When good intentions aren't enough: Overturning "Immunity to Change"

An Interview with Harvard Organizational Change Expert Lisa Lahey

Why is positive change so difficult to attain and sustain? As Mobius consultant Allison Conte reports, people and organizations have "immune systems" that act as powerful barriers to change. When we can uncover this hidden dynamic, we can unleash the energy we need for transformation.

As consultants and coaches, we've had the experience more than we'd care to admit: A client leader or team commits to an important change or strategy, yet it never seems to get off the ground. After facilitating a difficult conversation, we feel good about our ability to confront thorny issues, and the client recommits to action. But then as time goes by, there's still no traction.

And, let's be honest, even though we teach and coach others to create positive change, there have been times in our own lives when we wanted to make an important shift for ourselves – and struggled to pull it off.

Perhaps this is why we dream of running without actually going anywhere. Spinning our wheels in "neutral" while trying to move forward is a universal human experience.

But we have goals to accomplish! The world needs us to move forward! It's not enough to simply think about change. We must actually get on with it. So the burning question in organizational life is: How can we close the gap between good intentions and good outcomes?

A developmental challenge

Harvard researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey have spent years answering that question. They've concluded that, when we get stuck in this way, we're most likely facing an adaptive challenge rather than a technical challenge. Adaptive challenges demand a response outside of our current toolkit or repertoire: We simply don't have the capacity to address them.

"The challenge to change and improve is often misunderstood as a need to better 'deal with' or 'cope with' the greater complexity of the world," Kegan and Lahey write in their 2009 book, *Immunity to Change*. "Coping and dealing are valuable skills, but they are actually insufficient for meeting today's change challenges. When we experience the world as 'too complex,' we are not just experiencing the complexity of the world. We are experiencing a mismatch between the world's complexity and our own at this moment."

The nature of adaptive challenges requires us to expand our own mental complexity, or meaning-making structures.

How? The first step, Lahey suggests, is to reframe our improvement goals as developmental challenges that require us to grow as people. The next step is to create a map of our own meaning-making system – and investigate how it both serves and limits us.

According to *Immunity to Change* theory, the gap between a worthy goal and worthwhile results comes from a conflict between our *explicit commitments* and our *competing commitments,* which are usually out of awareness. When we unwittingly apply energy to a competing commitment, we create what Kegan and Lahey refer to as a "personal immune system" -- a way of being that has protected us or helped us to succeed, but can also stand in the way of what we need to be healthier or more effective.

For example, one CEO with whom I worked was known for aggressively defending against negative feedback. He was frustrated with the damage this was doing to his relationships both at work and at home. "My wife asked me to help my daughter move into a new apartment, and it felt to me like she was saying, 'You're a bad father for not offering to help,' so I argued with her about it instead of helping," he explained. He also knew that he really needed feedback from colleagues in order to learn and grow as a CEO. So he declared a commitment to welcoming feedback – positive or negative – and was determined to create an environment in which people felt comfortable sharing their perceptions of him.

But he just couldn't pull it off. When faced with negative feedback, he would react in the same old pattern: He would shift the focus of the conversation to how the other person was acting poorly and build a case for his own worthiness, insisting that he deserved to be treated better. For days, he would continue to stew over the issue while he launched a counter-attack on the person behind their back, to build support for himself. "I attack them because I'm feeling attacked," he said.

When we explored his personal immune system, he realized that he was committed to feeling "safe and

Discovering the personal immune system

Here's a brief description of the process that Kegan and Lahey developed to help people identify their hidden immune system. It's basically a series of questions, typically listed side-by-side in four columns:

1. What is the *one big thing* that am I committed to improving, so that my work can be more effective or more satisfying?	2. What am I doing or not doing instead, that prevents me from realizing that goal?	3. What am I committed to that make the column-2 behaviors perfectly sensible?	4. What would have to be true for me to be committed to column-3?
Since adults never change unless we really, really want to, it's almost never enough to have a goal that simply makes sense or is mandated by someone else. The improvement goal must carry a strong enough emotional charge to fuel the motivation for change. It should be *absolutely* necessary – in other words, *not changing is not an option* because it would put someone we love or something we care about at risk.	This is straightforward if we're willing to be honest with ourselves: What behaviors are getting in the way? Hint: Other people can be helpful in answering answer this question!	Many people find that this is the most difficult question – but that it ultimately it leads to the biggest learning opportunity. The first step to identifying a competing commitment is to ask, "What am I afraid or worried would happen if I did the opposite of the behaviors in column-2?" The worries bring us to the doorway of the competing commitment. If I'm worried it might happen, then I might also be actively committed to making sure that it doesn't happen.	Identifying the hidden assumptions beneath the competing commitment is the key to loosening the grip of the immune system. Taking these assumptions as uncritically accepted truths is the surest way to stay stuck. Testing them leads to the possibility of change.

OK" and to avoiding being seen as a failure — an incompetent CEO or a bad father — or, worse, to "having to face that I am a failure."

The shift came when he realized that these competing commitments rested on some big assumptions: "Other people's assessments of me count more than my own." "Negative feedback is an intentional attack on my worth." "I am not safe or OK if others criticize me." And to make matters worse, his assumption that "Negative feedback is more true than positive feedback" led him to discount the positive feedback he was receiving, so he could only hear the negative feedback. It was a downward spiral.

When we began to examine and question his assumptions, he discovered that they didn't hold water. He realized that, when he gave negative feedback to others, his intention was not to attack – it was to help them improve their performance. So he experimented with listening to both positive and negative feedback through the assumption that "This person is trying to help me, not hurt me." He also began to ask himself what he could learn from every piece of feedback he received. Things didn't change overnight, but in the course of the 18 months that we worked together, he learned to receive feedback with curiosity rather than with disdain.

Overcoming personal immunity to change

The good news is that it's possible to overcome a personal immune system. Lahey, co-founder with Kegan of Minds at Work, a Boston-area consulting firm, has dedicated her career to helping people do just that. "My interest is in teaching practices that will actually help people to grow, especially when they're feeling stuck around accomplishing important goals," she says. "I've spent my life creating materials that people can use to scaffold their own learning."

Building on a strong base in developmental theory, Lahey and Kegan's coach certification program, now in its third year, offers coaches concrete practices to help clients overturn their immune systems. The practices move from awareness-building exercises that uncover the immune system to experiments designed to test the assumptions that keep the immune system in place, and finally to practices that build the "muscles" required for new behaviors.

In the year-long program, coaches are required to go through their own personal Immunity to Change process. "That's the backbone of the program," says Lahey. "They need to have the experience from the inside out, and all the emotions that go with it, and see what kinds of changes are possible."

Aha. This is a fundamental truth in coaching for adaptive change: *The degree to which we do our own developmental work is the degree to which we are able to help others do theirs.*

With that in mind, I asked Lahey to tell me about her own personal immune system, which, it turns out, is a powerful story of the courage it took for her to "walk her talk" as a renowned teacher of personal and leadership development.

"I began working on my own four-column map about five years ago, as Bob and I were preparing to conduct a workshop at the World Economic Forum. But instead of feeling excited, I was feeling small," she says. "My energy was low, and I didn't want to be there. Given the state I was in, I became anxious about my ability to stay centered and present for the clients."

That's what pushed her to look at her own immune system. With staying present and centered for clients as her first-column noble commitment, she began to look at her second column. She discovered that her negative self-talk about not being good enough – a common driver for many successful people -- was getting in the way of her ability to stay tuned in with clients. Her inner voice was saying, "I'm out of my league." Then she realized in the third column that she was committed to avoiding being seen as incompetent, or as someone who didn't make a difference.

"You can see how unproductive that system is. I was protecting myself from feeling incompetent, yet feeling incompetent anyway!"

This insight was a good start… But at that point, Lahey was still not in touch with what was going on at a deeper level.

The deeper learning came when she saw how she had been protecting herself by putting herself in situations where she can feel highly competent – and not allowing herself to be in a learning mode.

"I held the belief that, *'If I can't do it right, right now, I will never be able to do it,'* she explains. "The underlying assumption was that this is a moment of judgment about my competence, instead of an opportunity for learning."

Although her work focuses on supporting people to feel anxiety, she wasn't allowing herself to feel the anxiety of learning and growing. "I felt like a fraud, like I wasn't living in a deep way the things that I teach. The result was that I could be very valuable to others, but not to myself."

Over the years, Lahey has worked to shift her mindset to see challenging situations as opportunities for growth. "When I start to feel small and lose energy, I pause and ask myself what's at stake. Usually there's nothing useful about my self-judgment. So I tell myself, 'It's OK to feel uncomfortable,' and I ask, 'If I can't do this right now, how might I step into being able to do it?'

"I learned that I don't have to be hard on myself to keep learning. I can be more generous and kind with myself. This has been such a powerful experience for me. I'm not fully on the other side of if, but I am deeply grateful for the gift of feeling free to be imperfect."

Whew. Together, Lahey and I exhale, awash in the strong emotions her story has stirred in both of us. We sit in silence for a moment. I tell her how honored I am to bear witness to such a personal revelation -- and how easily I can relate to it. She nods knowingly, having held space for such revelations many times herself.

Then she whispers, "I feel so much relief. I was unavailable to the people I most wanted to be with, because I was listening to my own chatter about having to be competent and perfect. Now, I can laugh at myself. I feel so much more alive and whole. My head and heart and gut are connected. Everyone has some burden to bear, and this is mine."

Lahey adds that her willingness to do the hard work of development – and to share it with others – has led to noticeable improvements in her effectiveness at work.

"My colleagues tell me that I'm stepping up more as a genuine partner, and that they can count on me to take more risks. I've always gotten feedback that one of my gifts is being able to listen deeply and without judgment of others. Now, I can also put myself 'out there' in such discussions. When I share what's going on for me and make myself vulnerable, this gives others room to do the same."

Creating development-oriented organizations

As part of her commitment to keep growing and stay on her learning edge, Lahey has recently expanded from working with individual immune systems to working with collective immune systems.

"In organizations, it's important to develop a culture of learning," she says, immediately pointing out that this is easier said than done.

In working with a large school district, for example, 120 school leaders did their own personal immunity work for a year. Then the district recognized that, no matter how much the individuals improved, there was a collective immune system at play that was impeding progress on the district's most important goal: for all district children to develop 21st-century skills. So they tackled Immunity to Change at the team level, school level and district level.

When Lahey facilitated the four-column exercise with the district group – including all 120 school leaders -- the group realized that what keeps them from achieving their goal

is the big assumption that, if they do the work they believe needs to be done, they'd get fired or in trouble. As it turned out, also in the room were the people from the district office whom the school leaders feared would do the firing – and, ironically, they held the same big assumption. Perhaps the board, too, may have held had some version of this assumption (i.e., "I won't get re-elected.").

They were stuck between a rock and a hard place: Everyone knew that the current situation is not working, yet everyone was afraid to take a risk to improve things. Or, as Lahey puts it, "People everywhere were covering their asses."

Like the school system, many organizations have the noble goal to be "learning organizations," but they also have powerful immune systems that prevent that goal from being realized.

"People recognize the term 'learning organization' but it's too easy to have only an intellectual understanding of the concept. To build the capacity for leading powerful adaptive change in organizations, leaders need to have some gut in the game: They need to experience themselves as learners, and to feel the vulnerability that comes with taking risks in a complex environment, when you don't actually know where you're actions will take you."

So what, then, will it take to do adaptive change work at the organizational level? Lahey's answer, of course, is this: Organizational leaders must do their own adaptive change work first.

"Doing this work at the organizational level requires leaders to be committed to their own deep learning -- and that means being willing to experience vulnerability. They have to step out of the mode of trying to prove themselves, protect themselves or demonstrate that they already know how to solve the problem."

In other words, the key to creating a true learning culture is for leaders to create an environment in which people feel comfortable taking thoughtful risks and experimenting with new behaviors. And the only way to do that is to set the example: To lead by going first. ■

Lisa Lahey

Lisa Lahey, Ed.D., specializes in leadership and the intersection between individual and organizational development. She is Associate Director of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard University, on the Faculty at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and Co-Director at Minds At Work, a consulting firm serving businesses and institutions around the world.

An expert in adult development and an experienced practicing psychologist, educator and leadership curriculum developer, she works with senior executives and leadership teams in a wide range of organizations. Dr. Lahey's special interests are in developing systems and cultures that promote transformative learning opportunities for leaders and teams that engender organizational growth and sustainability. She coaches individuals, groups, and teams on improving communication, collaboration, work performance, conflict resolution, and decision-making.

Lahey and her colleague Robert Kegan are credited with a breakthrough discovery of a hidden dynamic, the "immunity to change," which impedes personal and organizational transformation. Her work helps people to close the gap between their good intentions and behaviors. This work is now being used by executives, senior teams and individuals in business, governmental, and educational organizations in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Lahey and Kegan recently received from Boston University the Gislason Award for exceptional contributions to organizational leadership, joining past recipients Warren Bennis, Peter Senge, and Edgar Schein.

Lahey's publications include *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* with Robert Kegan (Harvard Business School Press), and *How The Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* with Kegan (Jossey-Bass). She is also co-author of *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools* (Jossey-Bass). A passionate pianist and hiker, she lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband and two sons.

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