

Moving From Compliance to Commitment

THE EXECUTIVE CHALLENGE

By Joanne L. Smikle

Of course they do what you tell them to, you are the CEO or at least a senior VP. They know that their continued employment is contingent upon your satisfaction with their performance. But we all know that compliance is not enough. Moving your association forward requires commitment, and not just from the leadership team, but from everyone who collects a paycheck. Wise executives seek high levels of commitment to the mission of the enterprise. These leaders know that in order for them to raise the bar on performance and productivity—both of which impact membership, revenue and reputation—they must build a core of committed colleagues at the most senior levels and throughout the rest of the association.

Wise executives also understand the concept of ‘adaptive change’ and its link to commitment.¹ Adaptive change is transformational in nature. It is the systematic process of taking the organization from its existing state and steadily moving it to the level where innovation, energy and exceptional performance are the norm. It is the process of creating an association characterized by notable, replicable best practices that set the standard in the industry.

By contrast ‘technical change’ can be solved using the existing resources and problem-solving capacity. Adaptive change requires the highest level of executive competence. This competence includes the ability to dissect, reflect, and project. The dissection of existing alignments, misalignments and their relationship to organizational strategy is essential. The willingness to reflect on current leadership styles, approaches and results enables the executive to operate from fact not fantasy. Finally, and perhaps most important, projecting the possibilities of what the organization can become is the real

challenge for leaders launching transformational innovations in the association industry.

Before discussing specific strategies for garnering commitment, it is important to make the distinction between commitment and compliance. Compliant managers do the work because they have to. Think of a CFO who is an adept number cruncher without a clue

about member needs and interests beyond the fact that they pay dues. Not only does this CFO not have a clue about life beyond the calculator, he doesn’t have an interest and is not ashamed to say that. He is often quoted saying “They hired me to make sure the money is here, not to be concerned about the members.” In addition to being myopic, this is an example of a senior staffer who lacks the necessary commitment to deliver on the promises of a visionary CEO.

Executives who are able to build commitment do it by creating enthusiasm for the work. These executives are able to connect the mission of the association to every

aspect of management. They ensure that everyone understands, appreciates, and honors the human element we are charged with serving in associations. Commitment implies a sincere desire to work for the members and their organizations, not just for the dollar. Senior managers who inspire commitment must first model their understanding of this noble purpose. They then communicate it throughout the organization. Communication is coupled with requirements for action that demonstrate an understanding of the very vital role that associations play in advancing the industries and professions they serve. That action is characterized by high standards of service.

Commitment is inspired by any number of factors. Commitment can be inspired by a meaningful corporate mission. Mission



statements have been around for what seems like decades. The statement is not what compels commitment, it is the intent—the purpose articulated in the mission. Forget long, flowery prose. Instead, focus on honing your mission to the core elements of who you are and how you accomplish your aims. Tampa-based Opis Management Resources has what is among the best articulated and operationalized missions in the long-term care industry. It is as follows:

Opis Management Resources is dedicated to the highest standards of care for all those we serve—our customers, their families, and each other. By listening to our customers, our caring and compassionate team members are continuously improving operations and creating a warm, respectful, dignified, ethical and safe environment for the elderly we serve.

They have instituted a wide range of comprehensive, interconnected leadership activities to ensure the implementation of the mission from the top of the house to the very bottom. This is no small feat for a company that manages more than ten long term care facilities spread throughout Florida.

Commitment can be inspired by a charismatic leader. We have all read the praise for Jack Welch (the GE giant), Tony Dungie (the history-making football coach) and Herb Keller (the genius behind Southwest Airlines.) They possess the ability to get people to gladly give more than is required. Leaders who have magnetic, charming personalities can inspire commitment by virtue of their interpersonal competence. While you may not be able to get your people to walk through fire with you, you can certainly work on maximizing your interpersonal power. Work on your ability to communicate mission, vision, and strategy. Begin playing to your strengths. Perhaps you have keen analytical abilities. Use them to not only analyze, but to lead others in honing their problem-solving skills. Perhaps you are glib and witty. Make that work for you by using your humor to break down walls created by power and position. Whoever you are, you have innate gifts that can help you in your efforts to create adaptive change in your association.

Creating commitment is much like a never-ending election year. While we may have tired of hearing from McCain and Obama, (and perhaps Nader), they are modeled behaviors that you can learn from. They passionately articulated a position. While we may not agree with a candidate's position, they are able to express it cogently. And, unfortunately, they repeat the mantra incessantly—just as you must. As a senior executive you must be able to clearly discuss the association's strategy. Add to that, you have to court dissenters, cajole the uncommitted, and bolster supporters. This requires a high level of energy, not to mention confidence. It is far easier to ignore dissenters or to try to get rid of them. But do not be hasty. A dissenter who has been won over can be the most credible, committed employee. Creating a critical mass of committed employees requires the willingness to make good faith efforts to connect with a diverse assortment of people throughout the enterprise. It is through this inclusion that you will strengthen your critical mass able to handle the challenges of adaptive change.

Inclusion is a complex topic, it requires far more time than this article affords. However, there are elements of inclusion that must be mentioned as they relate directly to fostering commitment. The workplace, and hopefully your executive team, reflects the diversity of the larger society. Not simply racial diversity, but also diversity of gender, religion, education, sexual orientation, and a number of other factors. It is much easier for people to commit to organizations and ideals when they are in a comfortable environment. As the senior leader you are responsible for setting the tone for an inclusive, welcoming environment. Homogeneity is seldom attractive to the creative, innovative talent that you need to create organizational transformation.

Inclusion goes deeper than the previously mentioned factors. It is directly related to the integration of diverse thoughts and approaches. Your ability to build and sustain commitment is directly linked to your ability to hear different perspectives and find ways to use them to foster the aims of your association. This can be difficult for some executives. Information can get filtered, diluted, and distorted before it reaches you; hence, the reason to build rapport throughout the organization. It is essential that you have access to uncensored information. That information should be considered and weighed. Diverse perspectives should be invited. Draw out different ideas and opinions, whether they are consistent with yours or not. Incorporate that diversity in your processes and products.

Conclusion

Creating an organization that reaches its maximum potential requires more than vision and strategy from the senior executive. It requires commitment from the entire executive team. That commitment is hard to get and tough to keep. But, it is not the impossible dream. Methods for creating commitment include building an inclusive organization characterized by open communication. An essential component of that communication is the capacity to discuss strategy in meaningful terms and to then hold leaders accountable for executing that strategy in ways that are consistent with the organization's mission.

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1. 'Adaptive change' is a term coined by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky in their 2002 article "A Survival Guide for Leaders," featured in *Harvard Business Review* June 2002.