Toolkit: Six Domensions of Real Commitment

Access to personal cash is often treated as the primary proof of an entrepreneur's commitment. But in environments where financial buffers are rare and systemic challenges are high, cash is a poor and often misleading signal.

This reference tool offers a practical alternative. It outlines six dimensions funders, investors, and program evaluators can recognize serious entrepreneurial commitment based on real-world behavior, not just financial starting position.

It is not a checklist. It is a guide to help decision-makers ask better questions, look for deeper signals, and judge resilience with more context and nuance.

True commitment leaves traces — in actions, choices, sacrifices, and small early wins. This tool is designed to help you see them.

Each dimension has questions with a 1–5 scoring rubric with example criteria. Use these as anchors to guide your evaluations.

Dimension 1. Time Invested in the Business

Why It Matters:

In tough environments, consistent effort over time — despite setbacks, slow progress, and external pressures — is one of the clearest indicators of a founder's belief in the opportunity and their resilience under uncertainty.

What to Look For:

- A continuous or near-continuous timeline of work on the business (even if part-time).
- Small but tangible milestones achieved without substantial outside funding.
- Personal sacrifices made to keep the business moving (e.g., balancing side jobs, working nights, reduced income).

How to Look For It:

- Ask founders to walk you through their timeline year by year: What were the major phases? What kept them going through tough periods?
- Listen for consistency, logical progression, and evidence of adaptation over time.
- Cross-check with external traces if available (e.g., old marketing materials, social media, product evolution, early customer feedback).

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1. How long has the founder actively worked on this idea (even if part-time)?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Less than 3 months	Idea recently conceived
2	3–6 months	Early exploratory stage
3	7–12 months	Significant groundwork done
4	13–24 months	Persistent effort, momentum building
5	More than 24 months	Deep, sustained commitment

2. How consistently have they committed time each week to the venture?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Sporadic	Works on idea irregularly
2	Low, but recurring	Weekends only or minimal weekly effort
3	Structured part-time	Evening/weekend hustle with discipline
4	Close to full-time	High time commitment, often at cost to other work
5	Full-time	Venture is their main daily priority

3. Have they made significant personal schedule or life adjustments to prioritize it?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	None	Fits venture around comfort
2	Small adjustments	Cut back hobbies, weekend time
3	Moderate trade-offs	Reorganized work or family time
4	Major shifts	Reduced income or job load
5	Radical changes	Quit job, changed lifestyle entirely

Dimension 2. Learning Loops and Iteration

Why It Matters:

Founders who survive and grow in difficult environments don't succeed by sticking rigidly to their first version of an idea — but neither do they jump randomly from idea to idea. True resilience shows up in the ability to stay committed to solving a real problem, while adapting the approach, product, or model based on what the market teaches them.

What to Look For:

- Concrete examples of product refinements, customer segment shifts, pricing adjustments, or delivery improvements — all anchored around the same core opportunity.
- Evidence of small experiments: pilots, early tests, informal market feedback loops.
- An ability to explain what they learned from early missteps, and how those lessons sharpened their understanding of the opportunity.

How to Look For It:

- Ask founders: "What stayed constant in your business over time? What had to change?"
- Probe for stories where the problem focus remained clear, but the execution evolved.
- Look for a pattern of thoughtful adjustment — not random reinvention.
- Validate with examples of customer feedback, product iterations, or market repositioning over time.

Suggested Questions:

4. How many structured experiments or market tests have they carried out?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	None	Only assumptions, no testing
2	1 test	Ran one informal pilot
3	2–3 tests	Basic testing with some learning
4	4–5 structured experiments	Systematic and iterative testing
5	5+ experiments	Constant learning through structured tests

5. Can they articulate real, specific insights they've gained?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No insights	Vague learning claims
2	Surface-level	High-level conclusions, no specifics
3	Some specific insights	Learning tied to behavior
4	Actionable insights	Insights changed design or strategy
5	Deep understanding	Can articulate customer psychology or system constraints

6. Have they visibly changed aspects of the business based on what they learned?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No changes	Plan unchanged despite signals
2	Minor changes	Cosmetic or superficial adjustments
3	Moderate changes	Updated offering or channel
4	Major pivot	Changed core strategy or focus
5	Multiple significant shifts	Built on learning across stages

7. Have they shown signs of internal mindset growth or identity shifts through learning?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	None visible	Still sees self as outsider
2	Starting to reflect	Beginning to own role
3	Identity emerging	Shows early ownership
4	Owns the builder role	Confident and clear on identity
5	Integrated identity	Sees venture as part of who they are

Dimension 3. Resourcefulness with Limited Means

Why It Matters:

In environments where access to early capital is limited or nonexistent, the ability to move forward with what is available — to create, test, and iterate without waiting for ideal conditions — is one of the clearest signs of founder ownership and initiative.

What to Look For:

- Evidence that the founder found ways to build prototypes, test demand, or serve early customers with minimal resources.
- Creative use of local materials, informal distribution channels, or existing community networks.
- Early traction signals generated without significant external funding — however small (e.g., first customers, product pilots, partnerships).

How to Look For It:

- Ask founders: "How did you get your 1st product or service with your 1st customer?"
- Probe for examples where they found scrappy, practical solutions rather than waiting for perfect conditions.
- Look for signs of "proof of concept" behavior — actual activity, not just plans or decks.
- Validate through early customer stories, pictures, product samples, or other tangible evidence of action taken without major external help.

Suggested Questions:

8. How far have they moved the idea forward using minimal financial resources?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No progress without funding	Waiting for external support
2	Minimal bootstrap effort	One-off action with limited reach
3	Moderate bootstrapping	Achieved early prototype or customer feedback
4	Strong progress with little money	Multiple milestones hit
5	Exceptional resourcefulness	Built operational system with negligible funds

9. How creatively have they solved practical challenges (e.g. with local hacks, borrowed tools)?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No evidence of creative solutions	Stuck without funding
2	Basic workarounds	Simple manual tools or favors
3	Moderate creativity	Used community resources cleverly
4	High creativity	Designed unusual but effective workarounds
5	Exceptional ingenuity	Turned constraints into innovations

10. Have they effectively used local networks or informal collaborators to advance the work?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Works in isolation	No visible collaboration
2	Limited help from friends	One-time support
3	Some informal partnerships	Occasional volunteer or referral
4	Consistent collaboration	Multiple people involved informally
5	Mobilized strong support system	Network consistently adds value

11. How many real-world, self-driven milestones have they achieved (e.g. research, prototype, test, sale)?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No clear milestones	Stuck in planning
2	1 milestone	Prototype only
3	2–3 milestones	Prototype + user test + feedback
4	4 clear milestones	Sales, repeat users, small team
5	5+ milestones	Sustained momentum, growing activity

Dimension 4. Stakeholder Trust

Why It Matters:

In low-trust, resource-constrained environments, gaining the trust of early customers, suppliers, or informal business partners is often more telling than financial indicators. If others are willing to work with a founder — extend credit, provide services, recommend them — it signals credibility, consistency, and real-world value creation.

What to Look For:

- Testimonials, endorsements, or repeat interactions from early customers, suppliers, informal business partners, or others who engaged commercially without formal guarantees.
- Evidence of small but meaningful trust extensions (e.g., informal supplier credit, customers referring others without incentive).
- Relationships that show depth and consistency, not just one-off transactions.

How to Look For It:

- Ask founders: "Who trusted you early on? How did those relationships grow?"
- Probe for stories where someone took a risk on them without formal guarantees.
- Look for patterns where trust built over time: multiple interactions, growing commitments, repeat customers or referrals.

- Validate with references if possible — early stakeholders are often willing to vouch informally.

Suggested Questions:

12. Have stakeholders (e.g. customers, suppliers, partners) taken action that reflects trust (e.g. purchase, referral, credit)?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No stakeholder signals	Only personal investment
2	Encouragement but no action	Interest but no follow-through
3	Initial signals of trust	One-off referral, first customer
4	Multiple signals of belief	Repeat purchase or informal deal
5	Strong ecosystem trust	Stakeholders proactively support or promote

13. Are there specific testimonials or endorsements that show someone valued the interaction?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No testimonials	No feedback collected
2	Generic comments	"Looks cool" or vague praise
3	1–2 real endorsements	Quotes from real users or partners
4	3–4 meaningful testimonials	Multiple people naming real impact
5	Consistent endorsement pattern	Word-of-mouth and reputation spreading

14. Has the entrepreneur built trust over time through follow-through, leading to repeat engagement or collaboration?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No follow-through	One-off encounters, no return
2	Occasional reliability	Delivered some of what was promised
3	Moderate reliability	Stakeholders begin returning
4	Clear delivery track record	Known as someone who delivers
5	Strong reputation for follow-through	Built informal brand of dependability

Dimension 5. Emotional and Social Risk

Why It Matters:

Choosing to stick with a venture in environments where entrepreneurship is seen as risky — or even irresponsible — carries real emotional and social costs. Risking reputation, security, and personal relationships to keep building a business signals deep commitment, especially when safer, more accepted paths are available.

What to Look For:

- Evidence that the founder faced — and chose to carry — significant personal risk: social disapproval, loss of perceived status, strained family expectations.
- Choices made that sacrificed short-term security for longer-term business building (e.g., leaving a stable job, continuing despite community or family pressure to seek traditional employment).
- Personal narratives that reveal the psychological costs of persisting.

How to Look For It:

- Ask founders: "What did you have to give up or risk when you chose to keep building your business?"
- Probe for the social environment: Was entrepreneurship seen as legitimate? Was there pressure to quit?
- Listen for emotional honesty — stories that show not just strategic calculation, but personal stakes and persistence.
- Validate with life choices over time: did the founder make sacrifices or trade-offs that others around them avoided?

Suggested Questions:

15. Do they show up and move forward even when no one is watching?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Avoids real work if not visible	Needs audience to act
2	Occasional solo effort	Works only when others ask
3	Starting to act independently	Has done things behind the scenes
4	Works steadily in silence	Builds with or without attention
5	Relentless builder	Consistently works without needing recognition

16. Are they focused on real traction — or distracted by optics and image?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Fixated on branding	Cares more about website than customers
2	Performs founder role	Polished slides, little business depth
3	Split focus	Balances image and substance
4	Focused on what matters	Tracks real numbers, solves real issues
5	All-in on impact	Fully tuned to value creation and user success

17. Can they sustain effort and clarity even in slow, messy, or discouraging phases?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Quits or pauses quickly	Loses momentum when things stall
2	Emotionally volatile	Up and down with external validation
3	Some emotional stamina	Keeps going through rough patches
4	Shows quiet resilience	Pushes consistently through ambiguity
5	Grounded and self-driven	Operates with deep internal clarity

Dimension 6. Early Market Validation

Why It Matters:

Early signs of real customer demand — however small, informal, or rough — are some of the strongest indicators that a business addresses a real need. In tough environments, even a few early customers, repeat users, or informal agreements carry far more weight than polished prototypes or future projections.

What to Look For:

- Evidence of early transactions: first sales, pre-orders, small pilot projects, letters of intent, even informal verbal agreements.
- Repeat behavior: early customers coming back, word-of-mouth referrals, informal loyalty.
- Willingness of others to commit resources (time, money, referrals) before the business had external backing.

How to Look For It:

- Ask founders: "When did you first see someone willing to pay for or adopt your solution?"
- Probe for real interactions, not just expressions of interest.
- Validate with any available proof: receipts, contracts, messages, testimonies — even informal ones.
- Look for traction that emerged **before** formal funding or structured support came in.

Suggested Questions:

18. Are they obsessed with solving a real, specific problem — not just building a cool idea?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	Idea-first	No clear pain point identified
2	Assumed problem	Vague or untested issue
3	Basic understanding	Knows what problem they want to solve
4	Deep user insight	Talks in detail about user pain and context
5	Problem-driven builder	Obsession with solving the real issue

19. How close have they gotten to real customer behavior in their testing?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No testing yet	Still planning
2	Safe/friendly testing	Used peers or ideal users
3	Semi-real testing	Faced real feedback or pricing conditions
4	Live exposure	Product/service in real conditions
5	Embedded in user world	Has delivered solution in high-friction contexts

20. How urgent is the problem in the customer's life — are they already paying for alternatives, however imperfect?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No urgency	Low stakes, low relevance
2	Mild discomfort	Nice-to-have improvement
3	Moderate friction	People care, but don't act
4	Clear urgency	Pain point triggers real behavior
5	Critical pain	Users pay for broken alternatives

21. Have they taken time to understand the customer's behavior, context, and decision-making?

Score	Criteria	Examples
1	No customer knowledge	Just guessing needs
2	Basic persona	Demographics only
3	Some context awareness	Knows some use cases or motivations
4	Clear behavioral insights	Can describe routines, objections, decision factors
5	Lived user perspective	Deep empathy and specificity

Closing Note

Recognizing entrepreneurial commitment — especially in tough markets — requires more than ticking boxes. It demands careful listening, thoughtful questioning, and attention to the small signals that often reveal more than formal metrics.

None of these six dimensions stand alone. Taken together, they offer a richer, more honest way to understand which founders have already shown the grit, adaptability, and focus it takes to build under pressure.

Ultimately, this tool is about seeing better — not lowering standards, but applying them more wisely.

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Scoring Sheet

Dimension 1. Time Invested in the Business
Q1: ___   Q2: ___   Q3: ___

Dimension 2. Learning Loops and Iteration
Q4: ___   Q5: ___   Q6: ___   Q7: ___

Dimension 3. Resourcefulness with Limited Means
Q8: ___   Q9: ___   Q10: ___   Q11: ___

Dimension 4. Stakeholder Trust
Q12: ___   Q13: ___   Q14: ___

Dimension 5. Emotional and Social Risk
Q15: ___   Q16: ___   Q17: ___

Dimension 6. Early Market Validation
Q18: ___   Q19: ___   Q20: ___   Q21: ___

Note:
There's no exact science here. But taken together, these scores tell a story — about the founder, the venture, and how well they align with your expectations.

- If most scores are **1**: there's not enough to proceed.
- If mostly **2**: caution — signals are weak or surface-level.
- If mostly **3**: potential — but likely needs more grounding or support.
- If mostly **4**: promising — signs of real traction and commitment.
- If mostly **5**: strong opportunity — this is someone building for the long haul.

You're not just scoring effort. You're assessing **readiness, fit, and real skin in the game**.

Reference Table

Dimension	Why It Matters	What to Look For	How to Look For It
Time Invested in the Business	Consistent effort over time signals belief and resilience under uncertainty.	Continuous timeline, small milestones, sacrifices made to keep moving.	Walk through the business timeline year by year; validate consistency with evidence.
Learning Loops and Iteration	Commitment to solving a real problem, while adapting execution based on learning.	Concrete examples of thoughtful pivots and adaptations, anchored in real feedback.	Ask about early assumptions vs. reality; listen for specific learning and adjustments.
Resourcefulness with Limited Means	Progress without ideal conditions signals ownership and initiative.	Evidence of bootstrapped product launches, customer tests, or pilots.	Probe for first customer delivery stories and real-world experiments without funding.
Stakeholder Trust	Gaining trust from early customers, suppliers, or partners signals credibility.	Testimonials, repeat customers, informal supplier agreements, trust extensions.	Ask who trusted them early and how relationships grew; validate informally if possible.
Emotional and Social Risk	Choosing entrepreneurship despite social and emotional risks shows deep commitment.	Personal sacrifices, reputation risks, persistence under social pressure.	Ask about personal costs and choices made to stay the course; listen for depth.
Early Market Validation	Early transactions, even informal ones, prove real market need before external validation.	Receipts, letters of intent, early sales, or informal commitments from customers.	Ask when real customers committed; seek proof of early transactions, however small.