

Series: The (not so) Secret Keys to High Engagement

**Part III of V: The Second Key - Emotional
Commitment to the Organization and the Team**

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To read **Part I** of this series, visit <http://www.progressu.com/ezine-leadership-2008-4.htm>

To read **Part II** of this series, visit <http://www.progressu.com/ezine-leadership-2008-5.htm>

Series: The (not so) Secret Keys to High Engagement; Part III of V

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After looking at how to maximize emotional commitment to the job through optimal selection and effective development, let's try to get a better understanding of what drives emotional commitment to the organization and to the team.

You may wonder why I combine emotional commitment to the organization with emotional commitment to the team?

While writing my first book "[The Groupness Factor](#)", I wanted get a better grasp on how cultures work and how an organization could build an optimal culture.

One of the important findings was that each group (defined as a collection of at least three people with some common cause or intention) would develop its own idiosyncratic culture and that what we came to describe as a 'corporate culture' is a shared direction, differentiating traits, and identity among the members of the group, which are manifested in their practices and rituals. A strong corporate culture means that there is strong alignment in terms of the direction, differentiating traits, and identity among the groups constituting the organization.

The dynamics of a small group and of a large group (e.g. corporation) consisting of various sub-groups (e.g. department) are very similar, especially when it comes to how leadership behavior drives or disrupts positive group activities.

So the question remains: what makes people emotionally (!) committed to a group (I'll use the term 'group' to encompass both teams and organizations)?

You probably can guess the answer – it's groupness!

Groupness is defined as the sense of belonging to a group. I came to distinguish con-groupness and dis-groupness. Con-groupness stands for constructive groupness while dis-groupness stands for disruptive groupness.

Take the example of Peter, a senior partner in a law firm. He is responsible for the litigation section of his company and has 3 partners and 4 junior partners directly reporting to him. Peter is an old-school lawyer and co-founder of the company. He's a very experienced and capable litigator but never got any formal training or coaching in leadership.

Recently, he noticed that the junior lawyers frequently go to lunch together. What seemed at first like a good thing because they developed some kind of team spirit, started to turn against him. For example, when he introduced a new policy on keeping client records, he found that the junior partners were implementing it half-heartedly, not exactly compliant with his new policy.

What struck him was that each of the junior partners were quite *consistent* in disobeying his filing policy.

It turned out that the junior partners together decided that this policy only created additional administrative work with little merit and that they would collectively resist it.

Here you go! A clear sign of groupness across the group of junior partners which turned out to become disruptive for the goals of the senior partner.

The point here is that groupness can be conducive or disruptive to the leader's goals.

What can the leader do in case of dis-groupness?

Peter needed to find out who was the 'key opinion maker' within this sub-group of junior partners and work on his or her buy-in into the new policy.

This was a challenge for Peter who at first wanted to enforce his policy through authority.

However, Peter realized that he might win a battle with this approach but eventually risked losing the war. If he couldn't turn dis-groupness into con-groupness, repeated conflicts could be expected.

But what makes members of a group develop groupness in the first place?

Based on my research, there are three factors that influence groupness. Interestingly, very influential leaders were masters in maximizing all three of them. (I can only discuss them briefly in this article, but you can read more about these in my book.) These factors are Direction, Differentiation, and Image (or Identity).

Direction

If people don't know where to go, they just go somewhere – not necessarily where you want them to go. Also, if people lack a clear common direction, individual members of the group are likely to go to stray from each other. This does not help in creating a sense of belonging.

Direction for a group includes

- **Vision** for the group: **Where** is our ultimate destiny?
- **Mission** for the group: **Why** do we want to get there? **What** drives us to make this happen? **What** is the deeper purpose?
- **Strategy: How** could we make it happen?
- **Goals:** The **milestones** that would lead us there. It's about breaking down the vision into doable steps.

Although I could not fully discuss in this article how to achieve maximum groupness using each of these factors, I'd like to share a few pointers from my experience working on these with my clients for you to reflect upon:

- How can you make sure that the direction is *shared* with the majority if not all of the members of the group?
- How do you need to describe the direction so that people can actually *clearly understand AND remember* it? (A simple and very effective test is to simply ask them about what they think it is.)
- What do you need to do to communicate it effectively and repeatedly?

Differentiation

According to my findings, differentiation tends to have the strongest impact on groupness. The sense of belonging grows significantly if the group members believe that they are part of something special.

Differentiation can be considered on three levels:

- a) Corporate level (e.g. a unique brand image of the organization)
- b) Performance level (e.g. a unique way of dealing with complaints)
- c) Product/Service level (e.g. a unique product design)

Image (or Identity)

The image of a group tends to include the following:

- the group's values
- the group's culture
- the group's internal and/or external brand perception

If we compare a group with a building, then shared values could be considered as the pillars and foundation of the group whereas the walls, floors, ceilings, windows and doors would represent the culture. The decoration of the house would be equivalent with the brand image of the group.

Again, the more each of these components is clear and shared, the stronger the impact on groupness.

The good news is, this is not rocket science. The bad news is that it requires a lot of work and continuous effort on all these levels to achieve a high level of groupness.

Besides, the challenge is to resolve the paradox of achieving groupness without falling into the trap of 'group-think' which kills creativity, a very needed quality of any group.

Conclusion on Emotional Commitment to the Organization and Team

People are emotionally committed to organizations and teams they feel they *belong* to. It's the responsibility of any group leader to inspire a stronger sense of belonging or groupness within the group he or she is leading.

An organization is a collection of groups whereby each group develops its own identity. If the identities of the groups of an organization are aligned, we consider it to have a strong corporate culture.

Any leader can foster groupness by clarifying the shared direction, by establishing how the group is different in meaningful ways, and by developing a strong shared identity for the group.

The key challenge to achieve this successfully is to express these factors in meaningful, easy-to-understand and easy-to-communicate ways. Another challenge not to be underestimated is to achieve groupness without falling into the trap of establishing group-think.

This might not be easy – but who said that top leaders should have an easy job? The good news is that being a great leader can be learnt.

Part IV of this series will focus on Emotional Commitment to the Manager.

If you have any comments in the meantime, please write to charlie.lang@progressu.com . We will post any comments to this series in the next part we publish.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

Charlie is a founding member and President (2007/08 & 2008/09) of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community, the largest coaching association in Greater China.