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Do Your Commitments Match Your Convictions?

by Donald N. Sull and Dominic Houlder

Included with this full-text Harvard Business Review article:

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The Idea in Brief

How many of us struggle harder every day to uphold obligations to our bosses, families, and communities—even as the quality of our lives erodes? And how many of us feel too overwhelmed to examine the causes of this dilemma?

For most people, it takes a crisis—illness, divorce, death of a loved one, business failure—before we'll refocus our commitments of money, time, and energy on what *really* matters to us. But why wait for a crisis? Instead, use a systematic process to periodically clarify your convictions and assess whether you're putting your money (and time and energy) where your mouth is. Identify high-priority values that are receiving insufficient resources—or outdated commitments that are siphoning precious resources away from your deepest convictions.

Once you've spotted gaps between what matters most to you and how you're investing your resources, use a time-out (a sabbatical, course, or retreat) to rethink old commitments and define new ones more consistent with your values.

By routinely applying this process, you—not your past obligations—will determine the direction your life takes.

The Idea in Practice

To manage the gap between your convictions and commitments, apply the following steps.

Inventory your values.
List the things that matter most to you, in specific language. For example, instead of "Money," write, "Providing financial security to my family," or "Earning enough to retire early." Aim for five to ten values And write what you *honestly* value—not what you think you *should* value.

Assess how you're investing your resources.
Track how much money, time, and energy you're devoting to your values. For each value you've listed, record the following:

- Percentage of your household income you devote to that value
- Number of hours per week you spend on the value
- Quality of energy (high, low) you devote to activities related to that value. (An hour spent on an activity when you're fresh and focused represents a greater commitment than an hour spent when you're exhausted and distracted.)

Identify gaps between your values and commitments.
Do some values on your list receive little or none of your money, time, and energy? Is there a single value that sucks a disproportionate share of your resources away from other priorities?

Understand what has caused the gaps.
Disconnects between what you value and how you actually spend your time can have several causes. Perhaps you've taken on obligations without considering the long-term ramifications. One successful entrepreneur in New York had promised to spend more time with her London-based partner. But when she decided to sell her start-up to a West Coast competitor through a five-year earn-out deal, she had to move to San Francisco to run the business. She now spends even more time airborne—torn between two conflicting commitments she made simultaneously.

Or maybe you've let others define "success" for you. One young banker earned colleagues' praise for his extreme work ethic. When he became a father, he wanted to spend more time with his family, which baffled his colleagues. Because he badly desired continued praise from colleagues, he continued his workaholic ways—and effectively gave his colleagues the power to set his priorities.

Change course.
It's harder to recalibrate commitments when you're not facing a crisis. A time-out—a sabbatical, course, or other device—can help you reflect and give you an excuse to break old commitments and forge new ones. To avoid "commitment creep," abandon or renegotiate one old commitment for every new one you make.

People usually reassess their priorities only after some personal upheaval—an illness, a divorce, the loss of a job. But with the right framework, you can think through your preferences long before crisis strikes.

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We all hold certain things dear—professional achievement, for example, or family life, or financial security. But when we step back and take stock of our day-to-day actions, we may notice a gap between the things we value most and the way we actually spend our time, money, and attention. It may be a crevice or a chasm, but, in either case, the gap raises questions about how we manage the differences between our professed values and our actual behavior.

Consider the case of Nick, the CEO of a health care products company. (The identities of all the individuals discussed in this article have been disguised to protect their confidentiality.) He turned the organization around after it was taken private by a leveraged buyout firm and has a successful managerial track record in a range of blue-chip and entrepreneurial companies. He is highly regarded by the private-equity investors who own his parent company. But there is a huge gap between what Nick cares about and what he is actually doing. One of the best times in his life, he told us, was when he and his wife took sabbaticals and volunteered for a year with an organization that helps immigrants—a cause that matters greatly to Nick, as the son of immigrants. He misses the time he and his wife spent together that year. "These days, given our schedules, we're lucky to spend more than one weekend a month together," he says. Nick also questions his professional impact. "At 50, I know I have five—maybe ten—good work years left," he says. "But I'm dribbling my life away working in a business that I'm not passionate about and that may or may not make me rich."

Nick is considering several career options. He could take a different CEO job; headhunters do call with offers. If his company were sold at the right price, he could retire early. He could teach at a business school. Or maybe he could work full-time at the nonprofit where he and his wife volunteered. Although Nick feels dissatisfied most days, he believes that any change must wait until he completes a major product launch at work and perhaps until he sees what happens with his equity. He says he is way too busy to do anything right now about the gap between his values and his working life. He's been "too busy" for several years running.

Perhaps your first instinct is to give Nick a thorough shaking. But the truth is, many successful people feel a similar disconnect between their daily activities and their deepest desires—and a similar inability to do anything about it. We became interested in that disconnect almost by accident. Since 1997, we have been teaching a course at London Business School on leading strategic transformations in organizations. The conceptual cornerstone of the course is commitments—the investments, public promises, contracts, and so on that bind an organization to a particular way of doing things. The course, and the research that underlies it, analyzes how historical commitments can create inertia that prevents organizations from responding effectively to changes in the competitive environment. It also explores how managers can commit to new business opportunities and thereby transform their companies.

Over the years, many of our midcareer and executive students borrowed the course's framework of commitments, inertia, and transformation and used it to think systematically about their personal and professional commitments. This happened enough times, and with enough interesting results, that we incorporated into the course a session on managing *personal* commitments. It even includes a computer-based exercise that lets students simulate personal commitments and track what kind of outcomes they may create—think the Sims discover the meaning of life. In the following pages, we'll take a closer look at this framework and describe how it can help midlife and other managers in their quest to narrow the gap between their deeply held values and their everyday activities. Let us be clear, though: We can't—and won't—try to tell you what the *content* of your personal commitments should be. We won't suggest that dedicating yourself to social service is better than making partner. Both are laudable goals. We do hope to help you improve the *process* by which you manage your personal commitments, whatever they may be.

Defining Commitments

First, let's define our terms and illustrate them in the business domain. Managerial commitments are actions taken in the present that bind an organization to a future course. When most people think of managerial commitments, they immediately call to mind dramatic actions—Boeing betting the company on the 777, for example, or Oracle acquiring PeopleSoft to build its position in applications software. In the corporate world, executives manage such commitments systematically. No responsible CEO would launch a new product or a make a major acquisition without first conducting methodical research and tracking progress against quantifiable goals. This is Business 101. Yet the most binding commitments in business are often so mundane as to be almost invisible. A company's ongoing investments in refining and extending an existing technology, for example, can cumulatively lock it onto a technological trajectory from which it is hard to escape. An organization that concentrates its sales efforts on its key customers can become dependent on those clients, limiting the firm's freedom to pursue other clients and other business options. Taken together, these kinds of mundane commitments can prove as binding as the big bets, yet they rarely receive the same level of scrutiny from managers.

A similar logic applies in our personal lives, where our most binding commitments are frequently the result of day-to-day decisions too small to attract our attention. There are exceptions, of course. Individuals periodically make dramatic commitments, such as changing jobs or getting married. And people who choose certain public-service careers, such as the military and law enforcement, may make the ultimate commitment by giving their life to a cause they believe in. For the rest of us, however, our most important commitments are the result of mundane decisions we make about how to allocate our money, time, and energy. Because these decisions are individually small, it is easy to lose sight of them, and when we do, a gap can grow between what we value and what we do.

Mind the Gap

The first step in managing your commitments is to take a quick inventory of what matters to you. (For a helpful work sheet, see the exhibit "Taking Stock.") You probably have at least a vague sense of what you value most, but it's

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important to clarify those themes from time to time. This exercise lets you check whether you are putting your money (and your time and energy) where your mouth is. A systematic inventory of where your money, time, and energy are going often reveals surprising gaps.

Using our work sheet, list the things that matter most to you in the first column. A few tips: It's crucial that you avoid overly vague nouns, such as "money" or "family," and instead use more specific gerunds and phrases. "Money," for example, might be articulated as "providing financial security for my family," "earning enough to retire early," or "making more than my business school section-mates." It's worth spending the time to get the language right. "Children," for example, might be broken out into a few more specific values, such as "raising well-educated, morally responsible children" or "enjoying time hanging out with my kids." These are two different values that have distinct implications for how much time you spend with your children and what activities you do with them. If you wrote the former, you might value spending time together on community service; if you wrote the latter, you might want to spend more time together at the beach. Don't be afraid to jot down a value, scratch it out if it doesn't sound quite right, and try again until it does. There is no "right" number of values, but most people find that it takes at least five to cover the multiple dimensions of their lives (for instance, professional, family, social, religious, and individual). If the number creeps beyond ten, you're probably not focusing on the highest priority values or the most critical ones. You might want to ask your spouse or partner to do this stage of the exercise, too. You can then compare notes and explore the significance of any differences you have in what you value most. Finally, it's important to write what you honestly value rather than censoring yourself or imposing judgments about whether you should want something or not. This is not an exercise in what you (or others) *think* you should value but in what *really* matters to you.

The second step is to look closely at how committed you are, practically speaking, to the items listed in the first column. The evidence here will not be in any dramatic actions you may have taken. Such momentous events, you will recall, are comparatively rare in personal life, as they are in business. Rather, the evidence will be in the smaller, more mundane commitments we all routinely make that can

Taking Stock

WHAT MATTERS TO ME	MONEY	TIME	ENERGY
Other			

What Matters Most: A Work Sheet

Ann Montgomery is a management consultant who has been feeling some incongruity between what she values and what she actually does day to day. She used this work sheet to take inventory of her situation. She listed her values in column one and assessed how much money, time, and energy she spends on each. The percentages listed in column two represent the portions of Ann's household income that support each of her values. The hours noted in column three represent the time Ann allocates, out of total waking hours in a week, to support her stated values. And the entries in column four denote the quality of the physical and mental energy Ann devotes to her values. Values receiving her peak attention get a "+." Values receiving her attention when she's less energetic get a "-."

WHAT MATTERS TO ME	MONEY	TIME	ENERGY
Raising healthy, balanced kids; spending mostly harmonious time with family Time spent with kids during the week is a blur. Are we overscheduled?	**35%** mortgage, utilities, and home maintenance **8%** trombone lessons, soccer camp, orthodontia **12%** variable expenses—bottles of merlot, food at Trader Joe's	**15 hours** "routine"—being a taxi service, cleaning up after kids, monitoring chores **5 hours** nagging and pestering kids **5 hours** "quality"—having meaningful parent–child conversations, helping with homework	-/+ - +
Doing interesting, useful work; gaining recognition	Hours are up; satisfaction isn't. Why?	**60 hours**	+
Saving for retirement and kids' college funds; hedging against job loss	**33%**	**15 minutes** worrying about Fidelity statement **15 minutes** fantasizing about Nasdaq at 10,000	- ++
Spending time on activities that recharge my batteries (reading, writing, exercising, one-on-one time with friends, and vices I'm not going to admit to)	Not much—gym fees, books, merlot, occasional dinners out, treats These always come in last...	**5 hours** exercising **5 hours** reading **0 hours** writing	+ - -
Maintaining close relationships—Alex (spouse), Mom, siblings, friends		**2 to 5 hours**	-/+
Contributing to the church—community service as well as money	**2%** I'm really too busy right now.	**0 hours** on community service	
Other	**10%** (darned if I know)	**5 to 10 hours** watching TV (worse during playoffs!), drinking merlot, reading blogs and other stuff online	+

Our most binding commitments are frequently the result of day-to-day decisions too small to attract our attention.

collectively lock us on a course of action. You can make the exercise concrete by taking stock of whether your daily investments of money, time, and energy are aligned with your values. Let us look at each category in turn.

Money. Over the past year, how much money have you spent on each of the values you listed? To answer this question, you can draw on the data you collect for tax purposes. "Dining out," for instance, may be a line item in your Intuit spreadsheet that jibes nicely with the value "spending time with friends." A word of warning, though: You will have to make some judgment calls. Your personal budget categories are unlikely to map directly to the values you listed. Sometimes they will not correlate at all, and the expenditures should be listed in a miscellaneous "other" category. Other times, your personal spending will map to your values in ways that aren't obvious. By taking a big mortgage on an expensive house in a tony neighborhood, for example, you also buy access to good public schools for your children. Your expenditures may correspond to more than one value, so you may want to split them across several values. You may also find that much of your money is allocated to long-term, fixed investments—a mortgage or a retirement savings account, for instance. You may prefer to assess only your discretionary spending—such as the amount you spend on memberships to health clubs or golf clubs—and leave a review of long-term investments for another time. Or you may discover that your fixed expenses—for instance, the amount you're spending on your summer home in Nantucket—are what most need to be reviewed. (By reducing your fixed costs, you also reduce the effort required to cover them, freeing up time and energy to pursue other alternatives.)

However you resolve these accounting issues, the next step is to convert the expenditures into a percentage of your household income and plot the percentages against your ranked values. (For a sample, see the exhibit "What Matters Most: A Work Sheet") Do the most important values get the most money? If not, there is evidence of a gap between values and commitments.

Time. Many people find themselves running short of time more often than they run out of money. Time is a scarce resource and one that inevitably gets depleted. By contrast, cash can increase over time if returns on investment exceed the cost of capital. In the past week, what have you done with your approximately 112 waking hours? Again, consider the values you listed, and try to map last week's hours against them. (If last week was atypical, pick the most recent week that you find representative.) As with your money, allocate only those hours that clearly support your stated values, and use the "other" category to account for the difference between total waking hours and those explicitly accounted for in your analysis. Everyone needs some downtime, of course, so you may want to include a value like "recharging my mental batteries." But also ask yourself, at what point does spending the afternoon watching college football on TV move beyond healthy rejuvenation and into the realm of wasting precious time? (Even reasonable couples may disagree on this one.) Are you dedicating the most hours to the activities that are of highest value to you? Was there a lot of time you could not account for—time that was not being used to ends that you care about?

Energy. Physical, emotional, and mental energy is another scarce resource and, like time, one that decreases with age. An hour spent on an activity when we are fresh and fully present in the moment represents a greater commitment than an hour spent when we are exhausted and distracted. Do the hours you spend with your partner, for example, generally come at the tail end of a 12-hour day and a six-day week? Was your mind plotting Monday's PowerPoint presentation during church or synagogue? On the work sheet, denote those values that, on average, receive your peak attention with a "+" and those that tend to get your least energetic focus with a "-."

Why the Gap?

Once you've filled in the work sheet as we've described, you should end up with a fair analysis of the alignment between what you value and how you commit your money, time, and energy. The basic idea is to identify big gaps—stated values that receive little or none of your scarce resources or a single value that sucks a disproportionate share of money, time, and energy from other values. If your values and your day-to-day commitments are closely aligned, we congratulate you: Many people find it difficult to strike and consistently maintain this balance. Gaps between your commitments and your convictions can develop and widen with time. Understanding how these gaps can emerge is helpful in preventing them from growing too large.

Sometimes the gap results from a reluctance to commit time, energy, or money to what we value. A professional or personal failure, for instance, may shake your confidence and leave you gun-shy about making new commitments. Or perhaps you just have an innate, Peter Pan–like desire to remain in the world of potentiality for as long as possible. Of course, there are times when keeping your options open makes perfect sense. Young adults, for example, experiment with alternative careers, lifestyles, values, and relationships—which is often painful for parents to watch, generally embarrassing in retrospect, but actually a prudent discovery process.

A much more common reason for the gap is that people are entangled in commitments they made in the past. We have observed an analogous phenomenon in corporate strategy. We use the phrase "active inertia" to describe managers' tendency to respond to even the most dramatic changes in their competitive environment by relying on and accelerating activities that worked in the past. Like the driver of a car with its wheels stuck in the mud, executives notice a change in the environment and step on the gas. Ultimately, they end up digging their organizations deeper into the quagmire. The ruts that lock people into active inertia are the very commitments that led to their past successes but that have now hardened: Strategic frames become blinders, selected processes lapse into routines, relationships turn into shackles, resources become millstones, and once vibrant values ossify into dogmas.

Many of us are bound by personal commitments we willingly made in the past that no longer fit. They deplete our time, money, and energy and limit our freedom even if the commitments are no longer aligned with what we currently value. Katherine, the chief executive of a midsize nonprofit company, received an offer to run a private firm. After 20 years in social service, Katherine was attracted by the new challenge as well as the generous health care and pension package, the company car, and the higher salary, which would come in handy as she and her husband put three children through college. In the past, Katherine had derided people who joined the for-profit world as sellouts. She and her husband, a political activist and community organizer, had consciously avoided what they considered the trappings of material life, including flashy cars, elaborate home renovations, and expensive vacations. Katherine's husband was livid when she broached the subject of taking the job, reminding her of what their friends would say. (Her husband's idealism was what had attracted Katherine to him in the first place.) Katherine's children, who had unsuccessfully pestered her for years to buy them iPods and PlayStations, accused her of hypocrisy. Although Katherine craved the financial security and new challenge, she felt trapped in a web of commitments she herself had woven.

Some of us experience "commitment creep." We often commit ourselves without really thinking about what we are taking on. It is very easy to say yes to new commitments without reflecting on the long-term costs of honoring the implied promises or the potential conflicts that may develop with existing commitments. Overcommitment is the bane of people who face many good options. Consider Hannah, a successful New York entrepreneur, who promised to spend more time with her London-based partner. Around the same time, she also received an offer from a large West Coast competitor to buy her start-up company at a juicy valuation. The deal was structured as a five-year earn-out, however, and required Hannah to move to San Francisco to run the combined business. The net result is that she is spending even more time airborne, torn between two major, conflicting commitments she made simultaneously.

The implicit nature of many professional and personal commitments also causes them to sneak up on us unnoticed. Relatively few personal commitments—marriage or religious vows among them—are explicit and public. Recall Nick, the health care CEO described earlier. His major commitment is not contractual; he has never signed an employment agreement. Rather, his sense of obligation arises from the implicit promises he made to Jerry, his company's chairman and principal investor. Nick has worked in senior roles in two of the companies Jerry bought. For more than a decade, Nick has been reinforcing an unspoken commitment to act as Jerry's right-hand man, which has now left him feeling trapped.

His reputation, identity, and stock options are as much at stake as if his commitment had been formalized.

Creeping commitments often seem especially binding because they lack the explicit boundaries and exit clauses common to legal documents. Anything you do to honor a creeping commitment will be understood as a reinforcement of an earlier promise or historical commitment—whether that is your intention or not.

Other people's expectations can also prevent us from committing our time, money, and energy to what matters most to us. Many of us measure our success against external benchmarks. Some of us remain prisoners of expectations set by our parents, long after we have left home. From childhood on, "success" means pleasing those who confer grades, jobs, prestige, and promotions. Well into adulthood, through college and graduate school, success remains a function of the esteem we receive from our peers, professors, and recruiters. In the corporate world, practices such as formal project reviews, 360-degree feedback, and annual appraisals increase our dependence on others' assessments of us.

This is fine, unless our values begin to diverge from those of our colleagues. When Ravi joined a Wall Street investment bank just out of college, for example, he cultivated a reputation for being the first in, the last out, and the hardest worker in the hours between. He relished the nickname his colleagues gave him—"the Marine." But after the birth of his first child, he wanted to spend more time with his family, which baffled his colleagues. To Ravi, it was simple: He wanted to continue to be praised for his work ethic, but he also wanted to spend more time at home. By relying on others for validation and praise, Ravi relinquished to them the power to set his priorities. As he discovered, handing the keys to others can be a problem if they're driving someplace you no longer want to go.

Moreover, some values generate less positive reinforcement than others and, as a result, tend to attract fewer resources. Consider the case of Ian, a successful director at a global management-consulting firm. During his 12 years at the company, he moved quickly through the ranks of consultant, manager, partner, and director, garnering a string of exceptional performance reviews along the way. Although Ian highly valued the hours he spent with his family, he found that most of his time and energy were devoted to serving clients, developing junior consultants, and building the firm. When Ian examined the source of this discrepancy (ever the consultant, he used a fishbone diagram), he discovered that he had become addicted to the positive reinforcement he was getting at work—which his home life couldn't match. At the office, he explained, "my colleagues and clients respect me, and my reviews are glowing. At home, I'm lucky to get a sullen grumble from my teenage daughter and an exhausted kiss from my wife when she gets home from work." Following the principle that "what gets measured gets done," Ian began tracking the hours he spent each week with his wife and daughter and comparing his performance week after week. Ian was pleasantly surprised to find that this simple exercise focused his attention on the hours he spent at home, and the weekly comparison provided a gentle hint that he need to do more of it.

Our historical success in meeting commitments breeds the expectation—in our bosses, colleagues, friends, and family—that we will deliver more of the same. Look at Lee, a corporate tax attorney specializing in the energy industry, who is at the top of her profession. She chairs prestigious committees, publishes in leading journals, and attracts high-profile clients who want her advice on thorny issues. Lee has always loved a professional challenge—in fact, her desire to seek out and solve the hard problems has driven her success. But after 25 years in the field, Lee told us, she had become increasingly bored with her work and longed for the intellectual excitement that characterized the early part of her career. She was reluctant, however, to scale back her lifestyle. Perhaps more important, the prospect of tackling a completely new endeavor—at age 50, no less—seemed daunting to her. "I almost wish I hadn't been so successful in law," she told us, "because then I wouldn't feel like I had so much to lose if I fell flat on my face trying something new."

The penny dropped at her 25th law school reunion. One-hundred or so of her contemporaries were all benchmarking themselves against one another. The inevitable success stories—Lee was telling them, too—were like spells that she now wanted to break. She realized she was feeling unfulfilled in part because of the company she was keeping: She worked all day with the lawyers and staffers in her firm. And because much of her time outside work was spent on professional service, she associated with many of the same attorneys on evenings and weekends. During her reunion, Lee recognized that her concerns about maintaining her current lifestyle had a lot to do with her wanting to keep up with her peers. To make a change, Lee cultivated friendships with acquaintances outside her immediate circle who sympathized with her aspiration to do something new and had themselves made major career shifts. She also cut in half the amount of time she spent attending professional conferences.

Changing Course

Most people who undertake the self-exploration process we're describing here find that it's relatively easy to identify their own values, somewhat more difficult to analyze the gap between their values and the way they actually live, and harder still to analyze the reasons for this gap. But the hardest task of all is doing something about *closing* the gap. As we know from organizational life, change is very easy to talk about and extremely difficult to pull off. The force of inertia is every bit as powerful in our personal lives as it is in most organizations.

The most common catalyst for serious change is a personal or professional crisis, such as the death of a loved one, a personal illness, a business failure, the loss of a job, or a divorce. No one wishes for crises; they drain not just money, time, and energy but often health, confidence and reputation. But crises do push some people to deliberately reexamine their commitments.

Annette was an independent consultant who worked within a network. Although she was putting in more and more hours, she found that she was spending less and less time on projects that really engaged her imagination and advanced her skills. She was trapped by layers of old commitments, some of which had crept up on her unnoticed. Never wanting to disappoint a client, she invariably delivered excellent work, on time. Her clients and colleagues expected more and more of the same. Years of professional success had left Annette with little freedom to devote herself to the things she really cared about.

Then her mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and Annette's priorities changed. At the top of her list was ensuring that her mother got the best possible care. Next was spending quality time with her mother in her final months. Further down the list were her commitments to clients and associates; in many cases, those commitments had to be abandoned. Annette's mother's illness lasted for six months and, like any crisis, consumed considerable time, energy, and money. But it also created advantages both obvious and unforeseen. Specifically:

Crises force people to figure out what really matters. In the end, all crises are reminders that we are not omnipotent or immortal and that we cannot afford to ignore the things that really matter to us. Her mother's illness and death sent a message to Annette: She had to make the most of her own life. That meant committing herself only to those professional projects she found interesting and challenging—not entering into the same kinds of engagements with the same kinds of clients using the same kinds of PowerPoint presentations where only the names change. It also meant spending more time with the people who mattered to her most, including her equally harried partner and her estranged father.

Crises force people to make choices. While some people fail to commit because they feel trapped by promises they've already made, others simply avoid making commitments altogether. A crisis will often demolish our commitment-avoidance strategies. The loss of a job, or an unexpected denial of promotion, can be the catalyst for exploring what we really want to make of our working lives.

Crises can nullify outdated commitments. A crisis in one's personal life is analogous to a force majeure contract clause in a legal document—all previous promises are nullified because of unanticipated or uncontrollable events. The people to whom Annette had previously committed her time and energy, for instance, understood that caring for her mother took precedence over earlier claims on Annette's resources. The slate was clean.

Crises prompt people to clear their diaries. During the six months that Annette was home caring for her mother, she had handed over most of her clients to colleagues, leaving her with a largely empty calendar. That allowed her to rebuild her professional life step by step, taking on new commitments.

Crises help to break the cycle of success. We noted earlier that many successful people feel trapped by their very success. A failure in the workplace, while undoubtedly painful, can also be liberating. Once you and the people around you see that you failed, but that the failure neither killed you nor destroyed your many strengths, it becomes easier to change direction and take on new challenges. When Annette returned to the workplace and began to remake her commitments, she focused on creative and stretch assignments rather than leaning on old ways of doing things.

It's harder (and braver) to make new commitments and rethink old ones when we are not facing a crisis. Which is why time-outs—sabbaticals, executive education courses, or any other catalyst for breaking the thread of a narrative—are so important. Such breaks confer some of the benefits of a crisis—particularly some time to reflect, an excuse to break old commitments, and a chance to clear the diary—without exacting the high costs. That being said, it would be wrong to suggest that changing direction is easy, even if you're reasonably certain about where you want to go. People tend to encounter the following pitfalls when attempting to remake their commitments.

The Great Leap Forward. Some people end up making unrealistic commitments that are bound to fail—great leaps that cannot be made. These commitments can be very enticing; they're novel and exciting for a while. But they are also very risky. Such commitments can provide an excuse for failing to make or keep more mundane commitments. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, are discouraged from pledging that they will never drink again; they are encouraged to take it one day at a time. Or consider Maria, a Brazilian who received her undergraduate and MBA degrees in the United States and stayed to work as a marketing executive in a large consumer goods company in the Midwest. After more than 15 years in the States, she was anxious to spend more time with her aging parents in São Paulo. She quit her job and moved to Brazil without lining up a new position. Although she enjoyed spending more time with her parents, she was deeply frustrated by her inability to find a position of comparable responsibility with a world-class company. And she missed the United States and her friends more than she had imagined. Two companies and 18 months later, Maria decided to return to the United States and concluded that she would have been better served by taking a one-year posting in Brazil with a multinational to test the waters professionally and personally.

The Go-It-Alone Fallacy. Remaking historical commitments is not a solo sport; after all, these are promises others rely on. Social organizations—families, churches, companies, and communities, for instance—are held together by the promises embedded in individual members' commitments. Undoing these commitments can disrupt organizations and undermine individuals' credibility. As the world changes around us or as our values evolve, we need to renegotiate existing commitments with those who would be affected by these changes, not try to make unilateral moves. For example, Susan, a high-powered London-based executive, wants to scale back her professional obligations to spend more time with her preschool-aged children. To do so, she would need to talk with her boss and her colleagues about how to reduce and restructure her workload. Even more daunting, in Susan's eyes, is the prospect of discussing with her husband, Donald, how this change in commitments would affect their family and financial responsibilities as well as the couple's overall lifestyle. Most important, she wonders, who would get to make the final decision?

The Clutter Trap. We fall into this trap when we are not systematically undoing old commitments as we take on new ones. As a result, so many promises—new and old—call out for our time and other resources that we may meet none of them or simply fall back on what we were doing before. Many of us have experienced this in our professional lives when we attend management meetings that add new items to our to-do list without removing existing ones. Taken as a whole, the agenda that emerges can be impossible. Let us look at Margaret, a senior executive in a large European firm, who realized she couldn't make new commitments to what she knew had to be done because of existing clutter. She had objectives for more than 50 different key performance indicators at work. Scrambling to achieve those objectives prevented her from taking on new ones. A good rule of thumb for avoiding clutter is to abandon or renegotiate an old commitment for every new one you make. Margaret, for example, scheduled an hour a month to cull her diary, canceling meetings as higher priorities arose.

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The final assignment in the course we teach on leading strategic change in organizations invites students to state the commitments they will make (or remake) after the program ends. We are always struck by the diversity of approaches that different students take to this assignment, even after sitting in the same classroom for a semester. This is why we are not offering you hard-and-fast rules for making or remaking your commitments. No such formula is possible for a process that is, by its very nature, highly idiosyncratic and dependent on individual circumstances. But you can manage the gap between what you value and what you do by periodically and systematically reexamining your values and the way you allocate precious resources. Such an exercise can help you take control of your future commitments so that past commitments won't take control of you.

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Do Your Commitments Match Your Convictions?

Further Reading

ARTICLE
Managing by Commitments
by Donald N. Sull
Harvard Business Review
June 2003
Product no. R0306E

Sull urges us to apply the same thoughtfulness to professional commitments as we do to personal commitments. Your professional commitments—R&D investments, public promises to hit growth targets, hiring decisions—set your business's direction. They each involve actions you take *today* that bind your company to a course of action *tomorrow*.

Commitments also shape your business's identity—establishing opportunities and limitations, and focusing and energizing employees. But like double-edged swords, they can be dangerous if made carelessly. While each decision defines your company's capabilities now, it also reduces its flexibility in the future. When competitive conditions change, you may be unable to respond effectively.

You can't anticipate every commitment's long-term consequences, but you shouldn't shy away from making commitments. How to wield these double-edged swords? Before each key decision, ask, "Am I locking us into a course of action we'll regret later?" When disruptive change strikes, let go of "business as usual" in favor of *transforming* commitments—investing in revamped processes and new resources, establishing new partnerships, and defining new values.