

Andy: [00:00](#) Hi everybody. Andy Crissinger here, director of coaching at Reboot, and I'm here with my colleague, Jeff Riddle. Jeff, it's good to be with you today.

Jeff: [00:23](#) Great to be here.

Andy: [00:24](#) And we're here to talk about, uh, a concept that often comes up in our coaching. We talk about this in our leadership training as well, and we think it might be particularly relevant for the times that we're living in right now. And the topic is coordinated action or commitments, commitment conversations. I'll say at the outset that we are indebted to the work of Fred Kofman in this area. Really appreciate his book *Conscious Business*. He's got a great chapter in there on coordinated action, and the reason we want to talk about this, um, is that w- we've noticed with our clients many organizations having to adapt to changing conditions, particularly around, uh, remote work. And so this topic of how we get work done together, how we, uh, coordinate our action under very different, uh, conditions of work, it's coming up in prevalent ways with our clients.

Andy: [01:20](#) So let me start by just defining our terms and defining some of the concepts. Uh, when we talk about commitments it's within the context of an organization, and an organization is simply a group of people that come together to do work that no one person could do alone. And so in order to get that work we done we make and keep commitments to one another.

Andy: [01:55](#) And a commitment is simply a pledge or bond between people in which we agree to actions with conditions. And this simple exchange between multiple parties really is the building block of collaboration and coordination. We're counting on each other to do particular things in particular ways by particular, um, moments in time so that we can accomplish this broader goal as an organization. And so in some ways it's incredibly simple, um, commitments. It's, it's not particularly technical, and yet we see time and again in organizations that breakdowns in commitments, um, can create, uh, some, some of the most, um, uh, damaging impacts to performance, to trust and culture. And so it makes sense to kind of slow down and let's examine this basic building block of organizational life together.

Andy: [03:00](#) Um, so first of all Jeff, I- I'd love to bring you in here an- an- and talk a little bit about what you're seeing with client companies that you're working with, um, particularly as, as it pertains to the making and keeping of commitments in a time of lockdown, in a time of, uh, you know, this, this forced movement into

remote work. What are some of the things that you're noticing with your clients?

Jeff: [03:36](#) I'm seeing a- a variety of things, uh, in your definition of what a, what a business is. I'd add it's that, uh, coordinated effort together in something we can't do alone towards a shared goal-

Andy: [03:49](#) Yeah.

Jeff: [03:49](#) And, um, and that shared goal piece has really changed quite a bit. So, uh, because that's now really become a moving target for a lot of organizations. I- I'm noticing that, um, it's exacerbating when an organization struggles with this already. So there's-

Andy: [04:04](#) Yeah.

Jeff: [04:05](#) If an organization is already struggling with commitments or, that's a ... maybe a weak spot in how they operate, because the goals seem to be moving for a lot of companies now, because of, of this change with the pandemic and economic impact. We're seeing that exacerbated. We're also seeing the remote movement, um, exacerbate that as well for organizations. If you, you know, the quality of communication when you're in an office, uh, there's a lot more you can gather from somebody in their body language, in their tone of voice-

Andy: [04:35](#) Right.

Jeff: [04:36](#) ... and when we have moved so much to things like Slack, as our primary method of communication, it's really changed how we make commitments and then the clarity of those commitments. So I'm seeing that quite a bit too. And then on the flip side I'm seeing organizations that were really strong with commitments before actually excel in this environment. Where there's already a lot of trust and, um, as I'm sure we'll talk about in more detail. And what, what this movement has done is it's actually leadership has to be more trustworthy of their team. They're not going to be around them. They don't see them. People are working around their children and homeschool and (laughs) laundry and somehow getting groceries and all the things that we have to do.

Jeff: [05:21](#) So I'm also seeing that organizations that are, are already strong with commitments, um, are excelling in this environment. In fact, I had one leader who was really hesitant to move to a remote environment for a long time, who is overjoyed at how

well their team is working together. And there's ... they're realizing that this is actually a real possibility and in fact it might even be a- an advantage for them to move to a more remote organization in the future, when things do return to some form of normalcy.

- Jeff: [05:52](#) So there's a variety of things here that are showing up, but it's definitely an interesting time to observe, how commitments are supporting an- and also maybe hurting organizations.
- Andy: [06:04](#) Yeah, that's great, Jeff. And a couple of things that you've shared that I think are worth kind of reiterating and is particularly if we're talking to leaders, one of the things is recognizing that where we're headed, our common goal as an organization, has likely shifted as a result of the current conditions. And so, number one priority is establishing clarity around what those shifts actually are, where are we headed together. And without that it's going to be ... it's going to set up kind of an environment where commitments can be muddy, because if we don't know where we're headed together, what am I even committing to? Why am I doing this thing? Why am I saying yes to it? Why am I asking for it? So that would be one key thing I heard you say.
- Andy: [06:51](#) And then the other is, um, that recognizing that as, as leaders our, our team members are operating under much more stressful conditions working from home, and maybe some of the things that used to make us feel like we could trust that people were doing what we wanted them to do like being able to see them working at their desk or being able to just pop into a conference room with them, we can't do that anymore. And so I ... you know, I've heard some, some founders and some leaders say, "Um, I feel like trust is lower in my team right now." When what I suspect they're saying is, "I'm not sure I can trust everyone's working, because I can't walk around and observe it anymore."
- Andy: [07:36](#) And so, just recognizing that that's there, that this may actually require, um, a deeper, uh, level of trust on the part of a leader, um, is important. Let's talk a little bit about something as, as simple an- an- and granular as making a commitment request. So, uh, Jeff, if you're, if you're working with a leader right now, and you're wanting to coach them, walk them through just making clear requests to people in the ... these sort of shifting conditions that we're in, what are some of the things you might advise them to do?
- Jeff: [08:14](#) Yeah, there's, uh, five things that, that, um, we'll recommend in making a request of a team, and it's interesting to put the ... to

overlay these five in, in an environment where a lot of this is happening now on Slack or email. So I would just add that caveat as I, as I name these that you consider what does it look like to actually communicate these and maybe just to go above and beyond in that communication to be sure. But the first is to make sure that we're speaking in, in I terms, that, that you're asking from ... you know, if I'm asking you, "Hey Andy, I would like you dah, dah, dah, dah." To speak from a place of this is coming from me, um, versus the ambiguity of, uh, of a, "Hey, we need you. We need you to do X, Y, and Z." That's a ... It's a deflection of the request-

- Andy: [09:09](#) Yep.
- Jeff: [09:09](#) ... and it's not really taking full ownership of the fact that you are asking for something.
- Andy: [09:13](#) Yeah.
- Jeff: [09:13](#) Um, the second one would be to explicitly ask. So it's a follow-on to that to be really clear that I am asking you to do something, I am making a request. The third would be to make sure that you direct it to one person.
- Andy: [09:25](#) Hmm.
- Jeff: [09:26](#) So, a lot of times, in a team environment you might be talking to a team, but it's not really clear who is the person responsible for this request, and for this commitment specifically. So making sure that you're clear on who this is for by directing it to one person.
- Jeff: [09:41](#) The fourth would be to set the conditions for satisfaction, including the timeframe. So what does, what does a successful commitment look like? What does that look like, and what is the time? "Hey, this is what I need by this time," and it needs to be really specific, which leads us to the fifth one an- an- and perhaps the most important of all, and this is coming back to the communication right now working remote, is that you cannot, you cannot leave any room for ambiguity.
- Andy: [10:07](#) Hmm, mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Jeff: [10:07](#) It needs to be clear and specific, and it's ... right now it might even be helpful to take that extra step to say, "Do you have any questions? Are there any clarifying questions?" You might even just go above and beyond to make sure that it's really obvious,

um, what is being asked, what's the timeline, what does success look like, who owns it. So, just making sure all those conditions are true.

Andy: [10:27](#) Yeah, thanks for that, Jeff. I mean, i- i- if it, if it sounds like what we're advocating for here is common sense, um, it is. And yet it's, it's amazing how often we don't do these simple good hygiene elements of communication, uh, when we're asking ... uh, we're making requests for commitment from our team members. So it's helpful just to have those five items kind of mapped out really, really simply.

Andy: [10:54](#) Let's look at it from the opposite side. So if I'm a team member or even if I'm a leader, and someone has made a request of a commitment from me, let's talk a little bit about, um, how do I respond to that. Um, an- an- and before we do that maybe I can just share a little bit of context about why I think this is important. So I've worked with a lot of organizations that have been remote or distributed organizations just in normal times. Like they haven't made the shift during the pandemic. That's just how they- they've operated, and, um, they found really, really wonderful ways of making that work, and in many ways that's kind of how we operate at as a team at Reboot as well.

Andy: [11:42](#) One of the things, though, that we see, one of the behaviors that we see in those organizations, even the ones that are doing this on a, on a daily basis under normal circumstances is that sometimes we might say yes to a particular commitment, and it's much easier to kind of ghost, so to speak, on that commitment when I don't have to always look someone in the eye or walk past them, you know, in the hallway or walk past their desk or sit across a table from them in a conference room. So, this kind of behavior or maybe even saying yes out of a desire to be helpful, a desire to be a good team member, but then not coming through on that commitment, the consequences in a remote environment are a little bit different, because you don't have to look that person in the eye. So, so perhaps you might be even seeing ghosting behavior showing up in your organizations as you've shifted into this new, uh, remote work environment.

Andy: [12:38](#) So, there's a little bit of context, and, uh, Jeff, maybe you could go through some of the, the response options that you have when responding to a commitment request. That might be helpful for folks to remember.

Jeff: [12:51](#) Yeah, an- and something I'll build on there is that not only are we working remote now, but as we, as we've said earlier, you

know, people are dealing with so much uncertainty and discomfort. There's fear, uh, we have children ... small children at home or children of any age for that matter, and, uh, we have parents or grandparents that might be affected by what's going on around us. So that, so that ... There's also...when I share these responses as a, as a leader I would encourage you to maybe think of this not just from you as a leader responding to whoever's making the request, but also if you are the leader making the request, and somebody who's at home dealing with all of these things, um, responds in these ways, how might you receive that.

Andy: [13:34](#)

Hmm.

Jeff: [13:34](#)

Uh, so there are five, five of these ... um, five responses. I'm sure there are more, but these are the, the five that we would typically coach somebody on. Um, the first response would be to ask for clarification. So it's not only on those making the requests to leave no room for ambiguity, it's also on the individual who's receiving the request to make sure you're really clear as to what they are asking of you. In an era of Slack user or Yammer or whatever the tools we are using. it's really critical to make sure you're ... you are so clear on what is, what is being asked of you. The time frame, et cetera.

Jeff: [14:10](#)

The second would be, once you have clarity, if you're unable to do it or if you have the space for it, you can make a counter offer and actually negotiate the request. So this happened to me recently with our team. our head of marketing asked if I might write an article, and I said yes. They had asked by, a week out, and what I should have said is, "Hey, I'm really busy with client work right now. Can I get this to you in three weeks?"

Andy: [14:49](#)

Hmm.

Jeff: [14:49](#)

That would be a counter, um, offer, an- and it would have been an appropriate response.

Jeff: [14:59](#)

The third would be, respond with a, with a different time. So you might offer, "Okay great, I'm happy to do this, but here's when I can do it." This is a little bit of a nuance to the counteroffer.

Jeff: [15:10](#)

The fourth is no and just to straight decline. "Um, I cannot do this right now." And you can clarify as to why or why not, but you have the right to reject the request. And this is a really important thing, especially right now because if you don't and you say yes even though you really can't, then you're going to,

you're going to start to break down that trust between you and whoever's making the request.

Andy: [15:31](#)

Hmm.

Jeff: [15:31](#)

And it can exacerbate some of the problems down the line.

Jeff: [15:39](#)

And then the last one which is the easiest one here if it makes sense, is yes, I accept.

Andy: [15:48](#)

So just to reiterate. Uh, again these are really, really simple, but, but profoundly important good communication hygiene elements. And so much of this is about clarity, it's about leaving no room for ambiguity, it's about sort of in a sense letting our, our yes really be yes and our no be no. And, um, it's the kind of thing that, uh, often gets undermined by really well-intended desire to be a good team member, to be nice, to be well liked, to be polite to each other. And this is a time where candor is really called for. And perhaps it's uncomfortable to have a conversation where we might say, "I actually don't think I can do that in the timeline that you're asking for," and yet to, to not do that would be to create more discomfort, more poor performance, more breakdown in trust as Jeff alluded to, uh, down the line.

Andy: [16:50](#)

And so really what we're advocating for here is really simple, really clear communication on, on the most basic levels around the completion of tasks ... the commitment to complete tasks. And a couple things to remember when you're responding to commitments during this time when you might feel overworked, overextended. You know, do I understand what the other person's asking of me? Do I have the skills and resources to do it? Am I convinced that the people I'm going to depend on to get this done will deliver for me? And then am I willing to be held accountable for, for hanging in there, navigating the breakdowns, and seeing this thing through? So it's really about kind of a player mindset, uh, as opposed to say a victim mindset.

Andy: [17:40](#)

And then Jeff alluded really to how all of this impacts trust in our organizations. And, you know, there are several kind of, uh, you know, elements that make up trust. One of those is reliability, and that's uh that when we say we're going to do something we actually follow through on that, that action. And that contributes to an environment of trust where we can get things done because we feel psychologically safe, we feel like the people that we're on a team with are going to be there for us. And that kind of an environment helps all of us sort of settle in and do our best work.

Andy: [18:21](#) Before we wrap up, I thought we might just say a word or two about something you alluded to at the beginning, which is just how do we balance this rigor around commitments with the need for extra grace right now on our teams?

Jeff: [18:39](#) (laughs) I ... The answer is I don't, I don't know-

Andy: [18:41](#) Hmm.

Jeff: [18:41](#) ... but I know that it's important. What's clear to me from the lens that I hold, working with a lot of leaders and organizations right now through this time is that um, we need commitments more than ever right now given that we have moved through remote ... to remote environments. The goals that we're moving towards are changing, and, and that's, um, we're reclarifying those things as leaders.

Jeff: [19:12](#) And so we need them more than ever, and at the same time there's also ...there has to be space for some grace.

Andy: [19:18](#) Hmm.

Jeff: [19:19](#) Because people are dealing with so much uncertainty and, um, working in really challenging environments. And, um, and it's all new territory, and there's a lot of unknown about the future. And so the best that I can tell is that it's really important to think of these things as separate. Um, it's, it's easy to, uh, start t- t- to think of an employee or a team member or colleague that that they themselves are screwing up or maybe they're showing up late to meetings or whatever it might be. We can start to make it about the individual-

Andy: [19:50](#) Hmm.

Jeff: [19:51](#) ... and it seems that the more we can separate those two and say, "Okay, there's a work product, and there's a relying ... a reliability we need in these commitments, that's essential to be effective." Uh, and so we can look at things and try to, to drill down into those specifically. And at the same time we can also ... let's say somebody is missing commitments or seems they're, they're ... something's breaking down in this, um, you might think of a- a two part conversation. One is let's just first focus on, maybe this is the second, but this is one of the pieces. Focus on what is actually going on from a work product perspective. Um, what are the commitments, and where might they be, be overextending or, um, just breaking down some of these questions that we're posing.

Jeff: [20:34](#) But the other is to then also take a moment, and, and have some grace for the human being. You know, where are you as an individual? How are you feeling? How are you doing person who's a human who's got their own feelings and fears and family issues and struggles? An- and I think if we can, um, bring a little bit of that to both, um, be able to have those really clear commitment conversations, at the same time do so with some grace for the human being that's behind them, uh, I think we can start to find a bit more of a, of a nice, neutral space where we can still rely on things to get done. Maybe help them feel safe for saying no or help them recognize the patterns and behaviors and also as the leader or the person who's asking them, uh, to make commitments to see the human that's there, um, and be able to give them a bit more of that grace that they might be needing or feeling or wanting to feel that safety from their team.

Andy: [21:23](#) Yeah, I love that. It makes me think of kind of the “it, we, I” framework that we often talk about that we kind of draw from th- the *Difficult Conversations* work of Doug Stone and Sheila Heen. It's this idea that there's the it, the, the in this case perhaps the, the commitment or the work product that we're, um, that we're working on together. And then there's the we, and that's the relational component. That's the, uh, the human experience the human being as you, as you mentioned that is here struggling, uh, within a particular context that has feelings, that has fears, that has stresses. And if we can have perhaps two conversations, parse those two things out, we might, uh, in the end not only be of service to the human being, but also of service to the work that we're trying to accomplish together.

Andy: [22:16](#) Thank you Jeff for, for being here with me. You know, what we're really wanting to say is in this time where we're shifting pretty dramatically the ways that we're working together, it's to come back to the simplicity, the simplicity and the good hygiene around communication with commitments. And it's about getting really, really solidly clear on what we're asking and what we're responding to, what we're committing to on a very basic level of operating with our teams.

Andy: [22:59](#) So we hope that you find this helpful, and we hope that you and your teams are finding ways to keep doing good work and thriving in this time. Thanks so much for listening.