Building Job Commitment Among Employees

ABSTRACT
This article is concerned with how persons in leadership roles can elicit the motivation, commitment, and personal investment of members of an organization. Recent research on employee motivation is briefly summarized and interpreted. It is argued that those in leadership roles bear a special responsibility for creating a sense of purpose in the organization. It is as leaders engage the members of an organization in establishing goals, in focusing on the purpose of their work and the mission of the organization, that they are most likely to elicit personal investment. The design and use of other management tasks, especially evaluation, play an important complementary role in reinforcing the sense of a shared purpose and therewith can contribute significantly to the development of employee commitment.

INTRODUCTION
One would have to be a 1980s Rip Van Winkle not to realize that "organizational effectiveness" has become a major, sometimes all consuming, problem. It is virtually impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine without seeing a reference to this problem. Almost everyone who walks to a speaker's platform these days seems obliged to issue a call for reform of this or that practice or this or that organization—its effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity. The resounding theme through all this seems to be that if our society is to remain viable, if our way of life is to be retained, we must be more productive; the various organizations associated with such productivity must become more effective.
Perhaps it was initially our loss of a competitive edge to the Japanese—first in autos, later in TVs and stereos, and most recently in the basics of computer technology—that started this train of thought regarding productivity. But it soon turned to the effectiveness of public schools and then to our colleges and universities. It has, to date, touched virtually each and every organization and agency of significance. Consider, for example, that health care organizations are virtually under siege, even though they are hardly in competition with Japan.

And what about libraries? It is suspected that libraries and librarians have felt the same kind of effectiveness pressures that most organizations today are experiencing; it is virtually inevitable. The dollars are fewer; we are expected to do more with less.

Productivity has been one of the dominating issues of the day. Doubtless the recent volatility of the financial markets will reinforce what has already been a persistent and dominating concern. It is doubtful that these issues are just another fad. If anything they will likely increase in importance. Those concerned with issues of management cannot escape the scrutiny, the challenge—and perhaps also the opportunity—that this brings to their job.

**The Importance of Worker/Employee Commitment**

Organizational effectiveness—what it is and how you get it—is a complex issue. Simply defined, organizational effectiveness means accomplishing the goals of the organization. Implicitly or explicitly it often means accomplishing goals with a minimum of resources and doing it efficiently. To do that, one has to be careful how the resources available to an organization are managed and utilized. It means careful attention to such things as copying expenditures and to duplication of services and purchases, but it means much more than that.

Several weeks ago, Lester Thurow, a prominent economist and dean of the Sloan School of Management of M.I.T., presented the David Kinley lecture at the University of Illinois. In that lecture he alluded to a fact that he has regularly mentioned in the last several years: In order to have what we think we want to have in this society, a qualified work force is an absolute necessity; there has to be not only skillful, but also motivated and committed workers. Undoubtedly he would not object to his point being rephrased by saying that an effective society needs effective organizations and effective organizations exist only as there are committed workers. Employee commitment at all levels in the organization is the sine qua non of any effective organization. People have to be willing to give at least a day’s work for a day’s pay. They must be willing at times to adjust their needs to the needs of the organization—i.e., adjust their personal schedule as the job demands, pitch in to help out even when their job definition does not specify it.

Effective organizations this author has known and studied could not be effective if there weren’t individuals in that organization—a
significant number—who were fiercely loyal to it, a significant number who were committed to doing the jobs that needed to be done, a significant number who were willing to stick with the organization in good and bad times, a significant number who believed in the organization’s ultimate worth.

In discussing employee commitment, the term *personal investment* comes to mind since it seems to suggest the kind of personal involvement needed in an effective organization. And essentially two things are meant by that term (for a fuller discussion see Maehr and Braskamp, 1986). First, the term implies a certain personal identification which involves loyalty—staying with the organization through thick and thin. Second, the term implies a willingness to put forth one’s best efforts in making the organization work.

All have the capacity to be committed to something. All have talent and energy to commit. The question is how will they choose to invest these personal resources that they possess? Why do persons commit their time and talent in this case but not in that one? The inevitable question of concern is What is there about a particular job or job context that does not serve to elicit worker investment? There is not really anything "wrong" with the person—he or she is not lacking in drive; he or she is not lazy. She or he simply is not attracted to the task in this case.

**What Conditions Encourage Commitment?**

It is doubtful whether any of you would be here if you did not essentially agree with most of what has been said thus far—i.e., organizational effectiveness is important; organizational effectiveness is significantly dependent on employee commitment. In a way, this is "preaching to the choir." The significant question is What conditions are likely to encourage such commitment?

Over the years change occurs in the variety of strategies initiating motivation because encouraging personal investment and employee commitment have been discussed, developed, and implemented. Reviewing what has been said in this regard one might suggest that in general there are thought to be three “pressure points” for change: the person, the job, and the organization.

In the first case, one can view the problem as resting particularly in the individual and work on changing something about him or her. Or, if change is not easy, one can concentrate on selecting the “right” persons; that is, persons who are judged likely to exhibit high personal investment in the role assigned. In the main this has been the approach pursued by such notables in the area as David McClelland (1978, 1985; McClelland & Winter, 1971).

The second and third possible pressure points for change involve the situation. In this case the focus is not so much on the characteristics of individuals but on features of the situation that will bring about change. Within the broad category of “situation” one can specify two
important subcategories. First, there is the task, the specific role to be played by the person; the job to be done. From the work of Hackman and Oldham (1980), as well as that of others, it is clear that there are a variety of factors that can be adjusted to change the task which will in turn affect motivation. Second, as will become increasingly evident in this address, the job situation, the task to be done, or the role to be played, is not the sole determining feature of the context. The nature, structure, policies, goals, and values of the organization as a whole make a difference.

The pragmatic question for those who are in roles where they must manage motivation is whether it is more practical to change the situation or to select the persons who happen to hold the desired meaning biases. If the latter is chosen, enhancing personal investment in an organization will involve especially a stress on recruitment, personnel selection, or perhaps an emphasis on changing persons to fit job and organizational expectations. If the former strategy is pursued, then the stress is on changing the work situation—redesigning the job, changing the work climate, or designing the organizational culture to enhance the personal investment of all regardless of the individual biases they may bring to the situation.

While each of these strategies may have a role to play in managing personal investment, the one that seems most practicable so far as leaders are concerned relates to changing the organizational context. Thus managers, administrators—i.e., leaders—cannot rely solely or primarily on personnel selection or placement as the means for influencing the commitment—i.e., the personal investment of their staff. They have too few opportunities to select and place. But there is some reason to believe that they can affect the context in which their staff works. In particular, there is some reason to believe that they can have their most important affects on staff commitment through the way they manage organizational climate and culture (Maehr, 1987).

And, within that broader domain, there is reason to believe that it is especially important to concentrate on setting goals, defining the purpose of the organization, and articulating a sense of direction. In short, it is as the leader establishes or articulates, and therewith communicates, a mission that staff are likely to exhibit personal investment.

A simple way of putting this is to suggest that the leader’s role in eliciting motivation and commitment begins and ends with an attempt to make work meaningful. A major function in this regard is to convey the purposes of the organization—where it is going—and how the individual contributes to and is a part of this overall direction of the organization. How can the leader/manager/administrator create conditions which foster such sense of direction and which give meaning to the employee’s efforts?

What the leader can do revolves significantly around three critical functions: diagnosis/assessment, goal and mission establishment, and
evaluation/performance appraisal. While each of these processes is worthy of a detailed discussion in its own right, this discussion will be limited to a few brief words in each case. The reason for this is: first, the time is short; and second, there is an unwillingness to get so involved in describing the trees that we forget that the forest is “the thing.” Strategies, tactics, and processes are important. These processes can be instrumental in establishing a sense of purpose in an organization. But in the final analysis they must be part of a broader whole. That broader whole is the overwhelming reason for making purpose important in the organization.

**Diagnosis/Assessment**

It is self evident that as a leader/manager/administrator you are not likely to create an organization from scratch with goals and purposes of only your choosing. One gets placed into an ongoing system and has to accept an organization or work group as it comes to you and perhaps inch it along to what you think it should be. Whether or not the overall culture of the organization, its goals, and sense of purpose need changing, one somehow needs to grasp what it is. That is what “diagnosis/assessment” is about.

If indeed the communication of a “mission” and the establishment of a certain organizational culture is important, then one does well to exercise concern by assessing just what that culture and mission are perceived to be. A diagnosis/assessment approach to the analysis of the character and operation of an organization and its units is desirable—and increasingly possible (see, for example, Braskamp & Maehr, 1985; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986). Thus, even at this early stage of organizational evaluation and assessment, there is good reason to believe in the ultimate worth of an information based approach in building the organization into a smoothly functioning organism in which the separate parts are truly invested in the overall functions and goals. Data very seldom tell a manager specifically what to do, but they are very often the first step and a necessary step in the process (Braskamp & Brown, 1980). As managers consider production figures and ledger sheets, they also do well to view the health of the organizational culture. With increasing evidence that work motivation might be significantly determined by organizational culture, the necessity to systematically identify, assess, and evaluate this variable rightly becomes a significant concern at the highest levels of the organization.

**Goal setting.** Assessment lays a basis for action and for the evaluation of such actions. But what action might be taken? Goal setting clearly must be a focus of an organization if it is to exhibit the kind of sense of purpose that, as has been argued, is critical. This is not to suggest that there is available somewhere a “cookbook” on goal setting that you can employ and some mechanical procedures that you can
easily put into practice for doing this although to some degree this is true. But, to make a more general point which is believed to be more adaptable to your individual situations, one does not have to create artificial situations in order to establish goals, purpose, and a broader understanding of why the organization exists. Meetings of the staff are a proper venue for goal concerns. Too often these meetings are merely concerned with trivia. But they can be important occasions for serious discussions of what the organization is and what it is to be. What kind of service does it provide? To whom does it give its service? What is the constituency? What is its unique role? What does it do that other groups cannot or do not do? How do various subgroups contribute to this overall purpose?

Those are the "ultimate goals." The penultimate goals are equally important. They relate to what kind of place we want this to be so we can get the job done. Do we have to have more or fewer meetings? Do we have to recognize good work more? Do we have to cooperate more?

In short, the overall point here is that in order to establish goals, purpose, and a mission one first has to engage the organization in goal talk. Second, one has to get a significant number of persons involved in specifying what the organization is about.

If any one technique for doing this should be emphasized, developing a strategic plan of some sort would be the one. The plan itself is not as important as the process of writing it. Through the years students have said that they really know some things but that they have a hard time writing them down. This author's response has been: you don't know anything until you can—maybe until you do—write it down. The process of operationalizing a collection of vague thoughts has an importance all of its own. Especially in establishing goals within an organization, writing a mission statement—a set of goals or a strategic plan—is an occasion for at least beginning to establish answers to the purpose of the organization, answers which relate to the meaning of why one should be personally invested in and committed to the organization.

Evaluation

There are few better ways of expressing what is expected than through the evaluation process and the reward and recognition that accompany this process. In attempting to foster organizational change of almost any type, the domain of reward and recognition must be extensively considered. Of course many managers personally evaluate the performance of only a few and certainly do not administer or actualize the evaluation process in a specific or direct way in many cases. But they do play a major role in establishing what is valued. They also set the tone for how evaluation is to be accomplished. In these two respects they can communicate the broad goals and mission of the organization.
To be a bit more concrete about this: Managers can choose to concern themselves with setting up systematic evaluation procedures and stress certain criteria. The mere fact that he/she establishes a group to do this and gives it some visibility may itself be sufficient to make it clear that there is concern and interest not only in evaluation but in certain performance criteria. Most important of all, doubtless, is that the manager must be seen to act in terms of the evaluation information. They must take it seriously and be recognized for doing so. In one form of the evaluation process—performance appraisal—it is clear that one can communicate what is expected through indicating an association between performance and reward (see, for example, Lawler, 1971; 1977).

Evaluation and assessment are integral parts of management style. Evaluation implies a caring and an interest in what is being accomplished. Not to evaluate is to imply indifference. Evaluation, although at times painful and difficult to do, has several important consequences. It provides an occasion for articulating the goals and mission of the organization for specific programs, persons, and units. The mere fact that evaluation occurs indicates that the organization cares about what is done. Properly done, evaluation can also reflect a concern for the growth of the individual worker as a contributor to the organization and suggest a stance that is generally growth oriented rather than static. It is through a concern with evaluation that leaders affect the organizational culture. It is one of the buttons they can press for action in this regard.

**Summary**

In brief, this author wishes to stress the overwhelming importance for the leadership to be concerned with goals. The strategies alluded to earlier are really all a part of one whole. The whole concerns developing a set of shared goals which guide the operations of the organization. There is little question but that commitment—personal investment—is likely only as such a shared sense of purpose is extant within an organization.

**Conclusio**n

There should be little doubt in anyone’s mind that a sense of purpose is key to the development of personal investment in an organization. What may be less clear is the leader’s role in this regard—a role which is both critical and problematic.

Leadership is critical to the establishment of a sense of what the organization is about. The leader is certainly not the only person involved in establishing purpose in the organization. But someone in a leadership role is inevitably critical in this regard. Someone has to initiate the process. Someone has to assess what is going on and project this into a sense of direction and purpose. Someone has to conceptualize, symbolize, and communicate the meaning and purpose of an organization. And that quite logically often is the formally designated leader of the organization.
But the role is problematic. To begin to articulate a set of goals and purposes, one has to go a bit beyond the information given. One does not have purpose handed to them on a silver platter. In helping an organization define purpose, leaders take a bit of a risk. Is this really a viable way to conceptualize what this group is about? Is it really acceptable both to the group and its constituency? Will it work? To the point: moderate risk-taking is implied in the role of leadership described earlier. That implies something about the kinds of persons that can and should be leaders. Perhaps that is a fitting note on which to conclude a talk to leaders about what is an important facet of their leadership function.

REFERENCES