



# BUILDING BUY-IN: IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT BY ELEVATING VALUE

by Dr. Andrew Johnston

When you want to call people to greater commitment, don't tell them why it won't cost too much – tell them why it's worth everything they've got.

I was recently flipping channels and marveling at the barrage of infomercials on late-night TV. I learned about stain removal, slicing things, and the wonders of nonstick cooking. I also learned that the men and women pitching these products are amazingly persuasive. I found myself thinking, “You know, he’s right ... I probably do need a special gizmo to pull weeds the correct way,” and “She’s got a point ... I would be a lot happier if my kitchen knives could saw a brick in half.” The items they were selling were intriguing, but it wasn’t the actual products that drew me in, it was the deal. It was the prospect of getting an exceptional, life-changing gizmo at such a low, low price. (In fact if I acted quickly they told me I could get a second set of the steak knives for free!)

In my experience, many leaders think of themselves as pitchmen or pitchwomen, too. Like salespeople, they describe exciting future states in ways that inspire action, and their vocabulary is filled with sales jargon. They sell people on their vision. They cultivate buy-in from stakeholders. They talk about ROI (returns on investment) in their development plans and performance reviews. But leaders are not simply pitchmen and pitchwomen in at least one important respect: They are not merely wooing their people toward a new idea or opportunity: they are trying to create genuine commitment over time, and that takes more than the prospect of a great deal. It takes a compelling purpose.

Think of the difference this way – the late-night hucksters I was watching cared more about my compliance than my commitment. Compliance is about getting the right action and moving people’s hands and feet, but Commitment is about getting the right convictions and moving people’s hearts. The product-pitchers were looking for action. They wanted me to grab my credit

card and “call now” because quantities were limited, and operators were standing by. In contrast, leaders who are looking for engagement need to care more about commitment than compliance. They want to motivate a change in people’s underlying values. They need to be wary of being satisfied with behavior when what they really want is buy-in. This means they need to be more concerned about the amount of worth than the amount of work. They need the courage to tell the potentially unappealing truth about what serving worthy goals will cost.

Many leaders miss this. Like infomercial spokespeople, they try to enlist others in their endeavors by pitching the best deals they can describe. They think people will move in new directions or accept new ideas best if the cost appears inconsequential. So they try to make any changes and investments sound as minimal or manageable as possible. “There won’t be too many extra hours required.” “The project won’t last all that long.” “There will be new synergies and shortcuts that offset any increased demands.” “The change isn’t really *that* big, and the transition won’t take that long.”

There’s just enough truth in this to convince you it’s the secret to motivating behavior and leading change. Unfortunately, if you try it, you’ll discover that this technique is only about behavior and that dialing down the investment can drain the buy-in of your people even as it temporarily elevates their activity.

Here’s why: It isn’t crazy to think that people might respond to a good deal, but this technique focuses on the wrong side of the equation. It tries to sweeten the deal by making the investment seem less consequential instead of by making the return seem more worthy. It entices people to do what you’ve asked, but without increasing their commitment to the purposes behind it.

## YOU NEED TO CREATE THE KIND OF ENGAGEMENT THAT ENABLES THEM TO PERSIST AND REGULARLY REINVEST.

If they act, it's not because they've genuinely bought in: it's because what you've asked isn't troubling enough to resist. The unfortunate truth is that commitment never exists without action, but action frequently exists without commitment. Sweetening the deal like this might get things moving, but it also makes the "deal" fragile and prone to failure as soon as things get uncomfortable or demanding. And let's face it, every important or meaningful endeavor eventually gets uncomfortable and demanding.

Buyers' remorse may be a small concern for the infomercial pitchman, but it's a big one for you as a leader because you're looking for more than a one-time response from your people. You can't afford for them to burn out and leave, or worse, burn out and stay! So you need to create the kind of engagement that enables them to persist and regularly reinvest. You need them to believe in what they're doing enough to want to give generously of their time and talent. That means you probably need to be more preacher than pitchman and dial up the worth more than you dial down the work. Instead of lightening their load, give your people a better reason to carry it. ✦

Dr. Andrew Johnston



For more about making the most of your team, connect with Dr. J at [DrAndrewJohnston.com](http://DrAndrewJohnston.com) or check out his latest book, *Fired Up! Kindling and Keeping the Spark in Creative Teams* (SALT Community Press).