



The Committed Manager

The three pieces in 'The Committed Manager' owe their origin to a meeting of the Pune Chapter of the Alumni Association of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. The discussions centered around the emerging profile of the "professional" manager. My thoughts on the subject were articulated in an issue of Fireside and later, in Business India on: 'The Professional versus the Committed'. They provoked a strong reaction. Our then General Manager, Human Resources, came in with a rejoinder, 'The Other Side of Commitment', which in turn prompted me to build on the basic theme: What commitment means to me. All these three pieces talk of values and how they seek expression in a management setting.



THE PROFESSIONAL VERSUS THE COMMITTED

Early November 1989, I was invited to a meeting of the Pune Chapter of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. I was to be felicitated as the senior-most member of the Chapter. Bit of a mixed honour, my only claim to fame being that I had survived longer than most

others! As I was reminiscing on this occasion, I shared with the group a curious fact that although I have had a long association with IIM, Ahmedabad (and I hold this school of learning with considerable reverence and affection), not a single alumnus of that institution adorns our company. This subject became a controversial issue during the dinner conversation—our salary scales, competition from better known organisations, the proverbial arrogance of the fresh MBA, the switch around from job to job, and the emerging profile of the *professional* manager.

By a curious coincidence, a week later, I was leafing through the 13th November issue of *Time* magazine. The fascinating cover story talks of a social revolution that has generated a consumer boom in India, with a market estimated at between 100 to 200 million people.

They have enough rupees to spare for the odd luxury item, whether it is a shampoo, or a fine cotton sari, a scooter, a vacuum cleaner, a refrigerator, a washing machine, a VCR, or a smuggled microwave oven or even a Maruti.

The article then moves on to the explosion of interest in business education and its most sought after graduate degree: the MBA. In a corner box, entitled 'Eat, Drink and Be Merry', a spokesman for the go-go generation, a personable 23-year old called Vipul Mehrotra holds forth on the virtues of the good life: "I want exposure, glamour, money and a job that provides room for creativity.... I like going to discos, picnics, and generally freaking out with friends." His ticket to the "business stratosphere"—an MBA from Delhi University. His objective: "to climb the corporate ladder—fast." His strategy: "Keep switching jobs—that is the shortest route to the top." A frightening thought.

Last week I was called in to meet a bunch of trainees in our company who had just completed a six-month induction programme. Mercifully, a fine, sober group; it was a pleasure talking to them: no concern about exposure or glamour or freaking out. We shared ideas on a variety of subjects—the future growth of our company, the role of R&D, the nature of competition, pricing of our products, career development and some basic values underlying our

approach to life and business. One bright young lad wanted to know why we need to recruit people from outside at a middle and senior level. Can we not fill up vacancies from within the organisation? A fair question. Part of the problem lies in our high rate of growth; we just haven't groomed enough good people. Part of the solution lies in building up successive cadres of trainees and maintaining a culture where they belong and thrive and grow up the ladder.

And this brings me to a question which has agitated my mind for a long time: the profile of a so-called *professional* manager versus a *committed* manager.

There is a school of thought that genuinely believes that a professional manager is one who possesses a body of knowledge or skills which can be put to use with a certain degree of proficiency and which is available at a certain price. In this perception, a professional manager is akin to a professional doctor or a professional architect. If an appendix has to be removed or a house to be designed, the professional comes in with his expertise to get the job done. I see more and more of these professional managers coming into industry—some more effective than others. But a common characteristic runs through some or all of them.

- They are available when a need arises, but they rarely anticipate a need.
- They do not feel a great sense of urgency to get the job done. They leave punctually at 5.15. They rarely miss their weekend golf.
- They do not reach out, they hardly take risks. They do what they are comfortable doing.
- They dislike taking ownership of a larger canvas, lest they become responsible for results.
- They are not concerned about building a team. They keep their expertise to themselves. Pressed under circumstances to delegate, they prefer to abdicate, retaining their titular role.
- Usually, though not always, they delight in the exercise of power than in the achievement of results. Status

symbols—grades and scales, a bigger car, a better-furnished office—become obsessions.

- They jealously guard their perquisites of office. They use their five-star privilege to the utmost, unmindful of how this may hurt the company or how it may affect the sensibilities of lesser mortals within the organisation.
- And finally, when the chips are down, when the company is going through rough weather they are quick to look out for greener pastures—fair-weather friends.

In contrast, we have the committed manager.

- He is there where the action is. His work finds no boundaries. He may be an accountant, a sales engineer, a counsellor or a designer by training—but he is there where the action is.
- He has a nagging conscience that can find fulfilment only in generating returns for the organisation many, many times what he is paid for. He has forgotten what he is paid; his worth cannot be counted.
- Efforts mean nothing to him. He has no norms of measuring efforts, however arduous they may be—they do not figure in his scheme of things. He measures efforts only in terms of results.
- He lives by living up to his commitments. On occasions, when he takes on a commitment, knowing full well that he is over-stretched, he goes beyond the call of duty. He finds joy in striving for the seemingly impossible. He is a *karma yogi* par excellence.
- But above all, the committed manager is one who belongs. He is part of the organisation. His identity is inextricably merged with the company's life-force. He owns the company. He has internalised the paradox "that the total organisation is more important than the individual; but that this does not make the individual less important."

During my business career over the last 30 years, I have seen many large, well-known companies—multinational conglomerates, household names—rise and fade

away. They had more than their share of professional managers. What they lacked were committed managers. By contrast, new names have emerged on the horizon—people with vision, enterprise, drive but above all a sense of commitment. I like to believe that in our own organisation, what we are today reflects the involvement of a number of highly motivated set of people. This is our wealth which no balance sheet can measure, no commissioner of income tax can take away.

As I was reviewing a draft of this article, I realised that in my ramblings I was doing a disservice to the MBA and the management trainee. Management training can be a tremendous resource for an effective manager. Many of us who are at the helm of affairs in our organisation have developed our understanding and insights through management development programmes. My own participation in a programme in management development at Harvard 20 years ago, was a great revelation for me. Many of my colleagues have since followed suit. The point at issue is that learning is only the start: action—responsible, committed action—must follow.

I recently came across a piece of writing by Ray Kroc, founder and for many years Chairman of McDonald's. It reads:

*Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.
Talent will not; nothing is more common than
unsuccessful men with talent.
Genius will not; the world is full of educated derelicts.
Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.*

What Ray Kroc calls persistence and determination, I call commitment.

THE OTHER SIDE OF COMMITMENT

(A reaction from our General Manager—Human Resources)

I read RDA's hard-hitting piece. 'The Professional versus The Committed' with tremendous interest and mixed feelings. I cannot but agree with the basic theme of the

article. I completely share this search for the committed person—a person who acts in the organisation's interest from a feeling of ownership, partnership and membership. And like the age-old question on leadership, are committed persons born or made? If they are born, I have to go no further; but if they are made then I would like to submit that significant persons in organisations have a crucial role in inviting and nurturing commitment in people.

MBAs are no less or more committed than other professionals like CAs, engineers or doctors. Commitment is a personal quality and has little to do with one's education or qualifications. As I look around at engineers, CAs, doctors, lawyers, MBAs, teachers, journalists, publishers—I see a whole spectrum of commitment displayed, some high and some low. It is in this context that I regret that the article has chosen to pick on the MBA.

I have been involved with management training for many years now and this has brought me in contact with many young MBAs, particularly from IIM, Ahmedabad. I share very deeply some concerns—their pathetic need to be treated as special, their unwillingness to blend with the organisation culture. Their preference for staff jobs, their unrealistic ambitions and most undignifying of all—their arrogance. Having said this I have noticed that these attitudes are most predominant in the early years of their career. I have seen a majority of them mature, mellow and contribute significantly to organisations.

Many companies like Asian Paints, HCL, Modi Xerox, Madura Coats, Wipro, Hindustan Lever—to name just a few—recruit, train and develop a large number of MBAs. These are consistently successful companies, in terms of growth and, more importantly, profit. They continue to cherish their share of "professional" managers who have played a vital role in their sustained success. They have not faded away. It would be revealing for us to compare our profitability, rate of growth and overall results with these companies.

These companies have many MBAs. If they did not anticipate needs, did not have a sense of urgency, went home at 5.15, took no risks, did not see the larger canvas,

were not concerned with team development, did not delegate and were preoccupied with power—how come these companies are also successful?

I also think it unfair to link conspicuous consumption with MBAs alone (or at least that is the way I see the trend of the argument). Do other people, committed or otherwise, not seek VCRs, microwaves and Contessa Classics? Lifestyle is a personal matter; it is best left where it belongs.

On the question of job hopping: it is my experience that MBAs or non-MBAs, engineers or non-engineers, CAs or otherwise, most young and mid-career people today have changed a couple of jobs. In fact, we in Thermax have sought out people from other organisations for our needs. We have been party to the job-hopping phenomenon. How then can we so easily take a self-righteous stand on an issue which is part of a larger phenomenon, not restricted today to the MBAs alone?

There are all kinds of people, professionals or otherwise, who offer varying degrees of commitment to the organisation. For some people commitment has to be nurtured and fostered by the organisation and others bring commitment from within, notwithstanding what the organisation has to offer. But in most cases, creating and sustaining commitment has to be a mutual process—a process for which organisations and individuals must both take equal responsibility (The article is silent on what leaders and organisations can do to *evoke* commitment—by implication, the article invites loyalty.)

The process of inviting and generating commitment is a complex one, and commitment is one thing that cannot be demanded—it can only be invited, nurtured and offered. When offering commitment, people go through many struggles. In daily life many people are grappling with issues of commitment in one way or the other: do I commit myself to the family, to parenting, to earning a living, to my job, to my skills, to my profession, to my convictions, to my well-being, to myself—to all of these? Commitment goes far beyond the organisation. It has to do with a deeper quality of the self.

Those who promise to deliver and do so consistently can

be said to be “dependable” and “loyal”, and those who consistently represent organisational interests show a dedication and belonging of a high order. These are outstanding attitudes from the point of view of the company, but are only some facets of commitment where the organisation is a recipient of the employee’s offering. For organisations to generate commitment actively, we may need to address larger issues of the self—happiness at home, stresses a person has to live with, struggles with the self, value conflicts, and many other dimensions related to the quality of life, creativity and well-being.

Till these soft, but critical life issues are addressed actively by the organisation, issues of commitment—as different from belonging and loyalty—will remain unattended. Dedicated, dependable and loyal people may burn out. Will the organisation stand aside while many of these people stare at a pre-retirement vacuum? Will the organisation slumber as many people sacrifice and let go of their many sided interests in life? Will the organisation be content with reimbursing medical expenses for heart surgeries?

Commitment is a process of mutual responsibility and cannot be a compulsion on the part of the individual, nor can organisations passively receive the individual’s offering. Senior people in organisations will need to look at the individual as a whole person—not just a pair of hands, or a brilliant brain, a person to beckon during office hours. Commitment is person related—whether professional or not.

—P.M. Kumar

WHAT COMMITMENT MEANS TO ME

(My Rejoinder)

A few days ago, I received an article from Prasad Kumar, our General Manager, Human Resources—‘The Other Side of Commitment’. I welcome Prasad’s contribution, partly because it gives me something particularly relevant to talk

about and partly because it allows me an opportunity to react and present this piece of writing—as it should be: a dialogue.

My dear Prasad,

May I sincerely compliment you on your very well-expressed and thought-provoking response to my article—but, alas, smouldering with righteous indignation! When I wrote those ramblings about the professional and the committed, I did not remotely realise that I was saying something controversial. The basic theme was simply this:

In any organisation there are people with talent and a capacity to change things, but for some curious reasons they seem to let things drift. There are others with talent and/or determination to get results within an organisational framework.

The success of an organisation depends largely on having 'committed' people in preference to what I call the 'professionals'—the ones who have the talent but not the inclination.

In my own experience many companies, large and small, have gone to seed because when the commitment is lacking, the critical mass seems to sway towards apathy and the downhill slide begins.

I like to believe that in our own organisation, our sustained growth over a period of 22 years (despite ups and downs) reflects the involvement of a number of dedicated people.

This "behavioural model" is so clear as to be almost simplistic. What seems to have touched some people to the quick is not the facile logic, what seems to have stirred a hornet's nest are some of the attributes of the committed versus the professional, as I saw them.

Let me be honest. As I was recounting some of the attributes—nine to five, the week-end bridge (or was it golf?) the abdication, the exploitation of perquisites of office, and so on—I had a picture in front of me of some of these archetypes, both within our organisation and outside. You must forgive me—I, too, am human. I also have in my mind's eye the other archetypes—the aching-for-results,

the *karma yogi*, the above and beyond, the involved and the committed. They are the salt of the earth. I salute them. Prasad, you do them grave injustice by shrugging them off in one sentence about 'ownership', 'partnership' and 'membership'. I am sure you do not mean it, but you begin the article eulogising the virtues of commitment to an organisation and spend the remaining three pages explaining why this commitment interferes (by implication) with a larger commitment to one's family, to one's profession, to one's well-being. That's bullshit. A committed person is not a workaholic or an automat. He has a family, friends, interests. He has his struggles and his conflicts. But he is very clear in his direction and his focus. At the end of the day, he adds value to the organisation, substantial value. And he finds a great sense of fulfilment in the process.

These days it is fashionable to allude to the Japanese experience. In some sense, it is very relevant in this context. The hard work, the long hours, the fetish for quality, the concern for results have become legendary. Having said that, the Japanese do rear children, they also delight in the *Ikebana*, they visit a *Kabuki* theatre, they relax with friends in a bar in the *Ginza*, they go abroad with their families in large conducted tours (most international airlines will testify to that), they even play golf—with a zest limited only by the lack of open spaces. Almost every Japanese working with a business organisation spends between 15 to 30 days a year in programmes of training and self-development. One can live a full life and still be committed to an organisation's goals, culture and values. The one does not preclude the other.

There, my dear Prasad, is the great philosophical divide. I have had my share of friendships unrequited, illnesses patiently borne, family ties that have been torn asunder, hopes that have remained unfulfilled, stresses that have made me stare at a gaping void. Should I wallow in my struggles and my conflicts and make them an excuse for inaction and self-flagellation or should I rise above them to work towards a larger purpose? What is that larger purpose? That larger purpose calls for a clarity of definition.

If I were an ardent Rajneesh follower, my sights would be very clear. I would work singularly towards trying to unravel the meaning and purpose of life. If I had a talent for painting, I would spend my time and effort in creating shapes, forms and colours. If I were imbued with a zeal to help the poor and the handicapped, I would become a missionary. If I had a yearning for pure mathematics, I would end up as a research scholar. If I had the makings of a revolutionary, I would make a beeline for the hustings. But I am none of these things. My vocation in life is to work within an organisation, to make and sell products and services that fulfil a customer need, and I shall do this with all my energies and all my involvement. In the process my organisation will grow and with it, I. Certainly, I shall continue to be a good father to my children, a companion and comfort to my friends, an upholder of my faith, a responsible member of my community and a contributor to the growth of my particular profession—all this and more. But, above all, I shall belong to an organisation which, I sustain and which in turn, nourishes me. And what a wonderful panorama this can unfold: new worlds to conquer not by the sword but by fulfilling a need; development of people—their native intelligence, the dexterity of their fingers, their skills; building the team; the creative challenge of new products, new systems, new structures, new strategies. What a magnificent obsession! I can think of no larger purpose, no greater commitment.

While I am waxing philosophical, there is a related issue: being balanced and being integrated. There is a school of thought that believes in the balanced view of life—things in time, in place, in moderation. There is a lot to be said for the balanced view of life. In this approach, you structure time: you spend a certain amount of time at work, with the family, with friends, with yourself. Unfortunately, time is not a measure of intensity or need. Let me explain. Most children prefer to spend their time in the company of their friends. They often look at their parents as an intrusion. At the same time, they feel neglected if their parents are not around. The balanced view requires that you spend an hour with your children each day as you return from work.

The integrated approach recognises that it is not time but togetherness, which is important. A tight hug and a few words in friendship or in encouragement or in comfort is worth many hours of desultory conversation. Again, time does not measure need. When my son is struggling with his homework, I am around doing my own thing, finishing a crossword or writing an article. But he knows that if he is stuck, I am there to help. Here is a simple example of a congruence between my commitment to parenting (ugh, what an ugly word) and my commitment to myself and perhaps to the organisation.

Another example of achieving an identity of goals—of self development and the organisation's needs. I am aware of a number of people who go for post-graduate degrees while at work, at considerable sacrifice to themselves. Three or four hours each day, after a hard day's work, calls for commitment of a high order. If in the process he enjoys what he is doing, it makes sense. But if he is doing it in the mistaken notion that this may advance his career prospects, he may be disillusioned—unless this is seen by the individual and the organisation as relevant. Many a stores clerk labours through a DBM program while he could be better advised to study for a computer course which is more appropriate to his immediate career path. A dose of counselling by human resources at the right time can save an avoidable conflict of objective and commitment.

Prasad, I am aware that you have made it your life's mission to explore the human resource—to understand the human psyche in all its many facets and its glory. All of us in Thermax are the happy beneficiaries of your perceptive and dedicated explorations. At the same time, you are also here where the action is—whether it is recruitment or training or appraisal or organisational restructuring. I cannot think of a better example of a congruence of the individual's interest and the company's objectives.

The conflict between my convictions and the values of the organisation: this is where I hesitate, not because it cannot be resolved but because it calls for some hard options. Let me explain. If I am, by conviction, a conscien-

tious objector and my company is heavily involved in the defence business, the sights are clear: I do not join or I discontinue my affiliation with the organisation. Similarly, if my organisation makes it a way of life to take shortcuts beyond the law, one does not have to spell out this as a policy objective. The organisation's values are implicit in one's day-to-day working life and one either belongs or one doesn't. But in many organisations, the issues are never that clear. The organisation is a good citizen, but it lets off its effluent in the drain with minimal treatment, or stretches a point of law beyond McDowell's reach*, or takes an easy way out of the bureaucratic jungle. Where does one draw the line? I wish I knew the answer.

A thought: I have to recognise the fact that I live and work in a social milieu. If I have to buy a flat I have to generate black money. It is abhorrent—you know it, I know it, the authorities concerned know it. We all connive at it. It has become a way of life. I am appalled at the collapse ("decline", is not the word) of basic moral values in the last five to ten years. Prasad, you and I know, that as an organisation we stand for and try to live up to high standards of public life. But we also know that there are times when we buckle down under pressure. You suffer value conflicts—so do I. I have one suggestion. I am prepared to give the lead if the organisation stands committed on this score. I must confess that this is one issue on which you and I cannot go it alone. We must have the group's unequivocal support. Together, we can overcome. The road is rough and winding and steep. We should be prepared to make some hard sacrifices. Can we rise to the challenge? If so, we have a lot of work ahead of us—you can contribute substantially in re-training and re-moulding attitudes. The rewards can be exhilarating. For, when all is said and done, profits (as we always remind ourselves in our advertising copy), is not a set of figures but of *values*.

*This refers to a ruling in a Supreme Court judgment that says in effect that the larger context and the overall intent of a law surpasses its strict interpretation.

And so we come to heart surgeries. They are expensive—I can vouch for that. Not many companies listed in the roster of successful companies in your article are prepared to reimburse the cost of heart surgeries as we do, and they are far more affluent! But I am being facetious.

Prasad, I am not too clear with your line of reasoning. Do I hear you say that effective managers work under undue stress and are therefore more susceptible to heart ailments and the similar? I sincerely hope you are wrong. I think you will agree that the human body is a complex phenomenon—genetics, age, lifestyle, dietetics and stress, all take their toll. But in my own personal experience, I distinguish two types of stresses: one, the good ones, when I am immersed as a sales engineer zeroing on a major contract, or as a design engineer developing a product, or as a project field engineer beating deadlines. Time and effort do not exist. I am working like a man possessed. I am sure it takes some toll, but it is a benign stress—I am enjoying every moment and I am at peace with myself. Then there is the other stress—the bad stress—the one that wears you down. A job done casually and you have to live with this for the rest of your life; an unhappy customer's taunts; ill-mannered gossip that hurts; unhealthy competition; game playing and jockeying within—these are the stresses that hurt, that gnaw at the vitals inside. Here is the challenge for all of us, and particularly HR: how can we help create an organisational atmosphere and culture where the hurtful stresses are eliminated and the benign stresses are allowed full play. Incidentally, if you recognise stress as an area of concern, can we develop programmes in stress management designed to help people become aware of stress and how to live with it in comfort?

Similarly, other areas of concern that you mention—dedicated people who burn out before their time, the preretirement vacuum—are real issues. How can we address ourselves to these issues? Career counselling, rotating jobs, helping to develop new skills, planning a retirement schedule ahead of time? You are best trained to work out meaningful approaches to these problems. You have all the authority to do so, subject only to the profit-centres

which are required to foot the bill and should be persuaded to do so.

A small non-issue: the MBA. I am grossly misunderstood. I am full of admiration for the MBA. The training he gets, in some of the better known institutes, is outstanding. My problem—and yours, Prasad — is, how do we fit them in and retain them? They could be a tremendous resource. They are a brilliant lot. But in my perverted dictionary, the opposite of “brilliance” is not mediocrity—it is “casualness”.

The central theme of your article bears deep reflection. Commitment cannot be demanded — it can only be evoked. So many memories flood my mind. Years ago when we set up a small factory at Chinchwad, a core group came over from Bombay. We couldn't afford a separate residential block. A corner of the plant was converted into a dormitory. Basic necessities were miles away. Scorpions and snakes were rampant (I swear to it). We had no office hours, no weekends. We were working on a shoe-string budget. The bankers were breathing down our necks. Every day meant survival or extinction. I can never forget the pioneers and their commitment—some of them are still with us.

Some years later, we were invited to participate in a joint venture with a small Canadian outfit. We were to supply coils and the Canadian company were to fit the controls and complete the boiler. They wanted a seasoned engineer who could take charge of production in Canada. We all felt that Noshir Mirza, who had been with us for several years, was the best choice. I called Noshir and suggested that he go. His response: “When do I start?” “Wait a minute,” I said, “wouldn't you like to check with Putli?” “Putli goes wherever I go,” was his matter-of-fact reply. (These days one would call him a MCP!) The Canadian venture came to an end prematurely with oil prices crashing. Noshir and his family are well-settled in Canada. My great regret—we lost a highly committed organisation man in the process.

Some of you may be aware of the crisis that befell our company 10 years ago. A substantial shareholder decided to part company under rather unhappy circumstances. I was given a difficult option to buy over these shares at

some considerable premium and I was required to do so within four days. I did not have the money. I shared my predicament with the group. I was overwhelmed. People put in their hard-earned earnings, little knowing what the future would hold. One particular member of the organisation pledged his family jewellery to buy the shares. As it turned out, it has become a good investment. But at that time it was purely an act of faith, of commitment, of belonging, of loyalty to the organisation. As far as I am concerned, these words are synonymous.

Each day I hear about acts of commitment—some small and some large. A major effort to turn around a losing division; going all out to retrieve lost goodwill and money at a major site at Verawal; scaling new heights of turnover, of profitability; breaking new ground—zero working capital, break-evens well ahead of target dates; discovering a new human being at the end of a self-renewal programme—I can go on and on. Prasad, you mention that commitment is a process of mutual responsibility. Responsibility is a rather heavy sounding word. Commitment is a matter of giving and receiving—only, in my experience, I seem to be receiving and receiving...

Talking of receiving, two days ago I received a delightful surprise. While discussing a forthcoming programme for production managers, you said that you were working on a major exercise on "commitment"—I was thrilled—and would I be part of the core faculty. I am touched and honoured. Prasad, I shall try my best to live up to your expectations. I know a little bit about boilers, I know a little bit more about cash flows, but I live and enjoy commitment. Sounds a little pompous. Well, I guess if I cannot occasionally give myself a pat on the back, who will!