

Gathering to Commit

**Transform your Meetings in
Conversations for Real Commitment**



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Introduction

This eBook focusses on what really enables us achieve our desired outcome when tackling a challenge.

The belief that we are more productive by making comprehensive plans, and then executing them, does not help us tackle the challenges that exist in today's organisations.

Assume we are working in a context in which challenges (1) are complex, (2) need to be solved collectively, and (3) our ability to make adaptations as a team is key. What we really need to do is identify and pay attention to the interactions that really make a difference.





These interactions are the conversations that generate engagement and commitment.

This eBook is all about bringing these conversations to the surface, and learning how to be effective using them towards results that can only be achieved by mastering the art of doing things together with others.



Meetings are not for action planning, but for commitment

Anyone who has ever worked in an office will know that feeling. You look in your diary and there are so many meetings that you begin to wonder whether there will ever be enough time to actually do any work.

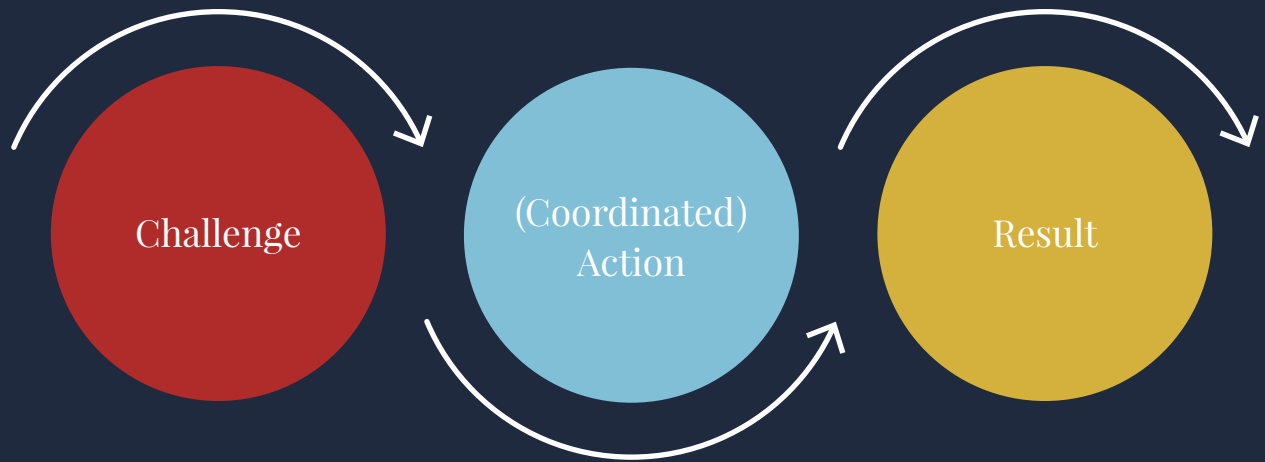
On the flip side, if you are a decision maker in your organisation, it is likely your work is highly dependent on the conversations you have and how you conduct them.



This is not surprising. To achieve the right results, we have to perform a large number of actions both as a group and as an organisation. And rather than being random or by chance, these should be synchronised actions.

Our organisations are, after all, a result of people collectively generating decisions and actions that create synergy, much like a team rowing a boat in a coordinated fashion.

We say people are coordinated because they perform coordinated actions.



DON'T COORDINATE PEOPLE, ASK FOR THEIR COMMITMENT

What I would like to present to you is the idea that we are not simply trying to organise people or determine each and every action they make. Ultimately, individuals will make their own decisions and act accordingly. As a manager or leader, your job is to influence people's decisions through the power of conversation.



You don't coordinate people; you ask them to commit to a decision that has been made or will be made together.

As a leader, your role is to generate commitment within your team, and the way you should go about achieving this is by generating conversations that produce individual and collective promises from them. Promises addressed to you, to one another and to the wider organisation.



Although conversation is key for coordinating the actions we need in our leadership work today, far too little attention is given to becoming competent in what leaders do most of all: converse.

What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘commitment’? For many people, it means something related to personal development, motivation or inner strength. Yet while this can be the case, it is not the facet of commitment we are examining here.

There is more to commitment than your internal conversations and your strong will alone. Something fundamental for our social lives that is all too often overlooked, something that can teach us how to commit, so much so that it can help us with our inner commitment as well.

You can master commitment in relationships with others. When we commit to something in the presence of others, we make a promise to ourselves and normally to others as well. Making good on that promise is much easier if you have more than yourself to hold your promise accountable.

You don't need commitment to act, commitment is the first action. And you don't have to do it alone.

COMMITMENT IS AN ACTION THAT DEFINES
THE FUTURE EFFECTS ON THOSE INVOLVED.

Fundamental action happens long before we roll up our sleeves; it happens in the coordination of actions we perform before the classic ‘going down to business’. Commitment is the action of promising one another a shared future and organising the coordinated actions involved.



The most overlooked problem in organisations today is not people failing to identify the challenge at hand or to them not performing the required actions. The blind spot in 10 out of 10 workspaces is the inability to engage in conversations to coordinate actions and generate commitment.



Generating commitment through conversation

In addition to the social cues, intuition and emotional intelligence you might use to assess an individual's inner commitment, one also requires 'pragmatic competencies' to generate commitment, and then guarantee a collective way forward.

These competencies are conversational, in the sense of being able to create transformative actions with words. So, how can one become an expert in these conversational competencies? Like so many things in life, by practice.



HERE ARE THREE STEPS TO HELP YOU.

1 Collect your affirmations and make collective declarations



Affirmations are used to describe the world around us. They state what we consider to be facts. “Andrew is the person wearing a red hat and is about 6 feet tall” is, for instance, an affirmation that describes Andrew.

Declarations change the way we interact with the world around us. Rather than describing the world, declarations change the world by creating possibilities and constraints. “Andrew is very competent at his job and is someone we can trust” is a declaration that will in all likelihood shape our future actions towards Andrew.

A. DETERMINE YOUR AFFIRMATIONS

What are the facts and data you need to take into account to be better able to describe the context and world around you?

Think of your budget, headcount, external deadlines, etc.

B. MAKE COLLECTIVE DECLARATIONS

What needs to be declared to give real direction to a group or organisation? Who has the authority to sustain that declaration and what makes it legitimate for the whole group? Consider your vision, strategic decisions, tactical choices, etc.

The objective is create a declaration that defines a choice of direction that is both powerful and recognisable. This way it can be considered legitimate and can be shared with everyone involved.

You can go through A and B using many paths, from a small group decision that informs the crowd to an open participatory creative process. The more complex your challenge, the more likely you will need more actors (experts, users, stakeholders etc.) to identify the affirmations needed, and to inform better collective declarations that have legitimacy.

Having your collective declaration is not a step before action, it is already action in itself. When you declare, as we have explored, we change the world by making a choice and committing to it.

People often overlook what can be achieved through collective declarations because they are not perceived as valued types of actions.

Take a statement such as: “We didn’t do anything, we just talked”, in which the speaker is clearly conveying a sense of disappointment that nothing has been produced. The dismissal of conversational action in this way comes at a price.

The lack of a clear collective declaration is one of the most common symptoms of organisational dysfunction. Everyone simply follows a generic purpose statement. The result? They all end up rowing the boat in different directions without thinking.

2 Ask and offer actions – making individual and collective promises

For your collective declaration to become a reality, the next step of the conversation is to coordinate actions with others. This step leads to people committing to their own personal actions, but with a twist in focus, with commitment at the centre of the conversations rather than planning actions together.



Conversational action, in this case, coordinating actions with others, has different characteristics than action planning. With the former, the actions you perform reflect and reinforce the process of committing together, and how the actions can be maintained and monitored. With the latter, the plans reflect the technical steps an expert takes to achieve a goal.

*Conversational action is about creating commitment,
whereas action planning is about creating tasks.*

Both types of actions are of course important. The fact that we are trained to perform expert technical tasks throughout our lives does, however, mean that nobody introduces us to an equally important set of actions that enables commitment, and therefore ensures that 'action planning' goes beyond just planning alone.



3

Monitor your promises and those of your team

All declarations are contextual and it is possible that they should be adapted as outlined in Step 1 or the promises made in Step 2.

While this monitoring is essential, it does not mean managing, let alone micro-managing. It means creating conversations to check and sustain the commitment that was generated.



Making conversational action visible and practical

Imagine you are at home and you call a friend who lives on the other side of town for a chat. After a while, you ask your friend to continue the conversation in person later this afternoon, and they say yes. They remember you don't have your own means of transportation, so offer to drive by your house to pick you up. You gratefully accept the offer and say goodbye.

A simple interaction, but not an uneventful one. A number of actions were undertaken. While these are not regular 'moving' actions, they will define what you and your friend will do later that day. We therefore call them 'performative' actions as they change things.



Let's first look at the results of this simple conversation: you and your friend both declared and committed to a future together. You both promised, be it implicitly, to act following this commitment. In time, this means you will need to 'think your thoughts' to keep track of time and 'move your body' to get changed and leave the house. All this to fulfil your commitment to the collective future outlined in a simple exchange of words.

Now, what really happened in terms of actions during our short example? Let's break down the performative actions you and your friend made step by step:

1. YOU ASKED YOUR
FRIEND TO MEET
IN PERSON

By doing so you are making a request, asking for something that you want or need in the hope that it will happen in the future.

2. THEY SAID
YES

This means that they accept your request and, by doing so, they commit to the future you outlined for both of you. Implicitly they make a promise to accompany you in a future action.

3. THEY OFFER TO
PICK YOU UP

With this action they are outlining a future that might be of interest to you by taking care of something they believe you want or need.

4. YOU ACCEPT THEIR OFFER

This is confirmation that a further commitment has been made that will change the near future: they will come by to pick you up. The moment you accept, your friend's offer once again becomes an implicit promise to you.

As you can see, while few visible actions have occurred, many things have changed during this short conversation. These actions will define you and your friend's future, and will likely lead many other future coordinated actions.

This is the very essence of Gathering to Commit. Every day we undertake countless actions without even realising it. How we converse with one another really does change our world and the world around us.



The fact that we, as human beings, can coordinate actions with one another using language is a key factor that sets us apart from any other beings.

WE COORDINATE ACTIONS WITH OTHERS

USING DECLARATIONS CALLED PROMISES

Let's take a moment to focus on the practical aspects of coordinating actions. In our short story, the two friends committed to a future together by making two distinct promises:

- i one promise was a result of a request when you asked for something; and
- ii the other promise was a result of an offer when your friend offered you something.



By coordinating actions with others, we exchange promises and therefore commit to a future together. Yes, just like a marriage, but cheaper!

This is your single most important responsibility in managing and leading: to coordinate actions with others by creating conversations in which commitment can be made through promises.

There are two main ways in which promises are made: you either ask for something and the other person says yes, or you can offer something and the other person accepts. The only difference is that a request reflects a concern held by the speaker, whereas an offer is an attempt by the speaker to meet a concern they believe the other person has.

Both lead to promises, declarations that have the power to change the future, and declarations that we can all learn to master.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF A PROMISE

The way we structure our conversational action to guarantee a sound commitment is by making promises to one another.

If you have already declared a proposal for future action, be it in your request or in your offer, and the other person has already agreed to it, you have successfully opened a space for a commitment.

A well-built promise is a foundation of a powerful commitment.



We master this action by becoming more competent in making commitments using well-built promises. The architecture of a promise is based on our ability to agree on a description of the future desired state, a description of the action, and/or its effects in the future.

To achieve an effective description of that future, a promise should encompass three things: People, Task and Boundaries.



PEOPLE

Who is going to do what, who is involved, and what roles are people assigned.



TASK

What do all parties agree is required to deliver the task and to fulfil the promise in the future?



BOUNDARIES

What are the boundaries – of which time is the most important – without which the promise cannot be considered fulfilled?

Promises that lack clarity on one or more of these three factors are unfortunately the rule rather than the exception. The result? Lower levels of commitment, which in turn generates a need to repeat work, frustration and even a degradation in trust in a relationship.

Let's now examine the gaps generated by not paying attention to promises.



THE PEOPLE GAP:

If you have ever heard a comment like “could someone please do this!” or “Marketing promised to deliver that”, then you know promises not assigned specifically to someone often fall through the cracks. The same is true in reverse, which is why we also hear people say things such as “Who asked for this change?” or “how do we know this is right?”. When this happens nobody can confirm proper delivery, so a promise cannot be completed.



THE TASK GAP:

An example of not having a clear task would be you promising to pass by somebody's house and them assuming you were offering them a lift, only for you to arrive on your mountain bike. What is required is a shared declaration of what will happen in the future. After all, we want to commit to the same thing.





THE BOUNDARIES GAP:

Not having clear boundaries means you know the task, but that there is a lack of clarity in terms of the context. If, for instance, you ask for a glass of water and the intended action is to drink it, it is clearly unhelpful if someone brings you boiling water. In this case, you either have an implicit context— “I’m thirsty, can you get me a glass of water?” or you need to state it. Stating a time or time period for our promises enables us to visualise a sequence of events for future actions.

Contrary to what many people believe, it is not the lack of personal commitment that undermines effective action. Rather it is, more often than not, our inability to articulate promise statements in an effective way.

It is therefore not a question of people lacking commitment, it is simply our inability to give and receive effective promises.

Note, this means that even if there is one person who has made a promise and will be held accountable to perform a future action, this interaction is still a shared responsibility. Commitment in this case is not a personal goal; it is a social act.

THE CYCLE OF A PROMISE

If a promise begins with an acceptance of either an offer or a request, it finishes when the person to whom the promise was addressed declares they are satisfied with the delivery.

Imagine you have asked for a pizza to be delivered. The restaurant says, “Yes, we will make this pizza for you, deliver it in 30 minutes and we expect to be paid x euros”. Sometime later, the pizza arrives at your front door. Done and dusted. But, wait, this is not the pizza you asked for! If this were to happen, you would probably call the restaurant and complain because they failed to fulfil their promise.

A different scenario does, however, also exist. Even though the wrong pizza has been delivered, you could choose to accept it. If so, the restaurant will assume it has done what it was supposed to do. So, in their eyes, promise accepted.

That process of accepting what has been delivered is therefore a fundamental part of a promise. For this reason, it is only after a declaration of acceptance that we can consider our cycle complete.



In organisational life, the act of declaring acceptance or requesting the need for revision of that promise is known as giving feedback. And when we provide feedback in an organisational setting, we are always in effect giving feedback on a promise that has been made.

We feed back on our promises. To put it another way, if we do not have a proper promise, there is nothing about which we can provide feedback.

Providing feedback is perhaps the most talked about topic and subject for training in organisational life. And for good reason. Only by learning to structure a promise can we give effective feedback. And we can only give effective feedback by beginning with a structured promise.



Conclusion

In this eBook, you learned that commitment is a fundamental ingredient to achieve positive results from challenges. And that commitment is generated when we act using our words effectively, in conversation.

You also learned that mastering conversational action enables you to declare a powerful collective future with others, in addition to creating synergy through well-built promises.

And finally, you now know the architecture of a powerful promise, and the steps to take to make one.

By using these learnings, I hope your gatherings will generate the commitment needed to move forward.



About the Author



Augusto has experience in working with people and teams focusing on leadership development, organisational change and in designing & hosting learning interventions that are effective for corporate, governmental and civil society organisations. Augusto's ability to connect systems and people is key to his work in preparing and conducting changing processes in face of complex situations.

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