

COMMITTED ACTION

The three-step method to inspire your people to take ownership and get results

ANDY BASS

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PRAISE FOR COMMITTED ACTION

In 30 years of business life, what distinguishes the best teams and organisations I have worked with is not intellect, or education or even resources – it is exactly the mentality described by the title of this book.

Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman Ogilvy UK, TED Global speaker, Author of *Alchemy: The Surprising Power Of Ideas That Don't Make Sense*

Leaders who want to inspire their people to take ownership will appreciate this enjoyable guide. Andy's idea of 'the leader as educator' is spot on in a world where organisations have to learn, and re-learn, faster than ever.

Rooney Anand, Former CEO Greene King
and Executive Chairman Redcat Pub Company

Wealth creators create jobs. The best ones go further and create Dream Jobs, which means recruitment, retention and performance are all made easier. Being a Dream Employer is a worthy goal which helps create the sustainable communities we need for national prosperity, making Andy's Committed Action essential reading.

Ninder Johal DL, CEO Nachural Group
and Publisher, The Business Influencer Magazine

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Anyone can open a factory, but it takes people to build a business. A lot of leaders don't realise the work needed to make that happen. Andy's emphasis on 'joining the dots up' for people is the difference that makes the difference.

David J Pritchett, Former President, Rieke Packaging Systems

We are in the business of helping our clients grow revenue, and we're very clear that means one thing: coordinated and committed action. That's even more true in the challenging world we're facing today. Andy's book will help you get your people on the same page so they take the actions you need to grow your business.

Michael FitzGerald, Founder & CEO, OnePageCRM

The world needs more inspiring business leaders. Andy's new book is a clear roadmap for how leaders can inspire commitment in today's challenging environment.

Nancy MacKay, CEO & Founder MacKay CEO Forums

Whether it's a special forces unit, a championship-winning team, or a business facing today's unique challenges, committed action is essential. Andy's book is a quick, practical read for leaders who need to create commitment and get results in real time.

Sean Bacon, Mental Toughness consultant , former Canadian Paratrooper, and mindset coach to the Olympic Gold Medal winning Canadian Women's Rowing Team

In my experience as a recruiter, employers are too quick to look outside their organisation for talent when they have plenty of nuggets within. Andy's book Committed Action shows leaders how they can release the potential of their existing people and encourage them to flourish. Recommended!

Tim Hall, Senior Finance Recruiter and Director, Hays plc

The commitment of your people is vital for business growth. Andy's C.E.O. formula will show you how to get it.

Ringo Francis, Chairman Emeritus,
Diversey & Zenith Hygiene, UK & Ireland

If people only 'half understand', they can only 'half commit'. Andy's book teaches you to translate your leadership message from terms that make you want to act into terms that make them want to act.

Jurga Žilinskienė MBE, Founder and CEO, Guildhawk

As the pool of talented people becomes ever more diverse, leaders need new ways to engage their commitment. Launch your leadership into a higher orbit with Andy Bass's C.E.O. roadmap.

Hanifa Shah, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean,
Birmingham City University

2.

YOU CAN'T MOTIVATE PEOPLE, BUT YOU SURE CAN DEMOTIVATE THEM

Ambitious leaders want people who are as motivated as they are. However, there's a fundamental problem: you can't actually motivate people. That said, you sure can demotivate them! So how do you prevent the demotivation, and end up as a leader surrounded by people who share your commitment to action?

Let's start with two steps:

1. Target sources of demotivation – I call them the “Commitment Killers”
2. Adopt a new lens – the Rules of Engagement.

Ten Commitment Killers

When you're not getting the response you want from people, it's easy to underestimate your influence on them. You might think managers are having no effect. But actually they may be having a very strong effect, just not one that's useful!

For example, here's the question I like to ask when people complain about low morale among their staff:

“Were they like that when you hired them?”

I mean think about it. When somebody gets a new job that's usually cause for celebration.

People might even buy them a card or drinks – or these days at least send them a “congratulations on your new role” message on LinkedIn. But ask a random person who has been in a job for a while, “How's work?” and – assuming they're honest and not just doing impression management – what's the most frequent response that you get?

Something is happening to these people between their appointment and the time they fill in their employee satisfaction survey. Before looking at new ways to build commitment, it's a good idea to take a cold, hard look at what's going on in the organisation to see if there are things that you should stop doing first. Here are the top ten “Commitment Killers” I've found.

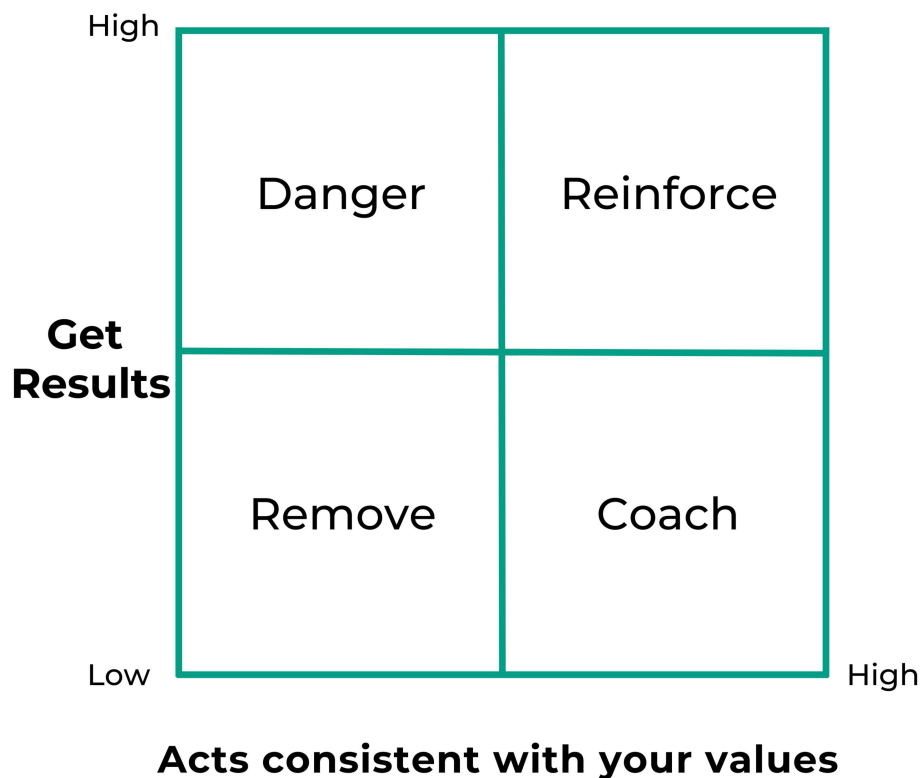
1. Tolerating people who undermine your culture

I first came across the idea in the following image in an interview with Jack Welch. It speaks to a common problem: organisations have nice posters around the place proclaiming their values, but someone who

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habitually violates them is tolerated because their numbers are good.

If you allow people with good results but poor respect for your values to continue with their act, you utterly undermine your culture.



Don't tolerate people who undermine your culture

Tolerating people in the danger quadrant also plays hell with your leadership credibility. Employees have often told me about a draconian or sociopathic manager who is causing poor morale, the departure of good but underappreciated people, or is even upsetting customers. But then they add that “the MD must want them to be like that, or else they would have done something about it.”

2. Not appreciating what you've got

A few years ago I was talking to a retired consultant who had worked for one of the most prestigious strategy firms in the world. And he told me a story about an engagement he had been on for an iconic American clothing manufacturer. The fee for this project was easily into seven figures.

Towards the end of the project my friend gave a PowerPoint presentation to the board. And they were extremely impressed. They found his analysis and his ideas insightful and exciting. Very much worth the million-plus dollars.

And he said to them,

“I’m very pleased that you’re happy. Now I should tell you:

“I learned most of what I’ve told you from the people who work one floor down from this boardroom, in your marketing department...

“But you don’t listen to them.”

When I talk about tapping into the power of underappreciated or overlooked resources, this is the sort of thing I’m getting at. And how do staff feel when they’re telling management the answers but are ignored in favour of an outsider?

I cover the power of your hidden resources in detail in my

book *Start With What Works: a faster way to grow your business*¹. Visit www.CommittedActionBook.com to read a free chapter.

3. Blaming

My mentor Alan Weiss has often talked about the importance of pursuing “cause, not blame”. Things will go wrong. And it’s a very human impulse to try to blame others. Honestly, this was definitely an issue for me – one I am glad to say I have made great strides with. Part of my inspiration for that change has been working with some excellent clients with an Army background. I noticed that they had a great ability to face up to situations where things are going wrong without histrionics or blame. Instead they’d ask, “What do we do about it given where we are now?” I recognise it’s tough, but avoiding blaming behaviours is absolutely vital. Some people excuse blaming as “keeping people accountable” but that is a lazy misunderstanding. When it comes to Commitment Killers, a blame culture is a weapon of mass destruction.

4. Being seduced by “Rockstar hires” and thereby implicitly criticising your incumbent staff

The idea of a hiring a Rockstar is very popular with leaders looking for a quick fix, and with recruiters who promulgate the mystique of the “A” Player.

And of course, some people are particularly talented and make disproportionate contributions. But the research on the outcomes of Rockstar hires should concern you. A lot of these hires don't work out so well. Their previous successes might have been less about their individual talent and more about the team they were part of, selling the right product at the right time, or working in a "hot" market. Often these people – who cost a fortune, by the way – strut in saying, "well when I was with Google ..." and upset the incumbents, who are anyway demoralised by the fact you went outside and brought someone in to "fix" things.

5. Treating groups as if they're all the same (e.g. millennials)

OK I'm old enough to say this, so don't get upset. In every era throughout history, older people have been envious of the young. Here's the philosopher Aristotle on the subject a mere 2,350 years ago: "Young people have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled by life or learned its necessary limitations; moreover, their hopeful disposition makes them think themselves equal to great things." Could have been any twenty-first century manager talking about millennials.

Yes, there is much angst and gnashing of teeth as the middle-aged plaintively cry out: "What do millennials want?"

Well, what do you mean by millennial? Every human born between 1981 and 1996? Regardless of culture, country, education, religion, sense of identity ...? That's 1.8 *billion* people (UK 16mn, US 56mn, Canada 8mn). They can't all want the same thing.

Now you could say I'm exaggerating to make a point, but the point is valid. It's easy to lazily assign people to groups and try to treat them all the same. Be careful before treating people on the basis of group memberships, whether generational or otherwise. And be especially careful about 'groups' that are arbitrary and not self-selected. You instantly create an Us and Them dynamic. It's not conducive to fostering Committed Action.

6. "Management-speak" (aka Corporate BS)

When I wrote my book *Start With What Works*, I included the following genuine Fortune 500 mission statement as an example of uninspiring and undifferentiated corporate drivel:

"We are a market-focused, process-centered organization that develops and delivers innovative solutions to our customers, consistently outperforms our peers, produces predictable earnings for our shareholders, and provides a dynamic and challenging environment for our employees."

We've all met executives (and management consultants)

who can drone on like this all day. There are even computer programs that can come up with this stuff.² I wanted to hold up the quoted mission statement as an example of how not to talk. Interestingly, my publisher's lawyers wanted to veto me. They had googled the quote and identified the company in question. They were worried that we'd be in breach of copyright if we published without permission!

So I googled the quote myself. And found a further eleven (!) companies using exactly the same – commodity – statement.

7. “Somehow management”

I like to tell the story of a Middle European country in the 1930s that had been taken over in a communist revolution. The management of a gun factory were told by the new government to stop manufacturing arms, but to keep the factory open and continue paying the workers. When they asked how they were supposed to do this, the one-word answer that came back was: “Somehow.”

Setting forth visions and goals is not enough. Yet some have misinterpreted ideas such as management-by-objectives to mean just that. Managers also need to set up structures, resource them and monitor and support execution.

Often neither the managers nor the people they are dumping on actually know how to achieve an objective,

but because the managers have the power, they can get away, for a time, with saying: “You figure it out! Work smarter not harder!”

8. Mushroom management

The idea of mushroom management is, of course, to “keep them in the dark and feed them manure”. Although this is usually mentioned as a parody, a manager I interviewed for the book told me that a former boss once recommended the approach with a straight – if cynical – face.

9. Sideshow solutions and generic skills training

Have you ever sent your people on an expensive training programme and found yourself wondering if it had had any effect at all? Of course you have. I know people who sent whole management teams to famous business schools and were never sure they'd got value in the end. The big issue in training effectiveness is what's called “the transfer problem”. Sure, people can develop and demonstrate skills in a training room, but how do you

- make sure those skills show up in the workplace?
- ensure that, if the skills do show up, they will actually work in your specific situation?

If either of these conditions fail to be met, training and similar events are just sideshows.

10. The “More with less” trap

“Doing more with less” – it sounds seductive. Logical. Pragmatic. Hard-headed.

In short, hard to disagree with.

“Doing more with less” sounds great in theory. But it works less well in practice, where it can lead to burnout, corner-cutting and value destruction (there’s a reason it’s the undercurrent of classic disaster movies like *The Towering Inferno* and *Titanic*). I’ll have more to say about this in Chapter 6.

Building a new mindset

The Commitment Killers spring up like weeds so it’s important to stay on top of them, even in a brilliant organisation. With the ground clear, you have a powerful opportunity. At the same time, Committed Action won’t just spring up by itself. Crops might grow on their own in fertile soil, but a farm still needs a farmer.

Seven Rules of Engagement

Before we look at the C.E.O. roadmap in detail, here are seven “Rules of Engagement” – mindsets that underpin the successful use of the formula.

1. Motivation is intrinsic

You can't motivate people. In truth, people are already motivated – even the ones you think are not. The laziest good-for-nothing is motivated: to avoid hassle, responsibility and effort. You can *move* them with threats or bribes, but that's as good as it will get until they decide their priorities have changed.

On the other hand, your best employee is also motivated: perhaps to pursue a rewarding career, contribute to an exciting, worthwhile enterprise or support family members. These motivations are there already; a good leader taps into them.

The intrinsic nature of motivation means that if you want Committed Action you can't get it using extrinsic factors such as pay and perks alone. You need to make the work meaningful for people *the way they make meaning*. You need to join the dots: from what you want to the way they decide something is meaningful.

One more time, is money a motivator?

Frederick Herzberg, who came up with the famous “motivators and hygiene factors” approach to motivation said, “They think I said money isn’t motivating, so I doubled my speaking fee.”

OK, so what’s really going on? This is where the idea of intrinsic motivation makes everything much clearer. Some people – at some times in their lives – are seeking money because it helps fulfil some intrinsic need. Others are not. If someone has insufficient funds, the offer of more will appear to motivate them. But once they have enough, they will back off, and offering more money might not make any difference.

And there’s another big problem with treating money as your go-to motivator: it’s expensive! As a *Management Today* headline pointed out, “Companies that have been inflating salaries to attract new candidates may be headed for a big dose of buyer’s remorse.”³

2. The meaning of your communication is the response that it gets

Remember the Town Hall example from the Prologue?

What management said	What the audience understands	What would have joined the dots for them
Return on Equity	This part of the presentation is not for me	A better number here will help our shares be worth more
Core Tier 1 Capital Ratio	It will be over soon and then I can have a drink	How resilient the bank is, and therefore how safe your job is if there's another financial crisis
Employee share scheme	Sounds like something for older people	Free money for you from the bank

I'm asking you to hold yourself to a high standard as a communicator here: if they're not committed it's because your unintended message is, "This is not worth committing to."

3. Leaders are educators

Although I left the university world over twenty years ago, I have always maintained links, in particular through executive education where I've taught strategy and leadership communication to high-potential managers

and leaders who were knocking on the door of the C-suite. The best such engagements are sponsored vigorously by the CEO. Whenever possible, I ask the CEO to participate with me in a fireside chat at the end of the programme. During this session, I interview the CEO about their strategy in front of the participants and we draw out the connections between the models and frameworks they've been studying and the actual strategic decisions the CEO has made and is considering. From one point of view, this is for the participants. But from another, the CEO is usually surprised about how good it is for them as a leader. By positioning them not so much as "the boss", but as a business teacher, the relationships change. Finally, they are having deep conversations with their people about their top priorities. The engagement lasts far beyond the workshop.

4. Every business is interesting

I can't say this is absolutely true, but it's a pragmatic attitude that's worth adopting. It will make you more tenacious in finding ways to reach people. Again, there's a parallel with education in general: think of the longest, least inviting textbook you ever had to study; I mean something that elicits boredom in you now just thinking about it. Then consider this: Someone *wrote* that. They must have been into it. Big time. I can tell you that you don't finish writing a book unless you are into it.

Consider this question: "Is there a subject you used to find

boring but that you now find very interesting?” I wouldn't have predicted that I'd develop an interest in history, computing and even aspects of accounting. Your list will be different, but the point is that our interests can change, if we have a good teacher who can link the dots up in a new way. So if your people don't “get it”, it's very possible they will once you frame it meaningfully for them.

5. If it fits their world, they'll do it

Remember *Return of the Jedi*, the third film of the original *Star Wars* trilogy? In a pivotal section, the heroes led by Luke Skywalker are captured by a tribe of hostile bear-like warriors called the Ewoks. There seems every possibility that the Ewoks intend to feast on their prisoners. Fortunately for Luke and his band, however, his loyal protocol droid C3PO is mistaken by the Ewoks for some sort of messiah whose arrival is predicted by their tribal mythology. He is accorded the awe and respect appropriate for a divine being and proceeds to use his position to enrol the support of the Ewoks in Luke's bid to rescue Princess Leia from the evil forces of the Empire. They fight alongside our heroes, and their commitment is decisive in securing victory.

Similarly, if you present an initiative so that it fits your audience's world – their story – they are more likely to support it, *even if they don't understand your way of thinking about it*. If this strikes you as odd, Chapter 4 will help.

6. Make sure the extrinsic incentives support, not fight, your objectives

While carrots and sticks aren't enough to manage your organisation, they do have an effect.

How a boss nearly undermined a new initiative

I was working with a pharmaceutical distribution business that needed to innovate fast. Drugs were coming off-patent, and industry forces were going to change who made money and how. The MD was worried. He was also frustrated that his senior managers, who he described as excellent operations people, were failing to come up with innovative responses to the new needs of their customers. As we discussed his objectives, he painted a clear picture of how he wanted these managers to innovate.

Then he said, "But they damn well better still hit their monthly KPIs."

This was just not going to work.

Why? Well put yourself in the shoes of the managers. The incentives are clearly to keep operating well and not to worry about the innovation.

Here's what goes on in their heads: "If I try to innovate, I'll have to find the extra time by working

longer hours, and I may well fail. Whatever people say, that will probably be held against me later. But if I just keep on operating, all that will happen is I will get whinged at by the MD. Big deal. It's not a sacking offence, is it? Anyway, I know the system really well. They need me to make sure the drugs get delivered. On the other hand, if I *MISS* my KPIs, then I'll have real trouble."

Only by changing the incentives could the MD hope to get these managers to give innovation some serious attention.

People calculate the perceived consequences of their actions instantaneously, often unconsciously. If you are finding that people agree to cross-sell, report problems or support strategic changes, but then they don't, ask yourself how they are weighing up the various incentives and start testing changes to them.

To find out what behaviour your culture is really supporting, think of what you need people to be doing. Then, put yourself in your employee's shoes and ask:

- What will happen if I do?
- What will happen if I don't?
- What won't happen if I do?
- What won't happen if I don't?

It's a good exercise to put post-it notes on a chart like the one in the following image. Often it will become blindingly obvious why people are agreeing to do things and then not following through.

	If I DO?	If I DON'T?
What WILL happen..	Better? or Riskier?	Better? or Riskier?
What WON'T happen..	Better? or Riskier?	Better? or Riskier?
	Low	High

The Consequence Audit

For more about the Consequence Audit and its effect on behaviour, see my White Paper, *Rationally Fearless*, at www.CommittedActionBook.com.

7. People will copy exemplars

How do people decide what they think will happen to them? They do it by watching exemplars. That's why it's no use banging on about values if prominent managers are getting away with violating them.

My bank's website tells me that one of their values is Integrity, which it describes in part as the willingness to "Challenge things I believe to be wrong and be open to challenge from others". Yet the CEO tried to uncover the identity of a confidential whistle-blower. Although he clearly violated the company's values, he got away with a fine and a slapped wrist.

What message do employees believe? The values on the website, or the story about their boss in the newspaper? By the same token, if you tell people to fail fast, look after them when they do.

Start with the people you have – if you can't engage them, recruiting new ones won't help

Often managers think, "I'll hire motivated people," as if motivation is a fixed quantity of something. They then introduce these people to an environment full of Commitment Killers, and wonder why candidates who interviewed so well didn't fulfil their promise on the job. Start with who and what you have, get that working and then you'll get far more value from your new hires (and probably improve your retention to boot).⁴

Quick Wins

- Managers need empathy for the way people weigh up incentives. Use the Consequence Audit to make sure your review is comprehensive. Are you asking the impossible? Are you saying one thing while your exemplars are demonstrating another?
- Identify how many of the Commitment Killers are happening.
 - If there are any you can stop today, just do it.
 - If there are any that seem more complicated than that, read on.

Notes

1. *Start With What Works: a faster way to grow your business*, Andy Bass, 2021, Pearson Business.
2. Check out bullshitgenerator.com.
3. "A dangerous game is being played at the moment", Managementtoday.co.uk, 30 May 2022
4. For a wide range of ideas about doing more with what and who you have already, see my book *Start With What Works*.