A review of
Immunity to Change
by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey
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Rating: 10
(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Discarding anything lower than 6 produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

Here's a provocative comment from the authors:
> "The change challenges today's leaders and their subordinates face are not, for the most part, a problem of will. The problem is the inability to close the gap between what we genuinely, even passionately, *want* to do and what we are actually *able* to do. Closing this gap is a central learning problem of the twenty-first century."

Knowing what you want to do even when coupled with really wanting to do it does not equal success at actually doing it. Ready, willing … but not able?

Kegan and Lahey present the results of their extensive research on this inability to change despite a professed desire to change. They write that
> "Change does not fail to occur because of insincerity. … It fails to occur because we are [unwittingly] living a contradiction."

This contradiction is not something we are aware of – we find ourselves looking past it, oblivious to it, because it is so much a part of way we are. In essence, we have an immunity to detecting the contradiction because it we just don't delve deeply into why our sincerest efforts at change consistently fall short.

In response to this common failure, they have developed and successfully used a tool to help individuals overcome their private immunities. Among the case studies they cite, we read about David. David is a success by most measures but he always has too much to do, resulting from his difficulty delegating tasks to others in his group. To assist him in achieving his development goal (better delegation) David works through their tool – a map which involves responding to a series of prompts. The preliminary prompt is essentially a reflective warm-up. The warm-up asks "People around me frequently say that I'm …" The intent here is to encourage an individual to report on what others are seeing and saying. The first real prompt focuses on clearly articulating a development goal. It may even have surfaced during the warm-up. This should be something that (a) matters to you and also (b) matters to others. That is, if you were genuinely able to get better at this goal not only would you benefit but those around you would also benefit.

The second prompt calls for identifying assumed barriers to achieving that goal.
> "…we can see, looking at even his earliest version of his map, that underneath his words is an as-yet-unrecognized view of 'delegating' as 'getting other people to do your work.' With this definition of delegating, how could it even seem like anything but laziness or selfishness? Uncovering the sources of this definition proved key for David's eventual bigger learning."

Thus, David cannot easily make the change to delegate more, not because he isn't sincere, but rather because of the barrier of not wanting to be seen as someone who gets others to do his work. It really helps to have a trusted person to talk this over with to see whether it makes sense to someone else.

This leads to the third prompt – the hidden Competing Commitment. In David's case, this is his commitment to not wanting to appear to be offloading onto others work which he believes he is best qualified to do. This Competing Commitment overpowers his espoused commitment to becoming better at delegating. This is the source, then, of his immunity to change. His behavioral 'immune system' is rejecting his expressed desire to change. Again, it really helps to have someone else to validate this.

This brings us to a critical juncture – success lies in changing the *behavior* rather than trying to change the *thinking*. Others have put a similar idea this way: *It's easier to <u>act</u> your way into a new way of <u>thinking</u> than it is to <u>think</u> your way into a new way of <u>acting</u>.*

The fourth prompt on the map calls for making explicit the Big Assumptions. This is where the miracle occurs. Typically the Big Assumption is feeding the existence of the barrier identified at the second prompt. For David, it was along these lines: "I assume that if I give some of my work to others, they will view me as shirking. Since I am committed to not shirking, I really cannot delegate anything at all." But what would happen if you *acted* as though that assumption were in fact *false* – what if you acted as though giving work to others (even though you might be the most qualified) were quite an ordinary thing to do? You would delegate some things to others and then you could find out whether people viewed you negatively – as a shirker – or positively – as a delegator / people-developer. You would be testing the Big Assumption.

> "Our entire purpose in acting differently is to generate relevant data to test our big assumptions. Our immediate purpose is not to improve or get better, but to get information. In doing so, we are again working within the sweet spot of an adaptive challenge, discovering whether it is possible to replace the safety born of limiting ourselves with a safety informed by learning that the expected bad outcomes don't materialize when we suspend self-imposed limits."

And if the Big Assumption turns out to be wrong, then you have evidence about the its illegitimacy!

Kegan and Lahey suggest that doing this on your own is very difficult. You really need to have someone to coach you, support you, challenge you, observe you. While they have coached people through this process to individual successes, they point out that using this tool with a group takes on even more power. They caution, however, that it seems to work best when the leader has already undertaken a successful individual effort. Once a senior member of an organization has undergone this kind of change personally, she can better support other members as they work through the discomfort. The general strategy is thus to get one influential person to try it as an individual, succeed, and then move a larger group through a collective effort.

> "One of the team member's final reflections touches on this point: 'I honestly feel our learning can't be in isolation; you need to do it with a team. I think the individual coaching experience by itself might be too isolated for self-improvement, without having

measures of whether changes are happening. Learning from the team is more effective because your behavior matters to others and you can get feedback.'"

If you can discover a change that many people want to adopt (say, implementing a new marketing strategy for a company or adopting a new anti-bullying policy in a school or entering a new geographic area for a nonprofit), you can use this approach and depend on mutual reinforcement and shared accountability to move it forward. The key is recognizing the critical yet invisible roles of both the Competing Commitment and the Big Assumptions.