

# The Commitment Advantage

*How Clean Promises Outperform Pressure and Tools*

## Why I'm Writing This

I've spent the last three decades helping entrepreneurs and small teams perform. I got an MBA, listened to dozens of traditional business coaches, tried tools, tactics, grit and determination. None of them explained why smart, committed people consistently produce unimpressive results.

It all changed when I discovered a different way to think of business. What finally clicked was simple and uncomfortable: we inherit a way of running businesses that was copied from the military into the industrial revolution. It's coercive and thing-based. It assumes people are resources, work is a line of tasks, and results come from orders, inspection, and punishment. That model sort of works on factory floors. In modern, knowledge-driven work, it quietly fails.

I'm asking you to try on a different lens: **business as a network of commitments among human beings**. Once you see that, you can fix what pressure and software can't touch. This is the "matrix moment" I want for you because it's both more human and a real competitive advantage.

Be forewarned. It is hard to see. We have a cultural agreement about how business works that shapes everything we do and feels simply true, even though we have never examined it. It comes from the industrial era. To see what I am describing, you have to step back and question the dogma we were all trained in. It lives in our habits and reflexes, and it is costing us.

## 1) What I Started Seeing (and Can't Unsee Now)

When I first learned this lens from Toby Hecht (my teacher that taught me this stuff), he said something I hadn't heard before: **most breakdowns are coordination problems**. Not motivation, not talent—**coordination**. And once he said it, I couldn't stop seeing it.

I started walking around "seeing" **commitments** everywhere and seeing how poorly we handle them:

- **Ineffective requests.** People hint instead of ask, or they ask without outcome, date, or acceptance standard.
- **Insincere promises.** People say "yes" knowing it won't happen because saying "no" feels unsafe and negotiation isn't culturally allowed.
- **Shaky execution.** Work begins without real agreement, so attention scatters, dependencies are unclear, and effort reworks itself.
- **Silent disappointment.** The requester is at least a little let down and does nothing about it; the non-conversation becomes the norm.

After watching this for a while, I became convinced: **we are terrible at making and executing commitments**. And once you see that, you can't unsee the waste, the missed handoffs mislabeled as "people problems," the deadline surprises that were really **ineffective conversations**, the status meetings that try to repair what a clean request and a real promise would have prevented.

Every so often I'd encounter an organization that ran differently. They weren't louder or harsher; they were **better at coordinating**. Requests were explicit. Promises were negotiated. Renegotiations happened **early**. Completion was declared and **accepted**. Trust accumulated. Throughput improved without more pressure.

That's the shift I want for you: **see the commitments**, and the pattern of breakdowns reveals itself. From there, everything else in this paper will feel obvious.

## 2) A Better Physics of Work: Networks of Commitments

Here's the flip: **real work moves when a human being makes a promise** "I will deliver this outcome by this date to this standard, so you can act." Organizations don't advance on task lists; they advance on **promises** that are made, negotiated, tracked, renegotiated when reality shifts, and explicitly closed.

Once I started seeing promises as the **atom of execution**, two things happened. First, I stopped blaming character and started **designing coordination**. Second, results improved without adding headcount, tools, or ceremony because I was working on the actual mechanism that moves work: **language**.

## 3) Study the Material You Actually Work With

Professionals study the fundamentals of the material they work with. For me and for you, if you lead, our material isn't steel or code; it's **human beings in conversation**. That's why I study three disciplines:

- **Biology / Neurology**. Mood and physiology determine the bandwidth of attention. Under pressure, attention collapses to noise; in calm, it widens to options. If I can't read and influence state, I misdiagnose performance.
- **Philosophy (interpretation)**. People don't act on facts alone; they act on **interpretations**; the meanings they assign to facts. If I can surface and reshape interpretations, I can create new futures without adding headcount.
- **Linguistics (generative language)**. Language doesn't just describe; it **does**. It makes obligations, opens and closes futures, allocates attention, and builds or erodes trust. This is the piece most leaders can't see, and once you do, everything changes.

Toby told me years ago that if I studied these, I'd gain an **unfair advantage** competitors couldn't copy. He was right. I began making sharper assessments and designing actions that actually produced the outcomes I cared about.

## 4) Linguistics for Leaders (the parts that matter)

When people hear “linguistics,” they think grammar. For leadership, the useful slice is **how language acts**:

- **Declarations** set reality: “This is our standard,” “We are launching.”
- **Requests and offers** propose futures.
- **Promises** bind action: “Yes, I will.”
- **Renegotiations** responsibly alter prior promises when reality shifts.
- **Completions and assessments** close loops: “Done as promised,” “Accepted / gap remains.”

These are not labels; they are **moves**. Use the wrong move, a hint instead of a request, a nod instead of a promise and coordination fails.

A few operating rules changed my life:

- **Treat the promise as the primary unit of work.** A task list without explicit promises is theater.
- **Require valid responses.** To a request there are exactly four responsible answers: **accept, decline, counter-offer, or commit-to-confirm by a stated time.** “I’ll try,” “should be fine,” and silence are not commitments.
- **Honor renegotiation early.** When facts change, responsible people speak early and bring options not apologies.
- **Close loops on purpose.** Performance ends with **declared completion** (with evidence) and a **customer assessment** (acceptance or specific gap). Trust compounds when loops close.

## 5) From Coercion to Commitment: Negotiate and Enroll Concerns

Coercive coordination says, “Do it because I said so; failure is punished.”

Commitment-based coordination says, “Let’s **negotiate** a promise that honors your capacity and our shared stakes and then hold it rigorously.”

Two practices make this real:

1. **Treat negotiation as professionalism, not defiance.** Real coordination requires mutual choice. Invite counters. Design the promise together.
2. **Surface worldview and concerns.** People act from what they’re protecting or aiming for; risk, workload, reputation, values. I ask:
  - “What would make this promise responsible for you?”
  - “What risks are you guarding against?”

- “What will success do for you (and us)?”  
When concerns are named, agreements become resilient. When they’re ignored, coercion sneaks back in as urgency and pressure.

## 6) Why This Pays (and can’t be copied)

Here’s the business case as bluntly as I can say it:

- **Operational clarity without bureaucracy.** Clean requests and valid responses eliminate rework and status-chasing. Speed rises with **less** supervision.
- **Premium positioning built on designed trust.** Premium pricing rests on predictable delivery and humane repair. Precise promises and early renegotiations create that experience.
- **Scalable culture.** As you grow, vague language scales confusion. Shared linguistic standards scale reliability without coercion.
- **Autonomous workforce.** Moving in this direction will get everyone on the same page and will make individuals more able to make decisions and act in concert moving you to your goals more quickly and easily with out micromanaging.

Competitors can copy your slides and mimic your offers. They can’t see, let alone copy, your **language practice**. That’s why this is an unfair advantage.

## 7) What I Want You to Do First (three moves that change everything)

### 1) Make better requests.

Communication is hard, and shorthand is dangerous. You probably *feel* your way through work; most people can’t improvise like you. Slow down and define **Conditions of Satisfaction**—the criteria that, if met, mean the work is done to your standard.

- Name the **outcome** (done-means-done), the **need-by** (date/time/TZ), and the **evidence** you expect to see.
- Add **why it matters** (the stake) so the performer can make good tradeoffs.
- Sample ask: *“Can you deliver a one-page onboarding guide (10 questions for Persona A) by Tue 4:00 p.m. ET? I’ll accept when it prints cleanly to one page and aligns to our five brand keywords because it unblocks Wednesday’s pilot.”*

### 2) Don’t accept bullshit promises.

The default in most places is “Whatever the boss asks, the answer is yes.” That quiet “yes” kills reliability. People say yes while privately believing it won’t happen—because saying no feels unsafe and negotiation isn’t allowed. Your job is to **invite the counter** and insist on sincerity.

- Name what you’re hearing: *“It doesn’t sound like you believe this will get done.”*
- Open the door: *“Does this request make sense as stated, or should we adjust it?”*

- Keep talking until you hear a **real** promise (accept / decline / counter-offer / commit-to-confirm by a time).
- Remember: this is empathy plus rigor—protect them from fake yeses, protect the work from fake promises.

### 3) Close the loop.

One of the most harmful leadership habits is failing to circle back to **assess** the promise. Leaders get a “done,” feel dissatisfied, and avoid the hard conversation. That’s a missed learning moment.

- Require **declared completion with evidence**, then **accept** or specify the **gap** and request the repair.
- If it missed, diagnose together: Was the request unclear? Was the promise insincere? Did we renegotiate late?
- Own your part. Sometimes the breakdown is a **poor request**—great, now you know how to make the next one better.
- The benefit: every closed loop moves the organization closer to **shared reality**—and reliability compounds.

## Closing: My Plea

I’m asking you to step out of an inherited, coercive, thing-based model and step into a **human, commitment-based** one. See your business not as a pipeline of tasks but as a **network of promises**. Study the material you truly work with; biology, interpretation, and **language**, and you’ll start to see what I see: work actually moves in language.

Once you see that, you stop moralizing misses, you stop buying more pressure, and you start designing coordination that’s precise, negotiated, and humane. You will build trust you can charge for. You will move faster with less drama. And you will gain an advantage competitors can’t copy, because they won’t even see what you’re doing.

That’s the matrix I want you to see.