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# Do Your Commitments Match Your Convictions?

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Donald N. Sull, Dominic Houlder

## The Idea in Brief

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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 Identify high-priority values that are receiving insufficient resources--or outdated commitments that are siphoning precious resources away from your deepest convictions.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

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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.

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## Further Reading

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Article

### **Managing by Commitments**

*Harvard Business Review*

June 2003

by Donald N. Sull

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.

## About the Authors

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