A BIAS FOR ACTION
How Effective Managers Harness Their Willpower, Achieve Results, and Stop Wasting Time

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MOST CORPORATE LEADERS RECOGNIZE that people drive organizational action and, therefore, the performance of their companies. As we have said, for routine jobs—when the tasks are simple, short term, and involve relatively habitual activities—motivation usually leads to accomplishing them.¹ For most managerial jobs, however—when the tasks are complex and far reaching—mere motivation is not enough. Strategies that leaders use to motivate managers usually lead to superficial acquiescence to goals, rather than to conscious and deep commitment. Indeed, many leaders act as coconspirators with their people in developing a work ethic of superficiality. The result? Inauthentic consensus, smart talk, and poor action.

To create true commitment to an intention or goal, leaders must prevent people from superficial buy-ins. Building volitional commitment means making the process of signing on to a project more difficult—not easier.² Indeed, in our research, whenever we
have found a frontline manager accomplishing a task with disciplined effort, we have typically also found a senior leader who had built in concrete steps to prevent superficial commitment.

We introduced our arguments in this book with the observation that such committed, purposeful action is a rarity in most companies. Then, throughout the past eight chapters we have seen why that is so, how individual managers can learn to act with volition—and how leaders can move their organizations toward such purposeful action-taking. Now, in this concluding chapter, we make one final address to top-level leaders of companies: What can you do to free your people to engage their willpower toward a bias for action?

Garnering willpower is a very personal, almost intimate process in which people tap into a very powerful force of human behavior. What follows are six strategies that leaders can use to help their people unleash that force and engage the power of volitional commitment.

**Strategy #1: Help Managers Visualize Their Intention**

Managers often have trouble committing themselves because they have only a vague idea of what they wish to accomplish. As a purposeful leader, you can help your people overcome superficial acquiescence by stimulating them to transform their ideas into concrete intentions. As Michael Hilti told us: “One of my guiding principles for leading people stems from the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm: ‘If life does not offer a vision that one wants to realize, it does also not offer a motive to make an effort.’ ”

As we illustrated earlier, to build commitment, managers must have a clear and vivid picture of what they wish to achieve. They must visualize not only their intention but also the process of enacting their intention. We saw how Jessica Spungin succeeded in creating this picture for herself to reach her goal of becoming a partner, but many managers—faced with a multitude of options and desires—need help simplifying their intention to make
it tangible. As a leader, you can help your people develop the power of commitment by supporting them in the process of creating a vivid picture of their intention.

Consider Jim Taylor. Back in 2000, when he started building Cevolution, the carbon-fibers division of Conoco, he struggled with the fuzzy definition of his new product. Carbon fiber was a light, unbreakable, and noncorrosive material that had always been very expensive to produce. Taylor’s division aimed to do what had never been done before: to produce these fibers in high quantity and at low cost. While he was convinced of the huge potential of this material (it could serve as a replacement for steel), he was having trouble getting started, overwhelmed by the sheer size and diversity of the opportunities. For example, the possibilities in transportation alone included reinforcing concrete roads, replacing the steel in signposts, making cars with lightweight carbon-fiber composites, and so on. As he told us: “This material is so multifaceted that you can produce almost everything out of it. This was fantastic, but this was also the problem. I did not have an idea of what it really was. At first, I enjoyed this exciting feeling of the huge, undefined opportunity, but later I was not sure whether I would be able to ‘get it down on the ground’ and really tackle the problem.”

The turning point for Taylor that finally spurred him to act came during a strategic business review meeting. Taylor explained in the meeting that, in principle, everything was possible—the product could become something really big. He then sought some direction from the senior team about where to start building the new business. Instead of suggesting where and how he should start, the group leaders challenged him to visualize the potential he was actually seeing. They pushed him to describe one concrete example of what this “really big everything” could look like.

“Slowly I realized that I wanted to build a bridge,” Taylor told us. “I wanted a bridge to be made out of carbon fibers—light as plastic, hard as steel, a bridge that would neither break nor rust. That then became my personal hook.” Taylor had a strong emotional link to his picture. His personal trigger was that he grew up in the northeastern United States, where he often crossed old
bridges that showed the stress of exposure to salt air. Suddenly, he visualized how Conoco could exploit the noncorrosiveness by building bridges from carbon fibers.

After that meeting, Taylor began to build Cevolution with a persistent, sustained purposefulness—and to inspire that same kind of volitional action-taking in his people. To make the picture concrete, he told his division members to look at a map of the world and block off in their mind's eye every area lying within one square mile of any seacoast. Those areas, he told them, were where their customer base lay. The result? By mid 2002 Taylor had a process protected by thirty-eight patents and a production facility up and running. Moreover, the carbon-fiber business grew from a core team of 5 people to 250 people. Although after the merger with Phillips Petroleum Company in August 2002 management shut the division because of market uncertainties, ConocoPhillips continues to be recognized as a world leader in certain carbon technologies. Taylor does not regret a single minute of his involvement with Cevolution.

Strategy #2: Prepare Managers for Obstacles

To engage managers in a particular assignment, most leaders paint as rosy a picture as possible, downplaying potential obstacles and risks and highlighting the potential payoffs. They coax, cajole, and seduce their managers into taking on the necessary tasks. Yet, as we have pointed out, much of the superficiality in organizations arises from this definition of the leadership role as "persuader." Leaders who foster deep commitments in their managers see their job very differently. Instead of obscuring obstacles and downplaying risks, as a purposeful leader you must ensure that managers fully understand the potential costs and benefits of an engagement before they commit to it.

Sven Olafson, head of a European subsidiary of IBM, provides a good example of such a leader. Olafson had observed that many activities that were started with great enthusiasm at