



BURY
MY HEART
AT
CONFERENCE
ROOM B:
Emotional
Commitment
at Work
Stan Slap

IT TAKES A VALUE PROPOSITION.

A manager's emotional commitment is the ultimate trigger for their discretionary effort, worth more than financial, intellectual and physical commitment combined. It's the kind of commitment that solves unsolvable problems, creates energy when all energy has been expended, and ignites emotional commitment in others, like employees, teams and customers. Emotional commitment means unchecked, unvarnished devotion to the company and its success; any legendary organizational performance is the result of emotionally committed managers.

Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted, said Einstein. This is a guy who conducted early nuclear experiments on his own hair and so is perhaps not your most reliable organizational thinker; still, he had a point. The really important measurements of emotional commitment include the ones a company can't see until managers need to show them. Ferocious support for the company when the company needs it most is one of these hidden metrics.

Any manager can appear fully productive and enthusiastic simply because they're financially, intellectually and physically committed. But if you've ever witnessed a human being emotionally committed to a cause—working like they're being paid a million when they're not being paid a dime—you know there's a difference and you know it's big.

A manager's emotional commitment is the ultimate trigger for their discretionary effort.

THE MYSTERY ACHIEVEMENT.

It's big but it's not easy. The issue of gaining emotional commitment from managers is typically one of manic yet unrequited corporate lust. How can your company get it? The question isn't how as much as why. Why would any manager choose to give such a thing to their company, or more accurately, why wouldn't they?

It never fails: Get any few managers together and they're sane and sensible about how they want to live and work, and live at work. Put a bunch of them together, some bizarre herd mentality takes over and they begin to legislate against themselves.

There is no evil brain in a jar behind the curtain. Who is it that creates, mandates and accepts violations of how managers want to live at work? Managers—acting as management, the honor guard of the enterprise. Focused, vigilant and unfortunately contributing to the threat, not resolving it. As if living personal values at work doesn't have anything to do with business—as if it doesn't directly affect managers' commitment and managers' commitment doesn't decide the success of the company.

Whenever a deep divide exists between who someone is as a human being, who they want to be as a manager and who they have to be as management, all hope for emotional commitment is lost. Lost for managers and lost for the companies which depend on them.

WALLET. HEART. KEYS.

And so the battle rages on over emotional commitment with no one ever declared the winner. On one side, companies seem condemned to artificial life support—the constant combination of bribing, bullying and bleating used to keep managers productive and paying attention.

On the other, managers seem condemned to being materially enriched as a tradeoff for ultimate fulfillment, a problem that often goes unrecognized until it's way too late to reconcile. You and your company may be successful while enduring these conditions, but for how long, at what cost, and versus what potential? What definition of success?

Like most standoffs, the problem is rooted in mutual misunderstanding. As you'll learn, what companies want most from their managers is what they most stop their managers from giving. What managers want most from their jobs is what they most stop themselves from getting.

You would no doubt savor this delicious irony if it didn't happen to affect you personally.

THE PRESENCE OF YOUR ABSENCE.

Whoa, *whoa*. Is someone saying that you're not emotionally committed to your company? You believe in your company and brag endlessly about it. You rock around the clock, working days, nights and weekends for your company. You wear nothing but commemorative company T-shirts and might do so even if they weren't free. What greater love hath any manager?

Ah, but emotional commitment is a tricky thing, a delicate process that's buried far below the level of conscious choice. It will happen only when your brain believes it's safe to give it and is uniquely rewarded for giving it. The critical signal for both is if you're able to live your deepest personal values at work. As a manager, can you say that's the case—no hesitation or qualification? Careful now: Even a financially rewarding, intellectually stimulating work environment isn't the same as living your own values.

Family. Integrity. Health. Freedom. These are examples of values. If these are some of your own biggest values and you feel that you have to compromise them in any way to do your job, you may not be fully living your values at work. It's not a matter of your intelligence, maturity or skill; there are relentlessly seductive forces being aimed at you as companies attempt to replicate a sense of personal values fulfillment for managers and insert corporate priorities in its place.

You can be a smart and sophisticated manager who has Family as a core value—and easily end up believing that you need to never see your family so you can make a bunch of money to take care of your family by killing the competition and, by extension, other people and their families, even though Harmony and Spirituality are also among your top values. And you can ignore that this is happening even though your value of Integrity, of which issues like accountability, self-awareness and congruency play key parts, is being regularly jeopardized.

Hmmm.

“Manager” can be a great job to have and you may be having a great time doing it. But imbedded in any manager’s job description is the requirement to regularly subordinate or compromise personal values in favor of company priorities. This doesn’t mean you’re out there committing heinous acts as part of some Faustian bargain (even if you are, pay attention), but it does mean that what your company wants done and how it wants it done must often take precedence over your own deep preferences. This is what it means to be a manager: serve your company first. Emotional detachment is a logical reaction in the face of this constant struggle.

Emotional detachment manifests itself in all sorts of ways. Could you possibly be emotionally detached at work without even realizing it? It would be hard to realize if you’re detached. There’s a party in your head and you’re not invited. It can just as easily mobilize you as paralyze you, so working a lot and thinking about work a lot aren’t always accurate indicators of emotional commitment to work. On the other hand, you may be able to draw a clear distinction between what happens at work and the rest of your life, but should that distinction be so easy? If you could bring the best of who you are to work, would that distinction be so necessary?

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FEAR ITSELF.

“Organization” comes from the same root word as organism—and for good reason. A company is an organism, a self-sustaining ecosystem. Like any organism, its primary priority is to survive. In order for a corporate organism to survive, it needs managers to help it function and grow. And it needs those managers to place company priorities over personal priorities whenever necessary, to marginalize their own values and beliefs in favor of company goals and methods.

To ensure this happens, companies bribe, bluff and bully their managers. In return, companies get financial, intellectual and physical commitment. But they don’t get emotional commitment, which is what they really need to ensure ultimate survival.

Companies can’t get emotional commitment from their managers because the company believes it needs to be the dominant organism in the relationship, which causes managers to have to repress their own values—and so causes them to detach emotionally from their jobs. In order to really get that emotional commitment, a company would have to reattach managers to their own deep drivers—allow them to live their own values and act according to their own personal codes.

Uh, who’s got the folder marked “Plan B?”

This has Company Nightmare stamped all over it. If managers were allowed to live their value of Family, maybe they wouldn’t work 50 hours a week, stay away from home constantly or constantly take the job home with them. If managers were allowed to live their value of Integrity, maybe they wouldn’t represent a product to customers as performing the best and at the lowest cost when it doesn’t, it isn’t—or it doesn’t even exist yet. If managers were allowed to live their value of Health, maybe they would resist conditions of constant stress. If managers were allowed to live their value of Freedom, maybe they would demand autonomy in decisions and pay less respect to an enforced

hierarchy. If managers were allowed to live their value of Creativity, maybe they wouldn't necessarily conform to established policy.

This is the great fear of the corporate organism: If I set you free to pursue your own priorities, you'll leave me and I'll die. The problem is, managers are already free. They're free to detach, which is about as free as one can get. The company may have captured their minds, their bodies and their pockets, but that doesn't mean it's captured their hearts. Those hearts are hidden away, in a safe place. Those hearts are the source of emotional commitment.

What every manager in every company has in common is that they are human. When that humanity is denied by an anxious corporate organism things get strange. No one acts naturally. No one feels safe or trusts anyone else. People detach to protect themselves. And no one emotionally commits.

Can companies really suffer this problem? It is perilously flawed logic to think that a company can achieve dependable success by causing managers to place their own priority beliefs in less than a priority position. When detachment is introduced into a management organization and pressure is added by insisting those managers be united and devoted, the result is instability at a foundational level. Core: Meltdown.

Even if they can't put the organizational finger on it, companies can sense the difference between emotional commitment and lesser kinds. They understand that something big is being left off the table—the gap between what their managers are giving and what they could be giving—and they attempt to close the gap.

The first attempt is to repurpose values by swapping individual definitions for corporate ones. You have family as a value? That's beautiful. This is your family right here. Now protect it by making your numbers.

The second attempt is the selling of the emotional company store: plenty of support for a common point of view; clearly defined enemies; ever-changing rewards and punishment; constant drama and numbing urgent pace; über support rallies where cold business logic is sold as burning passion; free company clothing and low-cost company food; and company “values” made available in a dazzling display of collateral damage including wallet cards, T-shirts, posters, mouse pads, coffee cups and a company laptop bag to stuff it all into.

Okay, the third attempt is to trot out the carrots—money and the stuff money buys.

All of this is carefully calculated to work. It should work. Sometimes it seems like it works. It doesn't work. Not logically. Not neurobiologically.

Companies can't get emotional commitment from their managers because the company believes it needs to be the dominant organism in the relationship

THE SOLUTION. CLEVERLY DISGUISED AS THE PROBLEM.

What's needed is a model that will reliably allow managers to live their values at work without the company having to constantly facilitate the process. A self-sustaining model that is a safe and healthy choice for both the company and its managers. Brace yourself: The model is called leadership.

Wait—come back!

Not leadership the way you typically hear about it, as a corporate subversion of the concept—the 10, 100 or 1,000 immaculate and selfless organizational behaviors required for you to be anointed a “leader.” The true purpose of leadership isn't to increase shareholder value or the productivity of work teams. That's important and leadership will indeed do these things when applied in an organization; any corporate objective that depends on inspired human effort will best be realized through leadership. But that's not the point of leadership, it never has been and it never will be, and to confuse cause and effect is to deny the critical reason to become a leader in the first place.

Taking the concept “leaders do the right thing” literally sets companies galloping off in an obsessive search for whatever “thing” is the Holy Grail of leadership. It's not what leaders do that's important; it's why they do it. Leadership is a motivation. It's a purpose before it's ever a practice. The worst thing in your own development as a leader is not to do it wrong. It's to do it for the wrong reasons.

There is more mythology, misdirection, superstition and generalized academic babble about leadership than any other business subject. All the noble impact of leadership is results, not reasons. In reality, the purpose of leadership is to change the world around you in the name of your values, so you can live those values more fully. The process of leadership is to turn your values into a compelling cause for others, so you can gain resources to help you do that.

The irreducible essence of leadership is that leaders are people who live their deepest personal values without compromise and they use those values to make life better for others—this is why people become leaders and why people follow leaders.

Because leaders live their own values they're essentially self-medicated—the pressure's off the company to provide the deepest motivational fulfillment. Leaders also remain the model of human beings driven to have emotional commitment and to create it in others, against all odds and, if necessary, against all protective common sense. It's real leaders that a company needs most if the organization is going to thrive.

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Yet a company exists in a dangerous jungle; there are a lot of hungry heavy breathers lurking in the shadows. The constant focus is on survival and the last thing it's going to chance is the counterintuitive move. What a company absolutely cannot do is knowingly introduce potential chaos into the organization, and this logically includes encouraging authentic leadership throughout its management ranks. At the root of chaos theory is the concept of the strange attractor and leaders are most definitely your strange attractors.

Leadership in its truest form is seen as a hectic proposition, a messy thing, and for all its tempting benefits, uncertain and uncontrollable. How many times have you been told to be a leader, trained in one leadership method or another, preached at, screeched at, had leadership once again imbedded in your job objectives? Yet how many times has it all stopped short of encouraging the uncompromising personal motivation that actually causes leadership in the first place? Companies want what leaders do without incurring why they do it.

Recognized or not, the intuitive corporate concern is that real leaders won't carry the company values wallet card; they'll carry their own and they'll burn the corporate house down in order to advance their cause. Allowing real leaders to thoroughly inhabit the system could destroy the system. They'll reorder the balance of power without considering practical consequences. This concern can be defined as: reasonable. That's what genuine, powerful leaders have often done throughout history.

But only if destroying the system was the purpose of their leadership. What if it were to protect the system? What if real leaders, transformed from throughout the ranks of a company's managers, flourished in the belief that to protect the company was to protect their ability to gain the personal benefits of leadership—to live their most important personal values every day at work?

Is this possible?

Any expert in human behavior will tell you that, if you want an emotionally committed relationship, then people must be allowed to be true to who they are in that relationship. This is the problem that companies must solve to get what they want most from their managers.

It's not a problem if the organizational structure just uses managers as standardized components with a ceiling of performance expectations. But if any company wants the best of what human beings can choose to give, it has to free them to give it. Only when a company sets its managers free will it have the dependable organization it dreams of. The company will finally be free as well. Free from the expensive burden of falsely stimulating shallow commitment. Managers will end up with what they've always wanted and so will the company.

New truth: The cause cannot always be the company; instead, it must also be managers' pursuit of their own values within the company. This isn't licensing chaos; it is ensuring control. There is no more reliable way for the company to become the cause than by not always insisting on being the cause.

Can companies trust their managers to remain committed to the enterprise if they're free to live their values at work? If you're managing managers, here's a sure way to tell: Could you trust yourself? If the answer is yes, the same trust can be extended throughout the management population of your company.

Human behavior is only unpredictable and dangerous if you don't start from humanity in the first place. To safely trust managers a company must allow them to do the things that real leaders do for the reasons that real leaders do them. The company must allow itself to be the best possible place for managers to practice true fulfillment, to live their values, and to realize deep connectivity and purpose.

This is the system managers will protect. This is the system managers dream about.

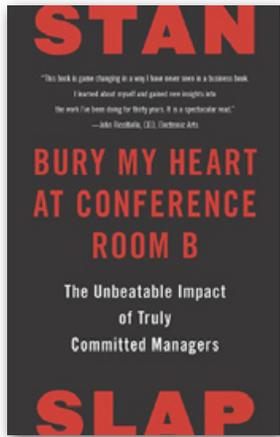
WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?

We are talking about nothing less than redrawing the potential for organizational success. The great plains of corporate possibility are a wasteland unless deep-seeded by a wholly different level of manager commitment. Little is grown and nothing is sustainable. Companies will never change this until they change who managers can be within the company.

We are talking about nothing less than redrawing the potential for manager fulfillment. Providing the ultimate solution to work/life balance: not escaping from work but living the way you want to at work.

This is all still very new thinking. New thinking requires smart connection of seemingly unrelated empirical data points, accurate interpretation of anecdotal evidence and the occasional leap of faith.

Most of all, it requires a deep desire to live in the new rather than continue to suffer in the old. 📖



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stan Slap has revolutionized performance for many of the world's most demanding organizations. His international consulting company, [slap](#), specializes in achieving ferocious commitment in manager, employee and customer cultures—the three groups that decide the success of any business. His client list ranges from Hewlett Packard and Microsoft to HSBC and Viacom. His first book, *Bury My Heart at Conference Room B*, is a *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *Publishers' Weekly* bestseller. He is at work on his second book and, whenever he can, lives in San Francisco.

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