Identity, return to the plateau. This is the dashed left arrow in the model. It is the path most commonly taken, usually disguised as pragmatism, realism, or responsible sequencing.
- Or – and this is the element most models miss – use the breakdown as the trigger for a deeper Context shift. Return to the top of the right-hand sequence, but at a higher level. The CEO's question in that leadership session – "what if this is evidence we are still relating to the company as the old organisation?" – was precisely this move. The breakdown became the material for a second, deeper Context shift. Which produced a more honest declaration. Which stabilised a more expanded Being. Which generated Actions that had previously been psychologically inaccessible.

This loop – breakdown to Context re-shift to deeper declaration – is the anatomy of organisations that generate repeated breakthroughs rather than one-off moments. They have learned to use breakdown generatively rather than treating it as disconfirmation.

When Commitment holds through breakdown, and the Context re-shift occurs rather than de-Commitment, the new way of Being begins to embed culturally. Practices, rituals, and language begin reproducing the Generated Future automatically. The old future loses its organising power. The breakthrough is confirmed – not by a dramatic moment, but by the evidence that the organisation is now producing different Results without requiring the same level of conscious effort that the initial shift demanded.

That is what cultural embedding means. Not posters and values statements. The new occurring becoming the default occurring. The expanded Being becoming the baseline Being.

## You Cannot Design Your Way to Breakthrough

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's change mastery research maps the emotional arc of transformation: initial enthusiasm, reality hitting, the valley of doubt, renewal of Commitment, breakthrough and normalisation.

Read through the equation, the valley of doubt becomes more precise. It is not primarily an emotional phase. It is the moment the occurring that launched the declaration is contracting under pressure – and the Being must actively expand to hold what the occurring can no longer carry alone. Leaders who misread the valley as evidence the future is impossible will de-commit. Leaders who recognise it as the structural test of whether their Being has genuinely expanded will move through it.

The valley is not a sign of failure. It is the anatomy working exactly as it should.

The central implication of all of this is uncomfortable.

You cannot design your way to breakthrough. You cannot govern your way there, or execute your way there, or framework your way there. The breakthrough always passes through the same narrow gate – the moment a leader stops waiting for the organisation to become ready, and starts becoming the person the future they have declared requires.

That moment is rarely experienced as empowering. It is experienced as loss – of certainty, of control, of the Identity that has organised behaviour until now.

I asked myself a version of this question repeatedly across my thirteen years leading Z Energy. Not always consciously. Not always in those words. But the question that mattered most, underneath the strategy and the operational decisions and the governance frameworks, was always some version of this:

*Am I willing to lose the organisation I know – and the Identity I built within it – to create the organisation the future requires?*

The answer was not always yes. There were periods when I chose the survivable version. When I let the Predictable Future reassert itself wearing the language of pragmatism. When I worked harder below the line rather than confronting what needed to shift upstream.

I am not describing those as failures. I am describing them as the anatomy working on me – the same way it works on every leader I have coached. The plateau is always an invitation. The question is whether you are willing to accept it at the cost it actually requires.

That is the question I leave with you.

## Practical Application

- Ask the causality question. In your next coaching conversation or leadership review, shift from "what is the organisation's problem?" to "what future is your current leadership perfectly designed to produce?"
- Map the anatomy. For any current initiative, locate yourself honestly in the Breakthrough Anatomy model. Are you on the left path or the right? If you are at a breakdown, are you de-committing or re-shifting Context?
- Name the occurring of breakdown. When a setback arrives, ask before responding: "How is this occurring to us right now? Is that the only available occurring?"
- Ask the protection question. Individually or with your leadership team: "What are we protecting that makes this future difficult to fully commit to?"
- Expect grief. When you or your team experience discomfort, loss, or disorientation at a breakthrough moment – name it as evidence you are on the right path, not the wrong one.
- Watch for the survivable version. Look at your current transformation effort and ask honestly: "Has this become operational rather than ontological? Are we improving without changing?"

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- What future is your current leadership perfectly designed to produce?
- Where in your transformation effort has the survivable version replaced the declared future – and when did that substitution happen?
- At your current breakdown, are you de-committing or re-shifting Context – and how do you know the difference?
- What are you protecting that makes the future you have declared difficult to fully commit to?
- When you last experienced discomfort or grief in your leadership – did you interpret it as something going wrong, or as evidence of genuine breakthrough?
- Am I willing to lose the organisation I know – and the Identity I built within it – to create the organisation the future requires?

## Chapter 5

### The Language of Commitment

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

In the mid-years of Z Energy's life as a listed company, our employee engagement scores had stalled.

I could see the problem. There were pockets of genuine excellence – teams that were alive, committed, producing Results beyond what their circumstances seemed to warrant. And there were laggards – teams where the energy had gone flat, where compliance had quietly replaced Commitment, where people were showing up without really being present.

At one of our monthly executive meetings, I said something like: "I expect you to take Action to get engagement back on track." I meant it, I was frustrated, and I wanted movement.

What I got was activity without traction – reports, initiatives, working groups, plans. The excellent teams continued to excel. The laggard teams produced engagement programmes. Nothing material changed.

The failure was not theirs. It was mine. I had spoken to everyone when I needed to speak specifically to some. I had issued a directive when I needed to make a clean request.

I had described a direction when I needed to name an outcome, assign accountability, and set a standard of satisfaction clear enough that someone could either accept it or push back on it. My language had been muddy, and muddy language produces a specific outcome in the equation: it contracts the occurring for everyone who hears it, because no one is entirely sure what is being asked of them, who is genuinely accountable, or what success actually looks like.

In that contracted occurring, the available Actions default to the safest interpretation – which in most organisations means a process, a report, more meetings, or a programme. That is what I got.

Language Is Not Decoration

Commitment is not only embodied – it is spoken. And the relationship between language and Commitment runs deeper than most leaders recognise.

In the equation from Chapter 3 –  $\text{Action} = f(\text{Being} \times \text{Occurrence})$  – language operates on both variables simultaneously. What a leader says shapes how the situation occurs to the people who hear it. But it also – and this is the less visible mechanism – shapes how the situation occurs to the leader themselves.

Most leadership thinking about language focuses on the first effect: how do I communicate in a way that generates Commitment in others? That matters. But the second effect is equally powerful and far less examined. The language leaders habitually use constructs the occurring they inhabit. That occurring determines who they are Being – which in turn determines what Actions are available to them.

This means that language is not merely a communication tool. It is a phenomenological force. It shapes the reality leaders experience, not just the reality they describe.

Commitment language differs from descriptive or predictive language in a specific way. Descriptive language says: here is what is happening. Predictive language says: here is what will probably happen. Commitment language says: here is what we will make happen. It creates a future not yet visible and invites others to stand inside it.

That kind of speaking is generative. It does not describe reality. It participates in creating it.

## The Loop Nobody Sees

I worked with a CEO leading a large organisational transformation. They were commercially successful, highly driven, and genuinely committed to the future they had declared. Nobody questioned their intelligence or their effort. However, their language had developed a pattern that was doing something structurally significant – and because the CEO was successful and the intensity seemed to match the scale of the challenge, nobody named it.

Almost every difficult conversation included phrases like: “We are under siege.” “This is going to be a bloodbath.” “We are carrying the whole business.” “Everything is a fight.” “I am constantly pushing uphill.” “This place resists everything.” “Nobody really wants change.”

None of this language was consciously strategic. It was reflexive – the natural vocabulary of a leader who was working extremely hard in genuinely difficult conditions. Parts of the organisation even admired the intensity.

However, over time, the language was constructing something. The organisation increasingly occurred to the CEO as exhausting, oppositional, heavy, and politically hostile. Which shaped emotional state, attentional bias, behavioural choices, and ultimately available Actions. Because the organisation occurred as resistant and adversarial, the CEO became more forceful, more impatient, less curious, more centralised, and less tolerant of ambiguity.

That way of Being then caused others to withdraw, become cautious, avoid challenge, hedge their communication, and delay surfacing problems – which the CEO interpreted as more resistance, more politics, and more organisational inertia.

The original interpretation kept getting validated. Not because it was objectively true in full, but because the language was continuously reproducing the occurring that confirmed it.

In the equation: language shaped occurring. Occurring shaped Being. Being shaped Action. Action reproduced the same occurring. A self-reinforcing loop, running largely below the CEO's awareness.

The shift started in a coaching session with a simple interruption. The CEO said: "Every strategic initiative here turns into trench warfare."

The response was: "What happens to your leadership if the organisation occurs to you as a battlefield?" There was a long silence. Then:

***"I probably stop leading and start fighting."***

That was the breakthrough. Until that moment, the language had felt descriptive – merely an accurate account of a genuinely difficult reality. The CEO had not seen that their habitual language was continuously generating the occurring they were trapped inside.

The work that followed was not communication coaching or positivity training. It was phenomenological awareness. The CEO began noticing which metaphors collapsed possibility and which reinforced victimhood or combat. Which narratives narrowed the available Action space. Gradually – without the external circumstances changing significantly – the language shifted.

From fight, battle, resistance, dragging, pushing uphill toward building, creating, learning, designing, developing capability, bringing people with us.

The occurring changed. The Being changed. The behaviour changed. The organisational response changed. And the new occurring began reinforcing itself as reliably as the old one had.

That is the loop, and language is where it begins.

## When Language Shifts a Nation

On 15 March 2019, a terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch killed 51 people. It was the deadliest act of mass murder in New Zealand's history.

In the hours that followed, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spoke three words that did not describe New Zealand's response to the attack. They declared it. "They are us."

Those words were not demographic. They were not policy. They were a declaration of Identity – one that shifted the occurring of the event for an entire nation. Before those words, the attack could have occurred – as it has in other countries – as an attack on a minority community. An act of violence against people who were different, tragic but somehow separate from the mainstream national Identity. That occurring would have produced a specific set of available Actions: condemnation, security reviews, community support programmes.

After those words, the attack occurred as an attack on New Zealand itself. On everyone. The Muslim community was not other. They were us. That shifted occurring produced a different Action space entirely – legislative change at unprecedented speed, a national reckoning with racism and extremism, a cultural response that transcended party politics and demographic division.

Three words. A declaration, not a description. The occurring shifted. The available Actions changed.

That is Commitment language operating at national scale. And it illustrates precisely what Speech Act Theory, pioneered by philosophers John Austin and John Searle, describes: language does not merely transmit information. It performs Actions. Saying "they are us" was not a report on existing reality. It was the act of creating a new one.

## The Architecture of Clean Language

Speech Act Theory identifies four categories of language that matter in leadership:

- Assertions – statements of fact. They describe what is.
- Declarations – speech acts that change reality by being spoken. "We are committed to..." "They are us." "We will land a man on the moon." These do not describe the future – they create it.
- Promises – Commitments to future Action. They bind the speaker to a specific outcome.

- Requests – invitations that elicit Commitments from others. When made cleanly, they generate promises. When made muddily, they generate activity without accountability.

Breakthroughs emerge when leaders use declarations and promises with precision. The danger lies in muddy speech acts – promises never meant to be kept, vague declarations nobody believes, or requests that sound like demands but carry no clear standard of satisfaction.

The distinction between a muddy directive and a clean request is structural, not stylistic. A muddy directive sounds like: "I expect you to take Action to get engagement back on track." Everyone hears it. Nobody knows exactly what they have committed to. The standard of satisfaction is undefined. The accountability is diffuse. The available Actions default to the safest interpretation.

Another 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 is 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 by Monday at 5pm with three concrete recommendations to cut average response times by at least 20%?"

There is a named receiver. A specific Action. A timeframe. A clear standard of satisfaction. Sarah can respond with a genuine yes, no, or counteroffer. Once accepted, it becomes a Commitment – not an instruction floating in the air hoping to land on a cushion of compliance.

Clean Commitment language has three qualities regardless of whether it takes the form of a declaration, a promise, or a request:

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

## The Recursive Effect: Language Shapes the Speaker

Return to the equation for a moment. Most leaders understand that their language shapes how situations occur to others. Fewer recognise that it shapes how situations occur to themselves – and therefore who they are Being – which in turn determines what Actions are available to them.

This is the recursive dimension of Commitment language, and it has a direct practical implication.

Auditing your language is not primarily a communication exercise. It is a phenomenological one. The metaphors you habitually use, the stories you tell about your organisation, the vocabulary you reach for under pressure – these are not just expressions of how reality occurs to you. They are active participants in constructing that occurring.

A leader who consistently describes their organisation as resistant is not just communicating a view. They are continuously generating an occurring in which resistance is the dominant feature of reality – which narrows their Being toward force and impatience, which produces behaviours that generate actual resistance, which confirms the original occurring.

The intervention is not to think more positively. It is to notice which language is collapsing the occurring and which is expanding it – and to choose deliberately.

“Every strategic initiative here turns into trench warfare” produces a contracted occurring and a fighting Being. “Every strategic initiative here is a test of whether we can build the capability this organisation needs” produces an expanded occurring and a learning Being.

Same circumstances, different language, different occurring, different Being, and therefore different Actions. That is the equation working through language – and it is available as a diagnostic in any leadership conversation.

## Martin Luther King and 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 those words lay in their clarity, ownership, and future-shaping force. They created a Context in which countless people could see themselves and their own Commitment. The speech was not merely inspiration. It was a linguistic act of Commitment – one that shifted the occurring of the civil rights movement from grievance to possibility, and from possibility to demand.

*The language did not follow the Commitment.*

*The language was the Commitment.*

## Your Language Is Already Constructing Your Occurring

In leadership, language is leverage. Teams do not just follow what leaders do – they follow what leaders say and believe they mean.

When Commitment language is clean, it creates alignment, energy, and resilience. When it is muddy, teams default to compliance – and leaders default to the contracted occurring their own language has constructed.

Most organisations are drowning in words that have stopped generating anything. Strategies nobody believes. Values posters nobody feels. Goals padded with caveats that everyone knows will be renegotiated at the first sign of pressure. Clean Commitment language cuts through that noise – because it names futures worth working for, binds behaviour to those futures, and makes accountability visible rather than diffuse.

The recursive insight is the one most leaders miss:

*Cleaning up your language is not about sounding better.*

It is about constructing a different occurring for yourself – one from which a genuinely different Being, and genuinely different Actions, become available.

Start there. The communication will follow.

## Practical Application

- Audit your language. Record a meeting. Notice how often you hedge – maybe, try, probably, depending on – instead of declaring. Notice which metaphors you reach for under pressure. Are they generative or contracting?
- Apply the recursive test. Ask of your habitual language: what occurring does this construct for me? Not just for my team – for me. What Being does that occurring produce? What Actions does that Being make available?
- Convert directives to requests. In your next team meeting, turn one muddy directive into a clean request: named receiver, specific Action, clear timeframe, explicit standard of satisfaction.
- Use "I" and "we." Own Commitments instead of outsourcing them to "the organisation" or "the business."
- Retire the war or sporting metaphors. If your habitual vocabulary includes siege, battle, fight, resistance, or pushing uphill – notice what occurring that language is constructing for you, and what Being it is producing. Then choose deliberately.
- Practise public declaration. Speak goals aloud in the first person, with a clear standard of satisfaction. The act of public Commitment changes both the occurring for others and the occurring for you.

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- What occurring is your habitual language constructing for you – and is that the occurring from which breakthrough is possible?
- Where are you speaking muddily when clean language would change your team's trajectory immediately?
- What requests do you need to make cleanly but have not yet dared to?
- What Commitments have you spoken that your team quietly treats as optional – and what does your language have to do with that?
- If your people only had your words, not your intentions, what future would they believe you are committed to?
- What single shift in your habitual language would most immediately expand the occurring from which you are leading?



## Chapter 6

### Practices That Generate Commitment

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

There were moments during my years leading Z Energy when I got lost.

Not strategically. Not operationally. Lost in the way that leaders sometimes get lost under sustained pressure – when the noise of competing demands, the weight of difficult decisions, and the relentlessness of organisational life create a kind of fog. The compass still works, but you have stopped trusting it.

In those moments, I had a practice. I would read Our Why. Not to review the strategy. Not to check whether the Values were still accurate or the language still current. I had authored every word across four editions and thirteen years – the content was not news to me.

I read it because it was the biggest Commitment I had made to myself and to my colleagues. And when I got lost, returning to that Commitment was the most reliable way I knew to find myself again.

What shifted when I read it was not, in the first instance, how the situation occurred. What shifted was who I was Being. The fog did not lift because the circumstances changed or because I found a new way to interpret them. It lifted because I reconnected to the Commitments and Identity the document expressed – and from that stabilised Being, the situation began to occur differently.

I have reflected on that sequence many times since. It has taught me something about practices that I do not think is sufficiently understood in leadership development.

A practice only works at the level of Commitment if it is rooted in something genuinely yours. Not borrowed wisdom, not an external framework, and not a values poster someone else designed. A Commitment you actually made, in your own words, to something that genuinely matters to you.

Our Why worked as a touchstone because it was mine – authored, revised, defended, and lived.

*Returning to it was not reading about Commitment.*

*It was returning to Being Committed.*

That is the difference between a ritual and a practice. And it is where Chapter 6 begins.

## Why Practices Matter: The Equation Under Pressure

Commitment is not self-sustaining. This is the central insight of this chapter – and it is the one most leaders resist, because it implies that the bold declaration they made is not enough.

It is not.

Returning to the equation from Chapter 3:  $\text{Action} = f(\text{Being} \times \text{Occurrence})$ . Under normal conditions, a leader's Being can hold relatively stable and their occurring of situations can remain reasonably expansive. But sustained pressure – the operational demands, the political complexity, the relentless stream of decisions, the accumulation of disappointments – works on both variables simultaneously.

Being gradually contracts. The leader becomes more defensive, more approval-seeking, more controlling, more risk-averse. Not because they have abandoned their Commitment, but because the conditions that sustained it have eroded without anyone noticing.

Occurring gradually narrows. The organisation starts to occur as heavier, more resistant, more political. Options that were visible six months ago are no longer occurring as available. The future that once felt genuinely possible begins to feel aspirational in the pejorative sense – something spoken about but not really believed.

This is drift. And it happens not through dramatic failure but through the quiet erosion of the practices that kept Commitment alive.

Practices are the answer to drift – not because they are motivational, but because they are structural. They are the mechanisms by which leaders return, repeatedly and deliberately, to the Being and the occurring from which committed Action flows.

Think of it this way: practices do not generate Commitment from scratch. They sustain the conditions in which Commitment can persist. They are the maintenance system for the upstream variables. Without them, even the boldest declaration reverts to aspiration within weeks.

## Culture as the Aggregate of Practices

Before examining specific practices, a structural point that connects this chapter to the broader architecture of the book.

Michael Henderson – anthropologist, culture practitioner, and someone who worked closely with Z Energy across multiple phases of our development – taught me something that reframes what practices actually are at the organisational level.

From working with Michael, I learned that culture sits across both Identity and Context simultaneously. It is the collective self-concept that must be preserved for an organisation to remain coherent – Identity – and the shared interpretation of reality that makes certain Actions sensible and others unthinkable (why we do things around here) – Context.

That dual location has a direct implication for practices. Every practice an organisation maintains is reproducing either the Predictable Future or the Generated Future. Practices are not neutral. They are the mechanism by which culture is continuously recreated, or continuously defaulted.

I recall one of Michael's quotes: "Business people often complain that people are afraid or reluctant to change. Anthropology suggests that is just not true or we would still be living in caves. What people fear is loss, not change." The insight that what people fear is not change but loss is directly relevant here. When practices change, people experience the loss of the familiar – the loss of the rituals that gave their work meaning and their Identity coherence. That loss is not irrational. It is the appropriate human response to genuine disruption of the Context and Identity that sustained them.

This is why designing new practices is not primarily a behavioural challenge. It is an Identity and Context challenge. New practices only embed when the Being they are designed to sustain is genuinely present – and when the occurring they are meant to reinforce is actually how the situation occurs to the people inhabiting it.

A practice imposed from above, in service of a future that has not yet shifted the occurring for the people it is designed for, will be performed rather than inhabited. It becomes compliance with a ritual rather than Commitment through one.

That is the difference between a culture programme and genuine cultural change. And it is why Michael's work at Z – auditing what we had, mapping the gap to what we needed, assessing Caltex's culture before integration, training the leaders who would work most closely on the transition –

was upstream of everything that followed. You cannot design practices that sustain a Generated Future if you do not know clearly what the current culture is actually reproducing.

## The Three Levels: Practices for Individual, Team, and Organisation

Practices operate at three levels. Each is necessary and none is sufficient alone.

Individual practices sustain the leader's Being and prevent their occurring from contracting under pressure. They are personal, specific, and rooted in the leader's own Commitments rather than borrowed frameworks.

The Our Why was one of mine. Yours will be different. What matters is not the form but the function: a practice that returns you to your Being when pressure has eroded it. Some leaders use a daily written Commitment – one sentence, written at the start of the day, naming who they are committed to Being today. Some use a weekly reflection: where did I honour my Commitment this week, and where did I drift? Some use a physical practice – running, meditation, a walk without a phone – not for wellness but for the specific effect it has on their Being and occurring. The form is less important than the consistency and the genuine connection to something that matters.

One individual practice worth naming explicitly: the daily reminder ritual. Not a motivational affirmation. A return to the Commitments already made. Read the stand. Feel whether it is still alive. Notice if the language still accurately describes who you are Being – or whether the distance between the words and the lived reality has grown in ways you have stopped noticing.

That noticing is the beginning of recommitment.

Team practices sustain shared Being and maintain the collective occurring of the future the team has declared. They make Commitment visible, social, and accountable – which matters because Commitment that exists only in one person's head is fragile in ways that Commitment witnessed by others is not.

Red/Green check-ins – where each team member names whether they are fully present or carrying something that is pulling them elsewhere – normalise honesty and make the Being in the room visible before the content of any meeting is addressed. A team that knows its collective Being before it makes decisions makes better decisions.

Commitment reviews – replacing status updates with an honest examination of where the team honoured its Commitments and where it drifted – shift the focus from task-tracking to integrity. They also make drift nameable before it becomes entrenched. The question is not "*what did we do?*" but

*"what did we commit to, what did we actually do, and what does the gap tell us about what needs to shift?"*

Failure postcards – a practice where teams share, after projects or initiatives, one thing they would do differently and one thing they recommit to – embed learning without shame. They treat breakdown as information rather than verdict.

Organisational practices embed Commitment into culture – into the recurring patterns that reproduce either the Predictable Future or the Generated Future. They are the practices Michael was examining when he audited Z's culture: what is this organisation actually doing, repeatedly, that reveals what future it is committed to producing?

Storytelling rituals – the regular, deliberate sharing of stories about people who embodied the organisation's Commitments – keep the stand visible through narrative rather than policy. People do not orient around mission statements. They orient around stories of people they recognise as like themselves, making choices they can imagine making.

Symbolic acts – visible rituals that embody values in Action rather than language. The All Blacks sweeping their own locker rooms is not a cleaning protocol. It is a Commitment to humility and stewardship made physical and repeated until it becomes Identity.

Commitment anchors in onboarding – asking new people, from their first day, what stand they are taking by joining this organisation. Not what role they are filling. What Commitment they are making. That question shifts the psychological contract from transactional to ontological before the first week is complete.

## The All Blacks: Practices as Identity

The New Zealand All Blacks are the most successful rugby team in history – a sustained record of excellence that no team in any major professional sport has matched over a comparable period. The explanations usually focus on talent, coaching, strategy, and physical preparation.

Those matter but they do not explain the consistency. Many teams have talent and many have sophisticated coaching. What the All Blacks have, more deliberately than almost any organisation I am aware of, is a practice architecture that continuously reproduces a specific Being and a specific occurring.

The haka is not theatre. It is a recommitment ceremony – performed before every match, rooting each player in Identity, history, and declared intention. Before the game begins, the Being is named. The occurring is shaped. The Action space is set.

Sweeping the locker room is not a hygiene standard. It is the physical enactment of *"no one is bigger than the team"* – repeated after every match, regardless of result, until it becomes not a rule but an expression of who All Blacks are.

The storytelling through which senior players share the lineage of the jersey with newcomers is not nostalgia. It is Identity transmission – connecting each new generation to a collective Commitment that precedes them and will outlast them.

These practices are not sophisticated. They are simple, repeatable, and directly connected to the Being they are designed to sustain. They work because they are genuinely owned – not imposed from above as engagement initiatives, but inhabited from inside as expressions of Identity.

In the equation: the practices sustain the Being. The Being shapes the occurring of each match, not as a contest to be won, but as a stewardship of something larger. That occurring produces Actions, levels of courage, creativity, and collective resilience, that would not be available from a different Being.

The Results confirm the practices, and the practices confirm the Identity. That self-reinforcing loop, sustained across generations of players, is what sustained excellence actually looks like.

## Agile as Commitment in Practice

Agile ways of working deserve specific mention here – not as a methodology but as a practice architecture that, when genuinely inhabited rather than merely implemented, sustains Commitment at the team level.

The daily stand-up is a micro-recommitment ritual. Each person names what they committed to yesterday, what they achieved, and what they are committing to today. Performed with genuine presence, it makes Commitment visible, social, and daily.

The sprint review is a Commitment audit – did we do what we said we would do? If not, what does that tell us about what needs to shift? It treats the gap between Commitment and result as information rather than failure.

The retrospective is a team-level practice of honest reflection and recommitment – examining drift, naming it, and choosing freshly. It is the team equivalent of reading the Our Why: a return to the

stand, with enough honesty to notice where the distance between the words and the lived reality has grown.

The power of Agile lies not in the ceremonies but in what the ceremonies are designed to do – keep Commitment present, visible, and renewable in short cycles rather than assuming it will sustain itself across long ones.

When Agile is implemented as a compliance framework – the ceremonies performed without genuine presence, the stand-ups reduced to status reports, the retrospectives to process reviews – it becomes exactly what Commitment practices become when they are divorced from the Being they were designed to sustain: ritual without meaning, activity without Commitment.

The form is not the practice. The Being inhabited through the form is.

## Model: Atomic Habits and Identity

James Clear's Atomic Habits framework offers a useful lens for how practices sustain Commitment. His central claim, that Identity-based habits are more resilient than outcome-based ones, maps directly onto the equation.

A leader who frames a practice as *"I am trying to be more reflective"* is anchoring the habit in aspiration. A leader who frames it as *"I am the kind of leader who reflects before deciding"* is anchoring it in Identity – in Being. The second framing is more durable under pressure because it is upstream of behaviour in the same way Being is upstream of Action.

Clear's cue-craving-response-reward loop also maps onto the equation's intervention logic. The cue is the trigger that initiates the return to Being – for me, it was the moment of feeling lost. The craving is the pull toward the stabilised Being the practice produces. The response is the practice itself – reading Our Why. The reward is the occurring shifting as Being stabilises.

Designed consciously, this loop makes the return to Commitment automatic rather than effortful. The practice becomes the path of least resistance, which is precisely what the most durable Commitments require.

## Without Practices, Commitment Evaporates

Without practices, Commitments evaporate. Not through dramatic failure, but through drift – the slow, quiet erosion of Being and occurring that happens when the conditions sustaining Commitment are left unattended.

Michael's observation about loss is directly relevant here. When practices are absent or hollow, what leaders lose is not just the practice. They lose the Being the practice was sustaining. And the loss of Being – the gradual dimming of who a leader was when they made the Commitment – is experienced as a kind of Identity erosion. It is why leaders who drift often describe feeling disconnected from their work, as though something that once mattered has become merely a job.

The antidote is not motivation. It is structural. Design practices that return you to your Being. Design team rituals that make Commitment social and accountable. Design organisational practices that reproduce the Generated Future rather than the Predictable Future.

And when you get lost, and every leader gets lost, have something to return to. Something authored in your own words, rooted in your own Commitments, that can stabilise your Being before the fog lifts.

Our Why was mine. What is yours?

## Practical Application

- Identify your touchstone. What is the document, question, or practice that most reliably returns you to your Being when pressure erodes it? If you do not have one, that is the first practice to design.
- Audit existing practices. Which of your individual, team, and organisational rituals are reproducing the Generated Future – and which are reproducing the Predictable Future?
- Apply Michael Henderson's lens. Ask of each practice: what future is this continuously recreating? What Identity is it sustaining or eroding?
- Design for Being, not behaviour. Frame practices in Identity language: "*We are the kind of team that...*" rather than "*Our process requires that...*"
- Make Commitment social. A Commitment witnessed by others is more durable than one held privately. Design at least one team practice that makes individual Commitments visible and accountable.
- Start small and sustain. One practice, genuinely inhabited, is worth twenty imposed rituals. Choose one. Keep it. Notice what it does to your Being and occurring over time.

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- What practice most reliably returns you to your Being when pressure has eroded it – and are you using it?
- Which of your team's current rituals are sustaining Commitment and which are sustaining compliance?

- If someone audited your organisation's practices the way Michael Henderson audited Z's culture, what future would they conclude you are committed to producing?
- What are you losing when you abandon a practice under pressure – and is that loss worth the short-term relief?
- If your practices were the only evidence available, what would they reveal about who you are Being as a leader?

*What is your equivalent of my Our Why – and when did you last return to it?*

## Chapter 7

# The Shadows of Commitment

*When does Commitment cross the line from powerful to dangerous?*

Commitment is not inherently virtuous.

This is the statement most books about Commitment avoid making, because it undermines the motivational premise. If Commitment is the engine of breakthrough, how can it also be the source of destruction?

*The answer is that Commitment amplifies whatever it is attached to.*

It is a force multiplier, not a moral filter. Genuine Commitment to a generative future produces transformation. Genuine Commitment to a distorted future produces catastrophe. And the problem is that from the inside – from inside the conviction, the energy, the willingness to endure – generative Commitment and distorted Commitment can feel identical.

That is why leaders must examine not just whether they are committed, but to what, at what level, and whether the Commitment is still functioning as it was designed to.

The shadows of Commitment are not rare exceptions. They are structural tendencies – patterns that emerge predictably when Commitment is held without sufficient reflection, calibration, or honesty. Naming them is not a counsel of caution. It is the work of ensuring that the Commitment you are holding is the kind that generates the future you have declared, rather than the kind that prevents you from seeing it clearly.

### The Commitment Pendulum

Before examining the shadows individually, a diagnostic framework that makes them visible.

## The Commitment Pendulum

<b>COST &amp; RISK</b>	High	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>UNDERCOMMITMENT</b></p> <p>Leaders hedge when boldness is required. The cost of any hesitation is huge – missed markets, strategic paralysis.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>OVERCOMMITMENT</b></p> <p>Leaders take on too much at critical stakes. The results - burnout, overextension, missed deadlines, credibility collapse.</p>	
	Low	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>UNDERCOMMITMENT</b></p> <p>Leaders perpetuate the everyday drift. Standards slowly erode, trust weakens, culture slips into compliance.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>OVERCOMMITMENT</b></p> <p>Leaders' energy is scattered on non-essentials. The leader looks busy, feels active, but progress is shallow.</p>	
		Low	<b>COMMITMENT</b>	High

The Commitment Pendulum maps two variables against each other: the level of Commitment a leader is bringing, and the level of cost and risk the situation actually warrants. The resulting four quadrants each represent a distinct shadow – a way Commitment can be misaligned with the demands of the situation.

The insight the model makes structural is this: the problem is never simply too much or too little Commitment in the abstract. It is the mismatch between the level of Commitment and what the situation genuinely requires.

**High cost/risk + Low Commitment – Undercommitment at critical stakes.** Leaders hedge when boldness is required. The cost of hesitation is enormous – missed markets, strategic paralysis, capability deficits that compound over time. This is the quadrant where the future is lost most quietly and most expensively.

**High cost/risk + High Commitment – Overcommitment at critical stakes.** Leaders take on too much at genuinely high stakes. The Results are burnout, overextension, missed deliverables, and ultimately credibility collapse. This is where Commitment that was once generative becomes destructive through sheer accumulation.

**Low cost/risk + Low Commitment – Undercommitment on everyday matters.** Leaders perpetuate drift. Standards erode slowly. Trust weakens incrementally. Culture slips into compliance

without any single dramatic moment of failure. This is the shadow of Chapter 9 – the drift of decommitment operating at low stakes but high cumulative cost.

**Low cost/risk + High Commitment – Overcommitment on non-essentials.** Leaders scatter energy on activity that does not warrant it. The leader looks busy and feels purposeful, but progress is shallow. This is performative Commitment – the appearance of engagement without the substance of it.

A leader can simultaneously occupy multiple quadrants across different Commitments. The most common pattern I encounter is also the most costly: undercommitted on the things that matter most, overcommitted on things that do not. Strategic paralysis plus performative busyness. The organisation moves constantly and progresses slowly, while the future that genuinely matters recedes.

The Pendulum is not a verdict. It is a self-check – a diagnostic to be used regularly, honestly, and preferably with someone who will tell you the truth about what they observe.

## Shadow One: Undercommitment at Critical Stakes – When Responsibility Becomes a Shield

The most dangerous shadow is not the one that looks like failure. It is the one that looks like wisdom.

I worked with a CEO navigating the early stages of a major market transition. The organisation's legacy business model was still highly profitable. The economics underpinning the industry were changing structurally – but not yet dramatically. Weak signals, not clear evidence. Enough ambiguity to create tension. Not enough certainty to force Action.

Internally, some executives were pushing for significant reallocation of capital toward emerging capabilities – digital infrastructure, new customer propositions, adjacent technologies, operating model redesign. The Board acknowledged the strategic threat. The strategy decks described it clearly.

But phenomenologically, the situation still occurred as: *"too early to move aggressively."* *"Not yet proven."* *"Something we should monitor carefully."* *"Something we could damage the core business by overreacting to."*

From the inside, the cautious path did not occur as cowardice. It occurred as prudent stewardship, fiduciary discipline, protection of shareholder value, and responsible risk management.

The executive language confirmed the quadrant:

*"We should stay flexible." "Let's not get ahead of the market." "We need optionality." "The economics aren't proven yet." "We can revisit next year once there's more clarity."*

Each statement was individually intelligent. Collectively they produced a contracted Action space. The organisation stayed close enough to the future to describe it confidently, but far enough away to avoid fully reorganising around it.

The real cost was not immediate. It was structural and compounding. Capability development remained too incremental. Leadership talent self-selected toward operational optimisation rather than reinvention. Competitors gained experiential learning advantages. And most significantly, the organisation unconsciously taught itself that ambiguity should be managed rather than inhabited. Years later, when the market transition accelerated decisively, the organisation intellectually understood what needed to happen but lacked the cultural muscle, the leadership reflexes, and the ontological confidence to move with speed.

The earlier hedging had slowly normalised caution as Identity.

This is what makes the high-cost/low-Commitment quadrant so treacherous. Leaders are not usually choosing between courage and fear. They are choosing between two competing versions of responsibility. One protects the current system from immediate volatility. The other accepts present discomfort in service of a future that does not yet have enough evidence to feel safe.

***Before the future becomes obvious, boldness almost always feels irresponsible to someone.***

That is precisely when the Commitment is most required, and most likely to be hedged.

In the equation: the occurring of the situation as *"too risky, too early, not yet proven"* contracted the available Action space to a set of responses – stage-gate, monitor, preserve optionality – that were entirely coherent within that occurring, and entirely insufficient for the future the situation actually required. The Being was not collapsed. It was cautious. And caution, in the high-stakes quadrant, is a form of de-Commitment disguised as wisdom.

Shadow Two: Fanaticism – When Commitment Stops Learning

Fanaticism in leadership rarely first appears as irrational extremism.

It usually begins as courage, conviction, resilience, and an unusual willingness to endure discomfort for a future others cannot yet see. Which is why organisations often reward it for a long time before recognising the cost.

I worked with a founder-CEO who had built a high-growth company over more than a decade. The organisation had succeeded largely because of the founder's extraordinary Commitment and refusal to compromise during earlier periods of uncertainty and scepticism. The founder had repeatedly been right – about the market, about customer behaviour, about strategic direction, about the need to persist through difficult periods.

That history mattered enormously. Because over time, Commitment stopped functioning as future-based openness and slowly hardened into Identity-level certainty.

At the beginning of our work together, the CEO described themselves as *"the person willing to hold the line when everyone else loses their nerve."*

That sounded like leadership. And in many periods of the company's history, it had been.

However, a pattern had become visible. Every major challenge or dissenting perspective increasingly occurred to the CEO as lack of courage, lack of belief, organisational weakness, or failure of conviction. Breakdowns no longer functioned diagnostically. They functioned ideologically.

Missed milestones, talent attrition, repeated execution fatigue, customer resistance, and leadership team concern were all interpreted through one dominant frame: *"People are struggling because they are not sufficiently committed."*

When several senior executives raised concerns that the organisation's pace of expansion was exceeding operational capability, the CEO's response was: *"Every breakthrough looks irresponsible before it works."*

Not irrational on its face. In fact, partly true. But the statement had become totalising. It eliminated the possibility that the concern itself might contain useful information.

The occurring of challenge had collapsed into a single interpretation: resistance equals weakness, questioning equals fear, slowing down equals compromise.

The leader's Being remained extraordinarily committed. But the occurring had become closed. Which meant the Action space paradoxically narrowed despite the intensity of Commitment. The organisation showed predictable symptoms: increasing executive exhaustion, reduced dissent,

performative agreement in meetings, informal side conversations replacing honest challenge, high-potential leaders leaving quietly, and growing strategic fragility masked by intensity and momentum.

The CEO genuinely believed they were protecting the future. And in some sense, they were. But they had stopped distinguishing between Commitment to the future and attachment to their interpretation of the future.

That distinction became the core coaching work.

The shift began during a conversation about repeated breakdowns in a strategic initiative. The CEO was again framing the problem as insufficient organisational belief. The intervention was simple:

***"How would you know if your Commitment was no longer generating learning, but preventing it?"***

That question landed hard, because until then, the CEO had implicitly treated persistence, endurance, and consistency as inherently virtuous. The possibility that Commitment itself could become rigid had barely occurred.

The deeper insight that emerged over time: originally, the CEO's Commitment had expanded possibility because it challenged inherited constraints. But eventually the Commitment itself became part of the inherited constraint. The organisation no longer feared market uncertainty most. It feared violating the founder's interpretation of the future.

That is where Commitment calcifies into fanaticism. Not when conviction exists. But when occurring closes, feedback loses legitimacy, reinterpretation becomes disloyalty, and Identity fuses completely with the Commitment.

At that point, breakdowns stop being informative. They become threats to belief.

And the equation starts reinforcing contraction rather than transformation: fixed Being, fixed occurring, repetitive Action. The system loses adaptive capacity while still feeling intensely purposeful from the inside.

Shadow Three: Commitment as Image Management

This is a subtler shadow, and one that is harder to name because it is often indistinguishable from genuine Commitment in public.

Leaders sometimes use the language of Commitment to signal virtue while avoiding genuine cost. They declare boldly, speak compellingly, and perform Commitment for recognition, but retreat when the sacrifice is actually required. The Commitment is real as language. It is absent as Being.

This shadow is visible in the gap between declared Commitment and resource allocation. Between values statements and actual decisions under pressure. Between the leader who speaks about transformation in keynotes and the leader who consistently makes the survivable choice when the genuine future requires genuine cost.

The Edelman Trust Barometer consistently reports that a majority of employees do not trust their leaders to keep Commitments long-term. This is the slow poison of Commitment as image management – when the Commitment is performed rather than inhabited, people sense the gap before they can articulate it. They become cautious. They hedge their own Commitment in response. The culture of performative Commitment reproduces itself downward.

In the equation: the Being is organised around appearance rather than Commitment. Which means the occurring of every high-stakes situation is filtered through the question: *how does this look?* rather than *what does the future require?* That filtering produces Actions that protect credibility rather than generate the future – and the gap between the declared future and the lived occurring widens until it becomes visible to everyone except, sometimes, the leader.

## Shadow Four: Destructive Commitment

This is the darkest shadow, and the one that requires the most honesty to name.

The human capacity for Commitment is neutral. It amplifies whatever it is attached to. A Commitment to a future that causes harm is not diminished by the sincerity of those holding it. It is amplified by it.

The global financial crisis of 2008 is the most instructive recent example. Leading up to the crisis, financial institutions were genuinely committed – with extraordinary energy and discipline – to growth, profit, and short-term shareholder returns. Entire incentive systems reinforced it. Leaders and employees worked with real conviction toward that goal.

But the Commitment was misdirected. It was not tethered to sustainability, social responsibility, or the long-term health of the systems the institutions depended on. Warning signs were everywhere. 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 its own structural fragility.

The result was catastrophic. Not because the Commitment was weak, but because it was strong, and attached to the wrong future.

For leaders, the implication is sobering. Do not confuse energy and focus with virtue. The question is not only “are we Committed?” It is: “to what – and at what cost to whom?”

## Metaphor: The 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.

However, every garden has weeds. Left unchecked, they choke what was once thriving. Over-watering drowns roots. Neglect hardens soil. A gardener knows that tending is not just planting but pruning – the humility to recognise what no longer serves, to cut back when needed, and to protect what remains fragile.

Leaders must treat their Commitments like gardens – watchful, discerning, and open to the possibility that what once generated life has begun, without their noticing, to generate its shadow instead.

## Commitment Without Reflection Amplifies the Wrong Future

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

Leaders cannot hide behind passion or persistence. They must ask the harder questions: is this Commitment aligned with the future I have declared, or with the Identity I am protecting? Is it generating learning or preventing it? Is it expanding the Action space or contracting it? Is it opening futures or closing them?

Recognising shadows does not weaken Commitment. It strengthens it, by ensuring that what you are holding is genuinely what you think it is.

The Pendulum is always swinging. The question is whether you notice, and whether you recalibrate before it carries you to an extreme you did not choose.

## Practical Application

- Use the Pendulum as a regular self-check. Map your five most significant current Commitments across the four quadrants. Where are you undercommitted at high stakes? Where are you overcommitted on non-essentials?
- Name the competing responsibility. When you find yourself hedging at high stakes, name explicitly which version of responsibility you are choosing – and what it costs.
- Audit the gap. Between your declared Commitments and your resource allocation. Between your values language and your decisions under pressure. Between the future you speak about and the future your behaviour is producing.
- Ask the fanaticism question. For your longest-held Commitments: how would I know if this Commitment was no longer generating learning but preventing it? The difficulty of answering honestly is itself diagnostic.
- Distinguish Commitment from attachment. Are you committed to the future – or attached to your interpretation of it? The difference shows up in how you respond to dissent and breakdown.
- Invite honest challenge. Ask someone who will tell you the truth: where do they observe your Commitments casting shadows?

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- Where in the Pendulum are your most important Commitments sitting right now – and is that the right calibration?
- Where are you choosing between two versions of responsibility – and which version is genuinely in service of the future you have declared?
- How would you know if your most strongly held Commitment had stopped generating learning and started preventing it?
- What shadows are visible to your people that you have not yet acknowledged?
- Where are you performing Commitment rather than inhabiting it – and who already knows?
- If your Commitments were audited against your actual decisions under pressure, what would the audit reveal?



## Chapter 8

# Commitment and Leadership Identity

*What if your leadership Commitments are only as strong as the Identity you live from?*

I like to be liked.

I am not offering that as a confession requiring absolution. It is a statement of Identity – one I have examined honestly enough to understand both what it gives and what it costs.

As a leader, wanting to be liked is not inherently a problem. It generates warmth, relatability, and genuine care for the people around you. At Z Energy, I believe it contributed to a culture where people felt seen rather than managed. The intern who emailed me to say he belonged because he could be himself – that was partly a product of a leader who genuinely cared whether people felt good about being there.

But Identity is always dual-edged. The same self-concept that produces your strengths produces your limitations, often through the same mechanism.

My desire to be liked made me slower than I should have been to intervene when someone was underperforming. It made me accept just good enough when Extraordinary required more. And it meant I never led a negotiation at Z Energy across thirteen years – not the \$800 million Caltex acquisition, not the \$2 billion sale to Ampol, not the professional fees on any of those transactions. I had no hesitation telling the Board this before each transaction: I am appointing someone else to lead because my desire to be liked will cost us at the table.

That is Identity work done honestly. Not eliminating the self-concept, and not performing a different one. Examining it clearly enough to know where it serves the future and where it prevents it – and designing around the gap with enough self-awareness to be explicit about it.

Most leaders never get that far. Not because they lack Commitment in the abstract, but because Identity is the most resistant variable in the equation – the one that most reliably determines whether declared Commitments can be sustained under pressure.

That is what this chapter is about.

## Why Identity Is the Most Resistant Upstream Variable

Returning to the Operating Primer: Context is visible when pointed to. Commitments are declarable. Identity is the variable most leaders never directly confront – because it operates beneath the surface, and because confronting it feels existentially threatening, and because the self-concept that is limiting the future is often the same self-concept that produced every success to date.

A precise point of architecture before we go further. The Operating Primer places Commitment at the top of the upstream sequence – above Identity, and above Context. Commitment establishes the future leaders stand for, or the one they unconsciously accept – the Predictable Future. Identity then shapes who leaders understand themselves to be in pursuit of that future. Context follows from Identity, determining how circumstances occur and what possibilities are visible.

Identity is not the highest upstream variable – Commitment is. What makes Identity the focus of this chapter is not that it outranks Commitment, but that it is the most resistant to change, the least visible from the inside, and the most consequential for whether declared Commitments can actually be sustained. When Commitment is declared but Identity does not expand to hold it, the Commitment quietly collapses – not through betrayal but through structural impossibility. Identity is the soil. Commitment is what must grow in it. This chapter is about ensuring the soil is deep enough for the future you have declared.

That last point deserves to sit for a moment. The Identity holding you back is not a weakness you developed. It is a strength you cultivated – refined across years of experience, validated by genuine Results, reinforced by the people and organisations that found you effective. Which means giving it up, even partially, feels like losing something real. Not something imaginary, nor a limitation to be discarded, but something that worked.

Michael Henderson – anthropologist, culture practitioner, and someone who worked closely with Z Energy across multiple phases of our development – makes an observation that reframes this precisely. Business people often assume that people fear change. Michael's research suggests otherwise. What people fear is loss. Not change itself, but the specific, concrete loss of something that gave their life and work meaning, coherence, and a sense of who they are.

That is not resistance. That is the appropriate human response to genuine disruption of the self-concept that has organised behaviour and provided coherence. Understanding it as loss rather than resistance changes the intervention entirely. You do not overcome loss through persuasion or

motivation. You work with it – by naming what is being lost, acknowledging its genuine value, and creating the conditions in which a new Identity can form before the old one has fully dissolved.

Leaders who skip that step – who declare a new Identity without doing the honest work of naming what the new Identity requires relinquishing – find that the old Identity reasserts itself under pressure. Not through conscious choice. Through the automatic self-protective mechanisms that Identity is specifically designed to deploy.

## The Eight Ways Hidden Commitments Become Visible

Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey's Immunity to Change theory explains the mechanism precisely. Leaders struggle not from lack of willpower but from hidden Identity Commitments that conflict with declared goals. A leader who declares a Commitment to empowerment may be unconsciously committed to being seen as the most competent person in the room. A leader who declares a Commitment to bold transformation may be unconsciously committed to preserving approval. The hidden Commitment does not compete with the declared one through open conflict. It simply makes the declared Commitment structurally impossible to sustain under pressure.

In my coaching practice, I rarely ask directly: "What are your hidden Commitments?" I infer them structurally – through eight distinct mechanisms that surface what leaders cannot or will not name directly.

**Recurring behaviour rather than declared intention.** I treat repeated behaviour as evidence of Commitment. Not aspirations, not values statements, and not stated priorities. Behaviour – specifically tolerated patterns, repeated avoidance, emotional reflexes, decision latency, and where attention repeatedly returns under pressure. The pattern reveals the operative Commitment more reliably than any self-description. Show me what you repeatedly do, and I will show you what you are actually committed to.

**Where Identity is being protected.** The deepest mechanism. I surface hidden Commitments by identifying what self-concept cannot currently be threatened. Commitment to being seen as competent, rational, collaborative, indispensable, strategic, liked, morally good, in control, or successful. Leaders often believe they are committed to transformation. Underneath, they may be more committed to avoiding embarrassment, preserving status, or not disappointing others. The questions that surface this: What are you protecting? What Identity would this threaten? What would you have to stop Being?

**Language listened to phenomenologically.** As established in Chapter 5, language is evidence of occurring and Being. I listen for hedging, certainty, collapse, justification, emotional contraction,

performative optimism, victimhood, and resignation. Especially: try, hopefully, if, once, they, I cannot versus I will, I choose, you can count on me, I am responsible. The linguistic pattern reveals the hidden Commitment with remarkable precision.

**How breakdowns are interpreted rather than examined.** Hidden Commitments become visible through how leaders explain failure, resistance, or tension. Repeated attribution to others, recurring narratives of unfairness, certainty about others' motives, or immediate operationalisation of difficulty – these reveal Commitments to being right, avoiding vulnerability, preserving authority, or protecting a worldview.

**Where energy flows under pressure.** Where leaders instinctively go when tension rises – into detail, governance, control, reassurance, performance, humour, intellectualisation, busyness, or withdrawal – is rarely random. These are manifestations of deeper Commitments: Commitment to certainty, Commitment to being needed, Commitment to avoiding emotional exposure, or Commitment to preserving relational harmony.

**The gap between declared future and designed environment.** Following the Operating Primer: the environment reveals the true Commitment. A company declaring innovation while rewarding predictability. A team declaring accountability while avoiding direct feedback. A CEO declaring empowerment while centralising decisions. The hidden Commitment is embedded in the system design itself. Most organisations are attempting to produce a future their daily operating environment is systematically designed to prevent.

**Competing Commitments.** One of the most effective coaching moves is helping leaders see they are not uncommitted – they are simultaneously committed to two incompatible things. Committed to transformation and committed to preserving approval. Committed to accountability and committed to avoiding conflict. Committed to innovation and committed to not looking foolish. This reframes the struggle away from weakness toward structural contradiction – which creates far more leverage.

**What the leader cannot imagine.** Sometimes hidden Commitments become visible not through what leaders say but through what never occurs as possible. "That conversation could never happen here." "The Board would never support that." "People will not change." "I cannot say that." Those statements reveal Commitments to inherited Context, inherited power structures, inherited Identity, or inherited narratives. The boundary of imaginable Action is precisely where the hidden Commitment lives.

This method is structural, phenomenological, and linguistic. It infers Commitment through recurring patterns, Identity protection, occurring, language, tolerated reality, breakdown interpretation,

environmental design, and Action under pressure. Which is why it often feels confronting without being accusatory. The point is never: "You are wrong." It is:

***"Your current Commitments are already visible in the future  
your behaviour keeps producing."***

### The Identity That Produced the Success

Here is the pattern I encounter most consistently, and the one that the standard leadership development narrative handles least well.

***The Identity that is limiting the future is almost always the  
Identity that produced the past success.***

The founder whose conviction and refusal to compromise built the company – and whose certainty has now calcified into the fanaticism described in Chapter 8. The operational leader whose attention to detail and personal accountability drove extraordinary execution – and whose control orientation is now preventing the empowerment the next phase requires. The relationship-builder whose warmth and care created genuine belonging – and whose desire to be liked is now slowing the performance conversations the culture urgently needs.

These are not weaknesses to be corrected. They are Identities to be examined. The question is not: "How do I stop Being this?" It is: "Which parts of this serve the future I have declared, and which parts prevent it?"

That examination is what Identity work actually is. Not Identity replacement, nor the performance of a new self-concept. The honest, specific examination of what the current Identity makes possible and what it makes impossible – and the deliberate choice, repeated under pressure, to expand the Identity rather than defend it.

## Case Study: Indra Nooyi and the Expansion of Identity

Indra Nooyi became CEO of PepsiCo in 2006, having built her Identity as one of the most rigorous financial minds in the consumer goods industry. Her rise had been built on strategic precision, financial discipline, and an analytical capability that commanded genuine respect. That Identity was not incidental to her success. It was the foundation of it.

However, the future she saw for PepsiCo required something her existing Identity could not fully accommodate. She believed the company needed to shift from performance-focused leadership to purpose-driven leadership – a strategy she called Performance with Purpose – integrating health, environmental sustainability, and human sustainability into the company's core business model rather than treating them as adjacent concerns.

That vision required Nooyi to expand her Identity as a leader – from financial strategist to purpose steward. Not by abandoning what had made her effective, but by adding a dimension that her previous Identity had not prioritised and that the organisation's dominant culture did not naturally reward.

The resistance she encountered was not primarily strategic. It was Identity-level. Investors, analysts, and parts of the organisation were committed to a version of PepsiCo leadership that prioritised quarterly financial performance above all else. The implicit message: a CEO who speaks about purpose is a CEO who has lost focus on returns.

Nooyi held the Identity expansion. Not without cost – the debate about whether Performance with Purpose diluted financial performance followed her throughout her tenure. However, she consistently demonstrated that the expanded Identity was not in conflict with financial discipline. It was the upstream condition for sustainable performance in a world where consumers, employees, and regulators were increasingly demanding it.

What makes Nooyi's case instructive for this chapter is not the outcome – though PepsiCo's performance across her twelve-year tenure was strong. It is the mechanism. She did not abandon the Identity that had made her effective. She examined it honestly enough to see where it was insufficient for the future she had declared – and expanded it deliberately, under sustained pressure, without retreating to the more comfortable version of herself that the organisation's existing culture would have rewarded.

That is Identity expansion done at scale. It illustrates what the equation predicts: when Being expands, the occurring of the situation shifts, and new Actions become available that the previous Identity could not have generated.

## Kurosawa: Identity Held Beyond the Evidence

A shorter illustration from a completely different domain – because Identity work is not confined to organisations.

By the mid-1970s, Akira Kurosawa – director of *Seven Samurai* and *Rashomon* – was in crisis. Films failing commercially, studios abandoning him, and in 1971 an attempt on his own life. Every external signal pointed toward the same conclusion: his Identity as a filmmaker was no longer viable.

He recommitted to the Identity itself. I am a filmmaker. Not: I was a filmmaker. Not: I will try to make films again. A present-tense declaration of Being, held beyond the point where holding it seemed reasonable.

Support came from unexpected directions – younger directors who admired his work secured funding. *Kagemusha* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1980. *Ran* followed five years later.

The breakthrough was not primarily artistic. It was ontological. Kurosawa refused to allow external circumstances to determine his Identity. In the equation: his Being stabilised the occurring of his situation – from "a filmmaker whose time has passed" to "a filmmaker between films" – which kept the Action space open long enough for conditions to shift.

For leaders, the lesson is not that persistence always produces outcomes. It is that Identity held clearly and honestly is more durable than the evidence would sometimes suggest it has the right to be.

## Case Study: Angela Merkel – Identity as Steady Stewardship

Angela Merkel served as Chancellor of Germany from 2005 to 2021 – sixteen years during which she navigated the Eurozone debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. She did not fit the archetypal European power broker – no commanding rhetoric, no theatrical presence, no cultivated mystique.

What she had was a deeply examined, consistently inhabited Identity as a scientist-turned-statesman. Patience, evidence, pragmatism, and calm reasoning were not communication strategies. They were expressions of who she understood herself to be.

That Identity anchored her Commitments in ways that repeatedly outlasted the pressure to abandon them. During the refugee crisis, her declaration "Wir schaffen das" – "We can do this" – was not a political calculation. It was consistent with her Identity as a pragmatic humanitarian: balancing compassion with responsibility, making the decision the evidence and values pointed toward, regardless of the political cost.

Her scientific Identity also governed her COVID-19 response – explaining policy through data, graphs, and probabilities, treating citizens as capable of understanding complexity rather than needing reassurance.

Merkel's case illustrates that leadership Identity need not rely on charisma or theatre. A deeply examined, consistently inhabited Identity – one the leader has chosen deliberately rather than defaulted into – creates a form of credibility that survives disruption precisely because it does not depend on favourable conditions.

She was the same leader in crisis as she was in stability. That consistency was not accidental. It was the product of an Identity examined, owned, and inhabited across sixteen years of sustained pressure.

## Commitments Fail When Identity Will Not Expand to Hold Them

Commitments fail when they clash with Identity. Leaders cannot sustain Commitments that contradict who they believe themselves to be – not because they lack Commitment in the abstract, but because Identity is the most resistant variable in the equation – the one that most reliably determines whether declared Commitments can be sustained under pressure.

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 not through betrayal but through the structural impossibility of sustaining what Identity is quietly preventing.

In volatile environments, only Identity-aligned Commitments endure. Leaders who do the work of Identity – naming it, examining it honestly, expanding it where the future requires, holding what serves and releasing what prevents – unlock performance that technical fixes, capability development, and strategic frameworks alone cannot deliver.

Importantly: the work is never finished. Identity is not a problem to be solved. It is a relationship to be maintained – with honesty, with the willingness to be surprised by what you find, and with the discipline to keep asking the question even when the answer is uncomfortable.

***Who am I committed to Being – and is that Identity large enough to hold the future I have declared?***

## Practical Application

- Name your Identity explicitly. Complete the sentence: I am the kind of leader who... Write three versions. Circle the one you actually lived last week. Notice the gap.
- Apply the eight mechanisms to yourself. Where are your recurring behaviours revealing Commitments you have not declared? Where is your energy flowing under pressure? What can you not currently imagine – and what does that reveal?
- Ask the protection question. What Identity am I protecting that makes this Commitment difficult to sustain? The difficulty of answering honestly is itself diagnostic.
- Distinguish the Identity from its expression. Which parts of your current Identity serve the future you have declared? Which parts prevent it? The goal is not Identity replacement but Identity examination.
- Invite external perspective. Ask someone who will tell you the truth: What Identity do you observe me leading from – and where does it appear to be limiting what is possible?
- Use Michael Henderson's question. When you encounter resistance to Identity change – in yourself or others – ask: What is being lost here, specifically? Name it. Acknowledge its genuine value. Then ask whether preserving it is worth the future it is preventing.

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- What is the Identity that produced your past success – and which parts of it are now preventing the future you have declared?
- What would you have to stop Being in order for the Commitment you most care about to become possible?
- Where are your hidden Commitments visible in the future your behaviour keeps producing?
- Which of the eight mechanisms most clearly reveals a Commitment you have not been willing to name directly?
- If you expanded your leadership Identity – if you claimed a larger version of who you are – what Commitments would immediately become possible that currently feel out of reach?
- What story will your people tell about your Identity when you are gone – and is that the story you want told?

## Chapter 9

### The Drift of Decommitment

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

There was a period during my time at Z Energy when I let performance drift in my own team.

Not dramatically, and not in ways that would have shown up immediately in any dashboard or review. Individual performances were slightly off – not catastrophically, just noticeably, at least to me. The performance standards I would previously have expected was not quite being met. The conversations I would previously have initiated were not quite being had.

And I had reasons. Good ones. *They are still developing. It is good for them to struggle with this. I do not want to undermine their confidence. The timing is not right. There is a lot going on. They will get there.*

Every one of those statements contained genuine truth. Developing leaders do need to struggle productively. Timing does matter in performance conversations. Confidence is worth protecting.

However, I was also, beneath the reasonable language, avoiding discomfort. The conversations I was deferring were not just developmentally appropriate patience. They were also easier not to have. The standard I was tolerating was not just compassionate leadership. It was also the path of least resistance.

The drift was not in the team. It was in me.

What makes that period instructive, and honest, is that I knew. There was an internal signal, quiet but persistent: *"I am rationalising this. I would not previously have accepted this standard."* I heard it. I acknowledged it briefly. Then I constructed another reasonable explanation and moved on.

That is how drift works. Not through ignorance. Through intelligent, socially rewarded, emotionally relieving justification.

The moment the justification becomes emotionally coherent – the moment "I am rationalising" stops occurring as a warning and starts occurring as a reasonable position – the new lower standard begins to

feel normal. The drift has completed its first cycle. The recalibration is invisible. The future has quietly contracted.

## What Drift Actually Is

Decommitment rarely announces itself.

It does not arrive as a dramatic moment of surrender – a single decision to abandon the future. It arrives through incremental accommodation. Through the slow, invisible recalibration of what is acceptable, what is urgent, and what the Commitment actually requires.

In the equation from Chapter 3: drift is what happens when neither variable collapses dramatically but both contract gradually. Being becomes slightly more defensive, slightly more approval-seeking, slightly more comfort-oriented. Occurring becomes slightly more constrained – the future occurring as something to manage around rather than something to generate. Neither shift is decisive alone. Together, accumulated across weeks and months, they produce a leader who is technically present but functionally absent from the Commitment they declared.

Returning to the Operating Primer: drift is the Predictable Future reasserting itself, one small accommodation at a time. Not through a hostile takeover. Through quiet, socially acceptable, contextually understandable choices that each seem reasonable and together produce a future the leader would not have chosen consciously.

This is why drift is more dangerous than dramatic failure. Dramatic failure is visible. It creates urgency and it demands response. Drift is invisible – camouflaged by intelligent justification, socially rewarded by the relief it brings to everyone who was uncomfortable with the standard, and operationally efficient because difficult conversations require energy that could be directed elsewhere.

By the time drift becomes visible in the metrics – declining Results, disengagement, talent attrition, missed milestones – it has been active in the phenomenological layer for months. In tone, mood, tolerated ambiguity, weakened language, delayed conversations, and subtle reductions in personal responsibility.

The organisation starts saying: *"Hopefully."* *"We'll see."* *"It is complicated."* *"Now's probably not the time."* *"We need to be realistic."* *"That is just how things are here."*

That language appears long before visible performance decline. Which is why the earliest warning signal of drift is not strategic. It is existential.

The future stops occurring as something to generate and starts occurring as something to manage around.

Loretta Malandro, in *Fearless Leadership*, identifies the specific behavioural patterns through which decommitment operates. Leaders do not usually drift through a single dramatic act of abandonment. They drift through four recurring behaviours that are each individually defensible and collectively corrosive.

- 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 these behaviours are not merely tactical failures. They are breakdowns of integrity – gaps between what has been declared and what is being lived. The remedy is not more discipline but more honesty: naming what is true, and choosing freshly from that truth rather than from the story that makes the drift feel reasonable.

## The Earliest Warning Signal

From my practice, the single earliest warning signal of drift that leaders consistently miss is this:

The quiet normalisation of emotional and behavioural compromise, in the name of being reasonable.

Not collapse, not failure, and not conflict. Compromise that slowly stops occurring as compromise.

Tolerating a standard they would once have challenged. Delaying a conversation they know matters. Accepting weaker Commitment than they actually require. Softening language to avoid discomfort. Allowing priorities to fragment. Choosing harmony over honesty. Quietly reducing ambition to fit current capability.

At the beginning, the leader notices it. There is usually an internal signal: *"Something feels off."* *"This is not quite us."* *"I am rationalising this."*

However, because the compromise is understandable, socially rewarded, operationally efficient, politically safer, or emotionally relieving – it gets justified rather than interrupted.

That is the critical moment.

*Drift begins not when standards collapse, but when the leader starts constructing intelligent explanations for why the collapse is acceptable.*

Highly intelligent leaders are, in this sense, at particular risk. They can generate extraordinarily sophisticated justifications for hesitation, dilution, avoidance, and contraction. The justification is often partially true, which makes it harder to challenge and easier to inhabit. The standard of care I applied to my own team's performance gaps was not false. It was incomplete, and the incompleteness was conveniently organised around my own discomfort rather than their genuine developmental need.

The diagnostic question that interrupts this mechanism – the one I return to most consistently in my coaching practice – is:

*What am I tolerating that I would not have accepted a year ago?*

That question works because drift is fundamentally a process of incremental accommodation. The comparison to a prior self – the leader you were twelve months ago, before the accommodations accumulated – makes the recalibration visible. Not as failure, but as information, and as the earliest available signal that the future is contracting before the metrics confirm it.

Ask it regularly. Ask it honestly. And pay particular attention to the quality of the answer. A leader who generates a fluent, well-structured response in under thirty seconds is almost certainly still in the drift. Genuine reflection on that question tends to produce a pause – and then something more uncomfortable than a list.

## The Anatomy of Drift

Drift follows a consistent pattern. Naming the stages makes it interruptible at each one.

**Stage 1: The initial accommodation.** A single decision – to delay a conversation, soften a standard, reduce an ambition – that is understandable given the circumstances. The leader notices a faint internal signal. The accommodation is justified and the signal is acknowledged but not acted on.

**Stage 2: The rationalisation.** The justification for the accommodation is refined and extended. It becomes emotionally coherent. The leader begins to believe the accommodation was not drift but wisdom – contextual sensitivity, strategic patience, compassionate leadership.

**Stage 3: The recalibration.** The new lower standard begins to feel normal. Language softens and urgency reduces. The conversations that would have happened six months ago are no longer even on the agenda. The leader has stopped noticing the gap because the gap has become the baseline.

**Stage 4: The cultural embedding.** The team and organisation adopt the new standard. People self-select toward it. Those who hold the higher standard become outliers rather than exemplars. The organisation has reproduced the drift as culture – and the Predictable Future is firmly back in control.

**Stage 5: The rationalised plateau.** The organisation is performing adequately. Results are acceptable. There is no single moment of failure to point to. The leader has stopped experiencing drift as drift. The accommodation has become the Commitment.

That final stage is the most dangerous because it removes the internal signal entirely. The leader who was once faintly uncomfortable has become fully comfortable. The future that was once constraining now feels like the right-sized ambition.

This is the endpoint of drift: not abandonment of Commitment but the complete normalisation of its diminished version.

## Kodak: Thirty-Seven Years of Intelligent Justification

Kodak's decline is the most documented organisational drift story in modern business history, and it remains instructive precisely because it was not a story of ignorance.

Kodak engineers invented the digital camera in 1975. The organisation understood, earlier than most, that digital technology would eventually disrupt film photography. The strategic threat was known, the capability existed, and the resources were available.

What drifted was not knowledge. It was Commitment.

Kodak's Identity – and its extraordinary profitability – was built on chemical film. The organisation was so committed to protecting that Identity and those margins that the digital future consistently

occurred as a threat to be managed rather than a possibility to be generated. Each decision to delay, to stage-gate, to invest incrementally rather than boldly, was individually defensible. Collectively, they produced a drift so complete that by the time the market transition was undeniable, the organisation lacked the cultural muscle, the leadership reflexes, and the ontological confidence to respond with speed.

By 2012, Kodak had filed for bankruptcy.

The drift had not happened overnight. It had happened through thirty-seven years of intelligent, well-justified, contextually understandable accommodations – each one reasonable, all of them together catastrophic.

In the equation: Kodak's occurring of the digital future contracted gradually from possibility to threat to inevitability-to-be-managed. Their Being as an organisation – their Identity as a chemical film company – never expanded to accommodate a genuinely different future. The Action space narrowed correspondingly, one accommodation at a time, until the Actions required for survival were no longer available.

The lesson is not that Kodak's leaders were unintelligent or uncommitted. They were neither. The lesson is that drift does not require the absence of Commitment. It requires only the quiet, repeated preference for the survivable version over the generative one.

## Serena Williams: The Counterpoint

Serena Williams' career offers the deliberate counterpoint to Kodak – not an organisation that drifted from its Commitment, but an individual who recommitted repeatedly across circumstances that would have justified stopping.

Injuries that ended others' careers. An autoimmune illness. Life-threatening complications after childbirth. Racism and sexism that the sport's institutions were slow to address. At each point, the available narrative was that the circumstances had changed enough to justify a smaller Commitment. At each point, she recommitted to the original stand – not cautiously, not conditionally, but completely.

Her 23 Grand Slam singles titles are the downstream expression of that repeated upstream choice.

For leaders facing drift, her story is not primarily about talent or resilience. It is about the decision, made repeatedly and unglamorously, to return to the Commitment rather than renegotiate it. To

interrupt the drift before the rationalisation became coherent. To ask – each time the accommodation presented itself as reasonable – whether reasonable was actually what the future required.

## What Genuine Recommitment Actually Feels Like

The standard leadership response to drift is renewed effort – a strategy refresh, a team offsite, a culture initiative, a recommitment ceremony. These are not without value, but they reliably produce another cycle of drift if they do not address what actually caused the first one.

Because there are two kinds of recommitment, and they feel completely different from the inside.

The performance of recommitment often feels energising, urgent, articulate, emotionally convincing, and socially persuasive. There may be strong declarations, visible confidence, renewed plans, symbolic gestures, ambitious targets, or emotionally charged leadership language. The room responds and momentum feels restored.

However structurally, the underlying Identity protections remain intact. The leader is still unconsciously committed to avoiding discomfort, preserving approval, protecting competence, maintaining control, or escaping uncertainty. The recommitment functions primarily as emotional relief from the discomfort of recognising drift. It restores self-image without fundamentally reorganising behaviour.

That is why it produces another cycle of drift. Because the leader has recommitted to the aspiration, not to the cost.

Genuine recommitment feels different. It usually does not feel inspiring at first.

It feels exposing. Sometimes grieving. Sometimes sobering. Often strangely quiet.

***Genuine recommitment is not primarily emotional intensity, renewed motivation, or performative certainty. It is the moment a leader stops negotiating with the implications of what they already know.***

It usually contains some version of: "I can now see how I have been participating in producing the future I say I do not want."

That recognition changes something existentially. Especially because the leader often realises the drift was not caused primarily by others, the compromise was gradual, and many of the rationalisations were intelligent and sincere. There is often humility in genuine recommitment. Not performative humility. Ontological humility. The leader stops relating to themselves as the observer of the drift and recognises themselves as one of its producers.

And importantly: genuine recommitment almost always involves increased specificity. The performative version speaks in values, aspirations, intention, and inspiration. Genuine recommitment becomes concrete very quickly – conversations that will now happen, standards that will now be enforced, tolerations that will now stop, truths that will now be spoken, trade-offs that will now be accepted.

The emotional texture changes too. The performative version often seeks emotional certainty before Action. Genuine recommitment accepts Action without certainty. The leader no longer waits to feel fearless, fully ready, or guaranteed. They simply stop allowing uncertainty to govern Commitment.

Another important difference: the performance of recommitment usually tries to restore the previous self-image – "I am still the committed leader I thought I was." Genuine recommitment often disrupts self-image – "I can now see where I have been compromising, avoiding, performing, or protecting." That is why it can initially feel painful rather than uplifting. But paradoxically, it is also where agency returns, because once the leader fully owns their participation in the drift, they stop experiencing themselves primarily as constrained by circumstance.

Finally, genuine recommitment changes the relationship to breakdowns. In performative recommitment, breakdowns quickly become evidence the recommitment is failing. In genuine recommitment, breakdowns are expected, interpreted diagnostically, and often experienced as evidence that the old system is actually being disrupted.

That changes persistence profoundly. Not persistence as stubbornness. Persistence as grounded Commitment in the presence of discomfort.

*The leader stops asking: "How do I get back to certainty?"  
And starts asking: "What future am I willing to keep  
generating even while this remains difficult?"*

## Why Drift Is the Final Test of Commitment

Every chapter in this book has been, in different ways, preparation for this one.

The plateau problem in Chapter 1 – that is drift that has become structural. The compliance masquerading as Commitment in Chapter 2 – that is drift that has been institutionalised. The contracted occurring in Chapter 3 – that is drift operating on the phenomenological variable. The survivable version in Chapter 4 – that is drift completing its anatomy. The muddy language in Chapter 5 – that is drift expressing itself linguistically. The hollowed practice in Chapter 6 – that is drift consuming the maintenance system. The shadows in Chapter 7 – that is drift producing its pathologies. The hidden Commitment in Chapter 8 – that is drift's root cause.

Drift is not a separate problem. It is the default condition of every system under sustained pressure. The question is never whether it is happening. It is whether the leader is willing to see it, and honest enough to name it before the justification becomes the Commitment.

That willingness is the final test of Commitment. Not the declaration. Not the breakthrough. Not the practices or the language or the Identity work.

The willingness, repeated across years, to interrupt the accommodation before it becomes the baseline. To ask the uncomfortable question before the metrics demand it. To name the drift clearly, without justification, and recommit – not to the aspiration, but to the cost.

That is what sustained Commitment actually looks like. Not inspiration. Not momentum. Not even courage, most of the time.

The unglamorous, repeated, honest choice to return – before the normalisation completes. Before the justification becomes the belief. Before the survivable version becomes the only version the leader can still see.

And to ask, again, the question the book began with: If nothing here changes, what future is inevitable?

Not as a strategic planning exercise. As a mirror, held honestly, and in the full knowledge that the answer reveals not just the organisation's trajectory – but the leader's own.

## Practical Application

- Ask the diagnostic question weekly. "What am I tolerating that I would not have accepted a year ago?" Write the answer before generating explanations for it.
- Map your drift stage. Which of the five stages are you in – initial accommodation, rationalisation, recalibration, cultural embedding, or rationalised plateau? The stage determines the intervention.
- Name what the drift is protecting. What self-concept has each accommodation been preserving? Use the Identity mechanisms from Chapter 8 to surface the hidden Commitment underneath the intelligent justification.
- Distinguish genuine from performative recommitment. Before any recommitment conversation – with yourself or your team – ask: am I recommitting to the aspiration or to the cost? The distinction is in the specificity of what will now change.
- Make one clean interruption before the offsite. Identify the most avoided conversation or most tolerated standard. Address it specifically, before the next planning cycle, before the next symbolic gesture. The interruption is the recommitment.
- Find your version of ringing the bell. In my final year at Z Energy, our executive team adopted a specific practice for naming drift without shame. When someone noticed a Commitment slipping, in themselves or in the room, they would say: "I am ringing the bell on that." Sometimes they would ask a colleague directly: "Are you ringing the bell on that?" The phrase gave people permission to surface drift cleanly, without blame or drama. It transformed what might otherwise have been an uncomfortable accusation into a shared act of integrity. The phrase originates in the U.S. Navy SEALs' Hell Week – recruits who can no longer continue ring a brass bell three times, signalling an honest opt-out rather than a quiet disappearance. Find your team's equivalent. A shared language for naming drift makes the invisible visible before the rationalisation completes.
- Watch your language. When "*hopefully*," "*we'll see*," "*it is complicated*," or "*now's probably not the time*" appear consistently in your own speech, treat them as drift signals rather than Context descriptions.

## Generating Your Breakthrough

- What are you tolerating right now that you would not have accepted a year ago?
- Where has the rationalisation become more emotionally coherent than the original Commitment?
- Which of the five drift stages are you currently in – and what would interrupting it specifically require?

- What is the most avoided conversation you are carrying right now – and what is it costing the future you declared?
- If you named your drift specifically – without justification, without Context, without the intelligent explanation – what would you have to say?
- Are you recommitting to the aspiration or to the cost – and how do you know the difference?

## Epilogue

### The Equation Comes Home

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

There is a question I have been carrying throughout the writing of this book.

Not a strategic question. Not a question about the framework, the case studies, or the structure of the argument. A more uncomfortable one – the kind the equation tends to produce when you stop applying it to others and turn it on yourself.

What future does my own current life demonstrate I am truly committed to generating?

Not conceptually. Operationally.

I have spent ten chapters asking you that question in various forms. I have asked you to name the future already organising your decisions. To examine the Identity protecting itself at the expense of the future you have declared. To interrupt the drift before the rationalisation becomes the Commitment. To recommit – not to the aspiration, but to the cost.

It would be convenient, at this point, to write an epilogue that synthesises those ideas cleanly and sends you back into the world with a framework and a question.

But the equation does not allow that. Not honestly.

Because the equation is currently working on me.

#### What the Equation Is Asking

My Commitment – the one this body of work is organised around – is not simply to help leaders perform better. It is something closer to this: to generate a body of work that fundamentally changes how leaders understand causality in organisational performance.

Not just what leaders do, but what futures organise them. How Identity shapes execution. How Context governs behaviour. How occurring constrains possibility. And not merely as philosophy – but as something transmissible, teachable, diagnostically usable, and organisationally actionable.

That is a larger Commitment than coaching. Larger than consulting. Larger than the accumulated authority of thirteen years leading Z Energy and the practice built since.

And the equation – my own equation – is applying its logic back onto me with the same precision I have applied it to others across my career.

$$\textit{Action} = f(\textit{Being} \times \textit{Occurrence}).$$

The Actions available to me at any moment are a function of who I am Being, multiplied by how the situation is occurring to me. And the equation is currently pressuring three things simultaneously – three places where my Being and my occurring are not yet fully aligned with the Commitment I have declared.

The first is visibility. My work challenges management orthodoxy. It reframes transformation causally. It integrates phenomenology and ontology into the practice of leadership in ways that most leadership development frameworks do not attempt. And the more original the work becomes, the harder it is to remain partially concealed inside coaching engagements and facilitation rooms.

The equation is asking whether my Being fully matches the scale of the future I am generating intellectually. Whether I am willing to stand publicly for ideas that are more disruptive than much of the market comfortably tolerates. Whether I can hold the tension between remaining commercially practical and relationally credible – and standing for something that challenges the assumptions on which much of the industry is built.

That tension is live, and I have not resolved it. It shows up in decisions about how I position this work, how explicitly I name the IP, how willing I am to let the ideas stand independently of the professional history that gave me the authority to develop them.

The second is the transition from practitioner to architect. For most of my career, my authority came from operating, leading, coaching, facilitating, intervening. From being in the room where the difficult work happened and having the scars to prove it.

Increasingly, the equation is organising me toward something different – codification, architecture, transmissibility, intellectual lineage. I am no longer only doing the work. I am attempting to define the causal system underneath the work. To make the invisible mechanics explicit. To build something that can be taught, applied, and used by leaders who will never sit across from me in a coaching room.

That transition has ontological cost. It requires stronger authorship, stronger differentiation, and a greater willingness to let the work stand on its own terms rather than leaning on the credibility of the operating history. It requires becoming a different kind of person than the one who built the practice – and the equation is clear about what happens when you attempt to produce a new future while preserving the old Identity.

The third is the deepest. My work consistently exposes where leaders intellectually understand a future while still emotionally organising around an older Identity. Where they declare a Commitment and simultaneously protect the self-concept that is preventing it. Where they perform recommitment without accepting its cost.

The equation is applying that same inquiry back onto me.

What future am I fully willing to organise my own life around now? What Identity still seeks safety, moderation, or careful legitimacy? Where am I still protecting the professional self that existed before this work demanded more of me than that self can fully accommodate?

I do not have clean answers to those questions. I have clearer ones than I did when I began writing this book. But the drift is always available. The intelligent justification is always nearby. The survivable version of this Commitment is always easier than the genuine one.

Which is why I keep returning to the question that closes Chapter 3:

***How is this occurring – and who am I Being in response to that occurring?***

Not as theory. As a daily practice of self-examination that this work has made unavoidable.

What the Book Has Built

Before the final question, a moment to name what has been assembled across these ten chapters – not as a summary, but as a map of the territory you have now traversed.

The book began with a provocation: the future is not something that happens to leaders. It is something they are already producing – through their Context, their Identity, and the Commitments that are actually organising their decisions, whether declared or not.

The Operating Primer made that visible structurally. The distinction between the Predictable Future and the Generated Future gave you a diagnostic lens through which every subsequent chapter could be read.

The equation –  $\text{Action} = f(\text{Being} \times \text{Occurrence})$  – provided the mechanism. Not a model to be understood and filed, but a diagnostic to be applied, repeatedly, in the moments that matter most. When Action is absent, it asks: which variable is collapsing the available Action space? When Commitment is declared but not sustained, it asks: has the Being expanded enough to hold the new occurring under pressure?

The chapters that followed unpacked each element of the equation in the context of Commitment. The plateau as the entry point – the moment leaders recognise that effort applied below the line is no longer producing Results. The compliance/Commitment distinction as the first upstream diagnosis. The equation itself as the mechanism. The anatomy of breakthrough as the sequence through which the upstream variables actually shift. Language as the primary tool through which occurring is shaped – for others and, recursively, for the leader themselves. Practices as the maintenance system for Being. The shadows as the failure modes that emerge when Commitment is held without reflection. Identity as the most resistant upstream variable – the one that most reliably determines whether declared Commitments can be sustained under pressure. Drift as the default condition of every system under sustained pressure, and genuine recommitment as the unglamorous, repeated, honest choice to return before the normalisation completes.

That is the architecture. And the architecture points toward a single conclusion that the book has been building toward from the first page:

***Leaders do not fail because they lack Commitment. They fail because they attempt to produce a Generated Future while preserving the Predictable Identity.***

The future and the Identity must move together. When they do – when the Being expands to hold the occurring the Generated Future requires – new Actions become available that were previously psychologically, emotionally, socially, and existentially inaccessible.

That is the breakthrough. Not a strategic event. An ontological one.

## The Loop Closes

You met an organisation in the Introduction.

An executive team that declared a genuine future – more adaptive, more commercially courageous, more capable of generating its destiny rather than defending its past. That for a period occurred as genuinely possible. And that then, without drama, adjusted to a smaller future than the one it had briefly been capable of generating.

*The company gradually adjusted to a smaller future than the one it had briefly been capable of generating.*

The organisation improved without fundamentally changing. The Predictable Future persisted, now wrapped in the language and artefacts of transformation.

I left that story unresolved in the Introduction deliberately. Because the honest answer, at that point in the book, was that I did not know how to give it a clean ending without lying about what transformation actually requires.

I can be more honest now.

The organisation did not have a dramatic turnaround. It did not produce a moment of collective awakening that resolved everything cleanly. What it had was a series of smaller, harder, more specific moments – each one requiring a leader to stop negotiating with the implications of what they already knew. To name what they were tolerating. To interrupt the drift before the rationalisation completed. To recommit – not to the aspiration, but to the cost.

Some leaders did that work. Some did not. The organisation that emerged was not the one originally declared. It was something more honest than that – a company that had genuinely grappled with what transformation required, had paid some of its cost, and had become more capable of generating its future than the version that had been producing the survivable one.

Not a success story. A more useful story than that.

A story about what happens when enough leaders in a room stop asking "how do we manage this?" and start asking "what future are we willing to keep generating even while this remains difficult?"

## The Single Question

Ten chapters. One equation. One question to carry forward.

Not a framework. Not a checklist. Not a Commitment to be made in the next leadership offsite and reviewed quarterly.

A question to be lived – returned to under pressure, in the moments when the intelligent justification is most available and the drift is most seductive and the survivable version is most convincingly dressed as wisdom.

The question the equation keeps asking. The question this book has been building toward. The question I am currently standing inside myself, with no cleaner answer than the one the work demands:

***What future are you willing to keep generating – even while  
it remains difficult?***

Not: what future do you want?

Not: what future do you believe in?

Not even: what future have you declared?

Those questions live in aspiration. This one lives in Commitment.

Keep generating names the practice – not the moment of declaration but the repeated, unglamorous return to the stand when drift is available, when the accommodation is reasonable, when the breakdown looks like evidence the future is impossible.

Even while it remains difficult names the cost – not the future that becomes possible once conditions improve, but the one you are willing to inhabit before there is evidence it will work, before the Identity has fully expanded to hold it, before the organisation has caught up with what you have already committed to becoming.

That question is not answered once. It is answered in every decision that either honours the Commitment or quietly renegotiates it. In every conversation that either names the drift or constructs an intelligent explanation for why the standard has reasonably adjusted. In every moment when the equation is working – Being and occurring and the Action space they together produce – and the leader chooses, again, which future will organise what happens next.

The Predictable Future is always available. It is patient, well-justified, and socially comfortable. It will wait.

The Generated Future requires you to keep choosing it – specifically, honestly, and at cost – before the world has confirmed it was the right choice.

That is the Commitment advantage.

And it begins, again, right now.

***If nothing here changes, what future is inevitable?***

***And is that the future you are willing to keep producing?***

If you are ready to begin that work now, the Appendix that follows translates the Operating Primer into a practical diagnostic your leadership team can complete within a quarter. It is not a summary of the book. It is the first operational step — a structured way to examine which layer of the Primer is organising your current Results, where the mismatch between your declared future and your operative Identity sits, and what specific shifts in Context would most immediately create conditions for Commitment to take hold. Start there. The question has been asked. The Appendix is where the answer begins to take shape.

## A Note on this Book

This book was written from practice – from thirteen years leading Z Energy, a 25 year global career prior to that, and from the work of Taumata Advisory with Boards, executives, and leadership teams across New Zealand, Australia, and Asia, and from the intellectual companionship of thinkers whose work has shaped my own: Werner Erhard, Michael Jensen, Steve Zaffron, Dave Logan, Loretta Malandro, Michael Henderson, Robert Kegan, Lisa Lahey, and James Clear, among others.

The cases in these pages happened. Where they draw on client work, they have been anonymised carefully. Where they draw on my own experience, I have tried to be as honest about failure and drift as about breakthrough and Commitment.

The equation:  $\text{Action} = f(\text{Being} \times \text{Occurrence})$  is mine. The ideas it draws on are not. I am grateful to the thinkers, practitioners, and leaders who made this thinking possible – and to the leaders who trusted me with the moments that proved it.

The work continues.

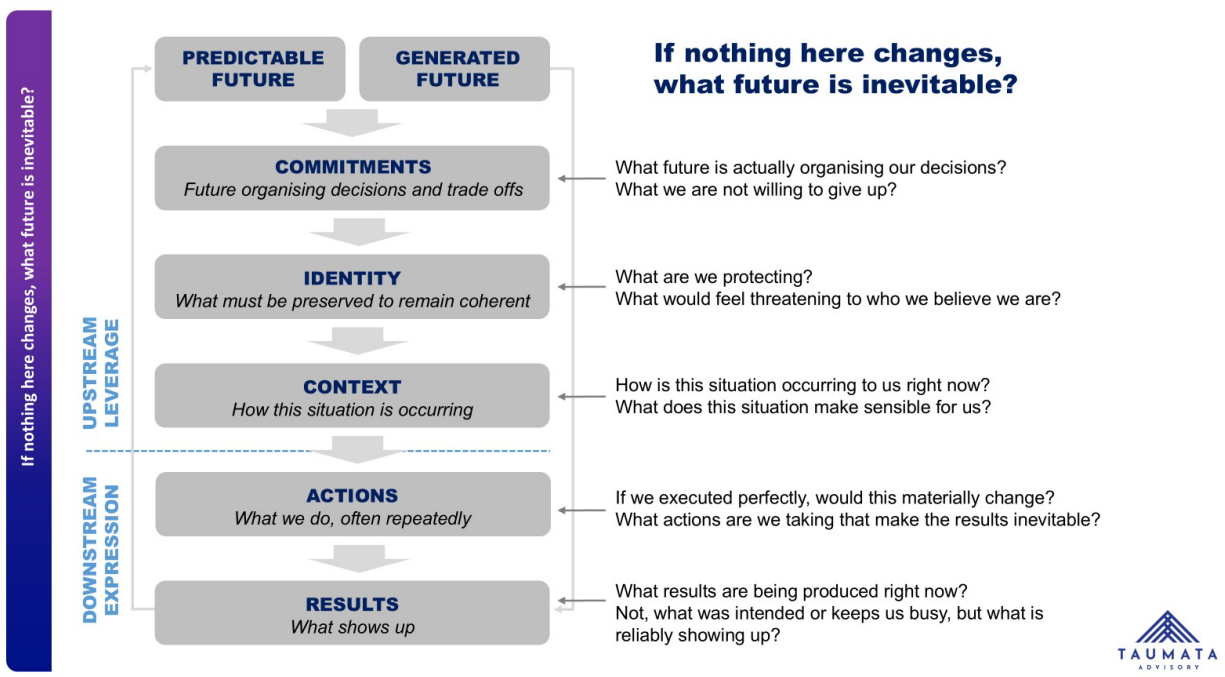
# Appendix – The Operating Primer in Practice

This appendix translates the Operating Primer into a working diagnostic and design framework for leaders, teams and organisations. It is not conceptual – it is operational.

Complete this diagnostic with your executive team within the next quarter. Do not delegate it to HR. Do not soften the language. Treat it as a Board-level risk assessment.

## The Core Causal Flow

The Operating Primer describes a structural sequence: Commitment → Identity → Context → Action → Results



Each layer determines the one beneath it. Results are not random – they are produced. If you want different Results, you must identify which layer is organising and producing them, without just a narrow focus on Actions.

### Layer 1: Results

Start with evidence. What Results are currently Being produced?

- Financial outcomes.

- Strategic progress.
- Cultural indicators.
- Talent retention.
- Decision velocity.
- Innovation cadence.

Describe them without narrative. Then ask: Are these Results predictable given how we currently operate? If the answer is yes, you are looking at a stable system. The question becomes: what is stabilising it?

### **Layer 2: Action**

- What behaviours are consistently occurring?
- What decisions are routinely made?
- What conversations are avoided?
- Where is accountability enforced or softened?
- What trade-offs are repeatedly chosen?

Look for patterns, not isolated events. Action reveals operative Identity. If empowerment is declared but decisions are frequently reclaimed, the operative Identity is control. If long-term value is declared but quarterly optics dominate trade-offs, the operative Identity is short-term validation.

Do not argue with the data; instead, observe it. It is a signal of something, not a judgment.

### **Layer 3: Identity**

Identity determines what feels legitimate. Ask:

- What kind of leader do I experience myself as needing to be in this system?
- What must I protect? Image? Competence? Likeability? Control?
- What feels too risky to inhabit?
- What conversations feel structurally unavailable?

Then test the gap: What Identity would be required for the future we have declared? Where is the mismatch? This is usually the hinge. Most performance ceilings are not capability gaps. They are Identity constraints.

## **Layer 4: Commitment**

What future has been declared? Not in aspirational language. In structural terms:

- What are we willing to be measured against?
- What would make failure visible?
- What would we refuse to compromise?

If Commitment is vague, Identity will default to inheritance. If Commitment is sharp, Identity must adjust. Weak Commitment produces a moderated Identity. Clear Commitment exposes misalignment.

## **Layer 5: Context**

Context expresses itself through patterns rather than policy. It is visible in how meetings are designed, how decisions are escalated, how performance is evaluated, how informal influence operates, and how everyday work is coordinated. These patterns either make the declared Identity easier to inhabit or quietly contradict it.

Ask: Do the daily patterns of coordination reinforce the Identity we have declared, or do they pull behaviour back toward the familiar?

Alignment is the aim.

## **Coaching Application**

In executive coaching, the Operating Primer is used to:

1. Diagnose where Results are stabilised.
2. Surface the inherited past-based Identity.
3. Clarify declared Commitment.
4. Translate Commitment into required Identity.
5. Identify structural misalignment in Context.
6. Design behavioural experiments that stabilise authored Identity.

The work is iterative and friction is expected. The aim is not insight alone – it is sustained alignment.

## **Enterprise Application**

In organisational transformation, the sequence is similar but scaled:

1. Declare a non-negotiable future.
2. Define the Identity the enterprise must inhabit.
3. Audit Context for structural contradiction.
4. Redesign incentives, governance and meeting architecture.
5. Reinforce behaviour publicly and consistently.
6. Measure Results against the declared Commitment.

Transformation fails when any layer is ignored.

- Action-only change stalls.
- Context-only change breeds cynicism.
- Identity-only change exhausts leaders.
- Commitment-only change remains rhetorical.

Coherence is the requirement.

### **Final Note**

The Operating Primer is not a motivational framework – it is a structural one. If Results are predictable, the system is coherent. If you want different Results, change the coherence.

That means:

- Sharpen Commitment.
- Author Identity.
- Design Context.
- Align Action.
- Sustain under pressure.

The ceiling is not mysterious. It is mechanical. And mechanisms can be redesigned.



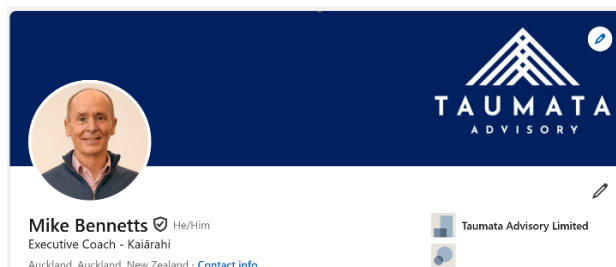
## Realising Individual and Organisational Potential

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](http://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 programmes, 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](mailto: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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