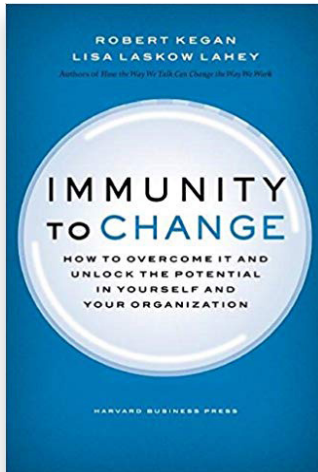


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Immunity to Change

THE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago a medical study showed that if heart doctors tell their seriously at-risk heart patients they will literally *die* if they do not make changes to their personal lives—diet, exercise, smoking—still only one in seven is actually able to make the changes. One in seven! And we can safely assume that the other six *wanted* to live, see more sunsets, watch their grandchildren grow up. They didn't lack a sense of urgency. The incentives for change could not be greater. The doctors made sure they knew just what they needed to do. Still, they couldn't do it.

If people cannot make the changes they dearly want to when their very lives are on the line, then how can leaders at any level, in any kind of organization, expect to successfully support processes of change—even those they and their subordinates may passionately believe in—when the stakes and the payoff are not nearly as high?

Could it not be any clearer that we need some new ways of understanding what prevents and enables our own change?

As with the heart patients, 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* and what we are actually able to do.

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PART I: UNCOVERING A HIDDEN DYNAMIC IN THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE.

ONE - Reconceiving the Challenge of Change

What will distinguish your leadership from others' in the years ahead? We believe it will be your ability to develop yourself, your people, and your teams. Throughout the world, human capability will be the critical variable in the new century. Leaders who ask themselves, "What can I do to make my setting the most fertile ground in the world for the *growth* of talent?" put themselves in the best position to succeed. These leaders understand that for each of us to deliver on our biggest aspirations—to take advantage of new opportunities or meet new challenges—we must grow into our future possibilities.

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. Coping and dealing involve adding new skills or widening our repertoire of responses. We are the same person we were before we learned to cope; we have simply added some new resources. We have learned, but we have not necessarily *developed*. 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 the moment*. There are only two logical ways to mend this mismatch—reduce the world's complexity or increase our own. The first isn't going to happen. The second has long seemed an impossibility in adulthood.

Many, if not most, of the change challenges you face today and will face tomorrow require something more than incorporating new technical skills into your current mindset. These are the "adaptive challenges," and they can only be met by transforming your mindset, by advancing to a more sophisticated stage of mental development.

Distinguishing adaptive challenges from technical ones again brings our attention back from the "problem" to the "person having the problem." We've said that "complexity" is really a story about the relationship between the complex demands and arrangements of the world and our own complexity of mind. When we look at this relationship we discover a gap: our own mental complexity lags behind the complexity of the world's demands. We are in over our heads.

This naturally brings us to a next question: can we actually do something to incubate mental complexity, and to accelerate it?

TWO - Uncovering the Immunity to Change

We have always told our clients that if they can make the changes they need to by recipe, by willpower, by creating some plan to extinguish certain behaviors and amplify others—like submitting to a diet—then by all means that is exactly what they should do. Nothing we have to offer is as quick and easy as a straightforward technical solution—*if it works*.

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But in reality nearly all the people we have ever had the privilege to serve have already tried simply changing their behaviors, as any intelligent person would, and they have discovered *it doesn't work*. They tried a technical means to solve their problems or meet their challenge, as well they should. It is a good way to discover whether the problem or the challenge *is* a technical one. You can't always tell just by looking at it.

For our friend, Peter, losing ten pounds apparently was *not* an adaptive challenge. A diet, a technical means, solved what for him was a technical problem. But in this respect, Peter is something of a rarity. For most of us—since research shows that the average dieter regains 107 percent of the weight he or she takes off—losing weight is *not* a technical challenge; it is an adaptive one. Solving it with a technical means—dieting—will not work.

As a leader, Peter had already tried to do a better job of delegating and releasing his direct reports. He may even have had some temporary success. But before long the old behaviors were back—plus 7 percent. This is a clear signal that for him these challenges are adaptive ones. But these are *not* failings arising from insufficiently developed moral muscle. *They are brilliant, highly effective behaviors serving exactly the purpose another part of him intends*. He makes everybody check back with him because he is in the thrall of his hidden compartment to feeling like the indispensable guy who knows best.

But make no mistake: Peter is *also* sincerely and deeply committed to becoming a better delegator. Change does not fail to occur because of insecurity. Change fails to occur because we mean *both* things. It fails to occur because we are a living contradiction. Peter wants to make a change, but he also wants to “save his life,” and underneath his commitment to being the guy who knows best is a deep-running assumption that his “life” would be at risk were he not to remain in complete control.

Too often, these sincere avowals to change become the work equivalent of New Year's resolutions. Most New Year's resolutions *are* sincere. That is what makes their dismal record of accomplishment so perplexing. We see the behaviors we seek to extinguish. But until we understand that the commitments that make the obstructive behaviors at the same time brilliantly *effective*, we haven't correctly formulated the problem. Einstein said the formulation of the problem is as important as the solution.

THREE - “We Never Had a Language for it”

Engaging the Emotional Life of the Organization

Our clients are our teachers. We know our CEO collaborators give us a lot of credit for bringing them a powerful, accessible, and professionally appropriate way of putting adult developmental issues on the table at work. But whether they know it or not, they also contributed something crucial to what we did together. After all, we originally came to this work from the perspective of psychologists supporting individual adult development. As organizational leaders, they were far more talented than we at thinking organizationally and systematically.

If you see through only one eye, you can still make out a lot of what is in front of you, but the key impairment is lack of depth perception. Binocular vision allows you to look with depth. As developmentalists, we were most interested in the problem of sustaining people's involvement in processes that would lead to advances in their individual psychological complexity so they could be more successful. As leaders of organizations, our CEO partners were most interested in the

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problem of how to effectively and appropriately engage the emotional life of the organization so that *it* could more successfully deliver on its purposes. Yet it was only by each of us also taking up the other's unsolved problem that we were ultimately able to deliver on both.

PART II: OVERCOMING THE IMMUNITY TO CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS, INDIVIDUALS, AND TEAMS

FOUR - Overcoming the Groupwide Immunity to Change

As you consider this phenomenon we call the immunity to change, it will no doubt occur to you that it is not just *individuals* who are in the grip of competing commitments and constraining big assumptions. Collectivities—work teams, leadership groups, departmental units, whole organizations—also unknowingly have immunity systems in place to protect themselves from making the very changes they most desire.

FIVE - David Doesn't Delegate

Overcoming an Individual's Immunity to Change

As any experienced manager will tell us, being an effective delegator is crucial to using everyone's time, skills, and knowledge appropriately. Many practical books offer excellent advice if learning to delegate is, for you, a technical challenge. For most people, we suspect that it's more of an adaptive or developmental challenge.

This was certainly true for David, one of the rising talents in a worldwide engineering company. For him, delegating is not always easy—he identifies three ways he acts inconsistently with his intent: He lets new opportunities distract him, adding to his list; he accepts more tasks and sacrifices non-work-related things like sleep, family, hobbies; and he doesn't balance time commitment regarding urgent and important rankings. His counter-behavior to his intent to delegate was straightforward: "I don't ask people to help me." His hidden commitment was to stay "independent" and "capable of anything." The cost he feared about delegating was he would lose self-respect, become superficial and trivial (exactly what he dislikes in others), and stop being valuable. Underneath his words was an as-yet-unrecognized view of delegating as "getting other people to do your work"—which seemed to him as lazy and selfish.

Change for David involved his total self-identity. He realized he believed that hands-on work is more important and valuable than thinking. His success in changing came from seeing himself not as "a tradesman" but being an "architect" and "developer." He can now shine at doing what he calls the "right work."

SIX - Cathy Can't Contain Herself

Overcoming an Individual's Immunity to Change

Cathy is a gifted, energetic, and highly successful marketer for one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies. She also tends to be impatient and stressed (high-strung and emotional) when problems or obstacles arise. Her colleagues think she's a terrific asset to the team, but they also wish the price they had to pay for the asset were not so high. Her boss thinks she could well become a star, but believes Cathy first needs to get a better grip on "self-management."

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Cathy had an inner commitment to never let herself or her team down, no matter what the cost was to her, even if it meant getting overstressed. She was attempting to live up to standards of perfection that guaranteed she would eventually get into a high-strung emotional state. In Cathy's case, she had a decade-old experience that convinced her that she was defective, and all her hard work was to protect herself and keep the world from discovering her flaw. When she saw this, an enormous weight lifted from her. Now she uses several techniques and post-it notes to help her keep everything in perspective.

SEVEN - The Case of Nascent Pharmaceuticals

Overcoming Individual Immunities to Help a Team Succeed

Chet, Cathy's boss, had to lead a newly merged senior marketing team to produce a clear and compelling marketing plan for a new drug. Chet had a strong track record as an energetic, hands-on manager and half of the people were from Chet's group. The other half came from a group accustomed to the charismatic, low-intervention style of their former leader who was not part of the merger.

The core issue of this team was insufficient trust, since it prevented people from communicating effectively with each other and it got in the way of people accepting their different work styles. Success came as individuals worked on personal improvement goals that fit within the team's goal.

PART III: OVER TO YOU: DIAGNOSING AND OVERCOMING IMMUNITIES IN YOURSELF AND YOUR ORGANIZATION

EIGHT - Unlocking Potential

Three Necessary Ingredients

We have noticed that some people *are* better suited to overcoming their immunities. The body of evidence suggests that the more people are connected to three ingredients—which for shorthand purposes we'll designate as “gut,” “head and heart,” and “hand”—the more significant their changes will be.

Ingredient #1: The Gut—a Vital Source of Motivation for Change.

To start and stay the course of doing genuine developmental work, a person must really, really want to accomplish his or her goal. It is almost never enough to have a goal that just “makes sense,” not even one with compelling, logical reasons behind it. Reasons can help fuel our motivation to change, but they aren't enough to help us cross the critical thresholds. Reasons tap into the “ought” and “should” realm of inner talk. We must also experience sufficient need or desire, visceral feelings—which is why we say they come from the gut.

We have seen people who described their self-improvement goals as “important” or “extremely important” to them to accomplish, yet they end up deciding not to pursue them. Why? They probably wouldn't say it this way, but it is almost as if they didn't have the stomach to endure what they imagine will be the unpleasantness of changing. These people were so alarmed when they saw (via their immunity map) that accomplishing their goal depended on altering their self-protective counter-commitment that they immediately reassessed the importance of their goal. A goal that felt, just an

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hour ago, like it was a 4 or 5 in importance to achieve, suddenly was no longer as critical. This is one way people resolve the dissonance.

The way to countering it comes from a powerful enough gut feeling that the *cost* of this self-protection—the impossibility of making progress on a deeply desired goal—has become too big a price to continue paying.

A prime source of this fire in the belly comes from feeling that if we don't change, we are putting someone we love or something we care about at risk. Self-efficacy, including having a notion of what we can do to accomplish our desired change, is another. We may have a goal we care about (be it to stretch ourselves, follow a passion, address a shortcoming, or build our competencies), but if we don't feel in our gut we can do anything about it, or we aren't sure what we can do that will make enough of a difference, we don't act on it.

For some people, seeing a picture of their immune system in front of them gives them exactly this direction and hope for what they can do to accomplish their goal. For these people, readiness to change is often triggered by a sudden inspirational understanding of a truth about themselves. As they uncover their immune system, a door they did not see before opens and reveals how they have been holding themselves back.

A third source of gut motivation can be the personal experience of deep discrepancy. In these cases, people feel the need to resolve a glaring gap they see in themselves. The gap can be cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral. It can be a mismatch that leads one person to feel badly about herself and another to feel excited about becoming more of the person he aspires to be. In either case, for many people, seeing themselves operate so contradictory—a foot on the gas, a foot on the brake—activates the gut.

Ingredient #2: Head and Heart—the Work Must Simultaneously Engage Thinking and Feeling.

In every adaptive challenge, the problem space lies above *and* below our necks. Because an immunity to changes expresses the thinking and feeling dimensions of a given level of mental complexity, we need to work on *both* dimensions to achieve real, adaptive change. No amount of thinking or effort alone will be sufficient to solve an adaptive problem, since how we feel is inherent in the problem itself. And because how we feel is intricately tied to how we know, we cannot *feel* differently if we don't *know* differently. We need a bigger emotional and cognitive space, one in which we experience that the internal conflicts and inconsistencies of our adaptive challenge are not inevitable and intractable.

The mindset reflected in an immunity to change is not simply a cognitive phenomenon. As we have said, it is also a brilliant anxiety-management system. Tampering with it means tampering with a well-tuned, highly serviceable, long-possessed instrument for keeping dangerous dread at bay. Every immune system is an intelligent force that seeks to protect you, even to save your life as you know it. You can hear in that definition how the head and heart are furiously working in tandem.

Working through an adaptive challenge is a head-and-heart consideration of an alternative cost-benefit equation. Learning whether it is possible to think and feel that we can still be safe while pursuing a change is the essential change challenge. This is what we mean by working through anxiety: We come out on the other side with a new understanding

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that the world works differently than we had imagined, that we can still be safe—and even experience more expansive benefits—doing things we never thought possible before. We discover not only that we can survive, but thrive. This discovery—a kind of recalculating of our risks and benefits—entails a simultaneous “thinking about our feelings” and “feeling our way into new ways of thinking.”

As people experience the emergence of options where before there were none, they begin to feel new energy and hope. Tasting the possibility of living in a no-less-safe, but significantly larger space is intoxicating and a source of continued motivation to stay in the work and carry it through. New ways of thinking permit new ways of feeling, and new ways of feeling encourage and validate new ways of thinking. Energy that had been trapped in the immune system is not released and can be redirected to feeling increasing competence and control in our lives. New energy leads to new action, and a particular kind of action furthers the process of adaptation.

Ingredient#3: Hand—the Work is Simultaneously About Mindset and Behavior

We can't merely think or feel our way out of an immune system no matter how high our motivation is to accomplish our goal. The mindset does create what we see. But it is also true that conception without inception is paralysis. We must set out. We must begin to take new action. Success follows from taking intentional, specific actions—the reaching hand—that are *inconsistent* with our immunity so that we can test our mindset.

We start this work with what may seem the most modest sort of action. At first, we simply observe the behaviors that work against our improvement goal. These observations lead us to see our hidden commitments and big assumptions in real time, which can expand access to additional facets of our mindset. Such observations can also lead us to see additional realms in which our big assumptions operate, which can in turn further motivate us to change as we see greater costs than we first realized.

The next “doing” step involves enacting new behaviors—ones that our big assumptions would tell us *not* to do—in order to get information about the validity of our mindset. We need to be as purposeful about which actions we will take as we are about what information we will collect. Testing our mindset through intentional action, data collecting, and interpreting the data are the core means we use to mine the gap between our intentions and current ability to deliver on them.

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. Not only that, we may discover the benefits of an increased repertoire of behavioral options and the sense of excitement, accomplishment, and mastery that comes from making progress on our change goal.

Keeping both mindsets and behavior on the change agenda is not easy. Two common tendencies—to favor change on only one or the other dimension—highlight the difficulty. Let's look at the action tendency first. Some people find it difficult to keep clear on the purpose of enacting new behaviors. We have seen people act for a host of other reasons,

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including wanting to prove to themselves that they could do “it” (whatever their behavior challenge was), to get something done, or to be brave and get “it” over with. Problem solved. (This happens even for people who understand and accept the premise that behavior is symptomatic of a system, and any lasting change will require the *system* to change.) Like a patient who prematurely discontinues a course of penicillin because the painful systems have been eliminated, many people confuse short-term alteration of specific behaviors with the actual accomplishment of their goal.

It is completely understandable confusion. If you have wanted to lose ten pounds for ten years and a diet finally helps you do it, you might well assume that you have accomplished your goal. But your goal actually isn’t to lose ten pounds. Many people (even you?) have lost ten pounds *many times!* The goal is to lose ten pounds *and keep the weight off.* Dieting doesn’t lead to weight loss that endures. For this we must join a change in behavior with a change in the way we think and feel, we need to change our mindsets. When we are working on truly adaptive goals—ones that require us to develop our mindsets—we must continually convert to what we learn from behavioral changes into changes in our mindsets.

Nor is the work accomplished by just seeking “insights,” as empowering or clarifying as those insights might feel. This is the other common tendency we see: People are stuck by the self-understanding their 4-column immunity map affords, but then they get mired in their thinking, analyzing and reflecting, with little inclination to act. Reflection without action is ultimately as unproductive as action without reflection.

Interestingly, as diametrically opposite as the two unproductive approaches are, they share an identically flawed theory of action. “If I can just accomplish *one more* (one more behavior, or one more insight), it will finally unlock the key to why I cannot change.”

Achieving Adaptive Change: The Common Threads

Our discussion so far has focused on what people need from within—guts, head and heart, and hand—to work adaptively. But the social milieu also plays an important role. We are not just referring to a relationship with a coach or mentor. We are flagging the contributions of people who were a seamless part of each person’s change narrative, be they team members, a spouse, a best friend or a colleague.

Without such an environment, it is very difficult to see ourselves fully. Inevitably, we are limited by our own perspectives. Without a predictable outside source challenging one’s flawed world view, it becomes easy to drift out of the zone for transformation, and stay stuck in a current mindset.

It is easier to stay in the zone and make progress when there is a social dimension to our learning. When we let someone know what we are working on, we can turn to them at any point to ask for input. Additionally, simply knowing that others know what we are working on can provide a form of social accountability; in this way, we count on others to help hold us to our own goals.

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NINE - Diagnosing Your Own Immunity to Change

To create your own immunity map, design a chart with four vertical columns. Don't expect to necessarily complete this chart in a single sitting.

In the *first column*, write down your improvement goal. It is sometimes more powerful to write down what you want to *become* instead of what you want to *stop* doing.

In the *second column*, fearlessly write down what you are doing (or not doing) that is working against you reaching your improvement goal. The more honest you are, the greater the eventual diagnosis power of your map will be.

In the *third column*, list any fears or worries that arise when you consider doing the opposite of what you listed in the second column. What makes you feel unsafe? Then, from each of these fears, identify and write down the hidden commitments you feel may be competing with your goals.

In the *fourth column*, write down your "Big Assumptions." You should now be able to see your own change-prevention system and your anxiety-management system—and you can see why a technical approach is not a winning plan. Identify and write down the core assumptions that sustain your immune system. We see these assumptions as though they were truths about reality, and therefore they make our third column commitments inevitable (and therefore reinforce our immune system). Please generate as many possible big assumptions as you can.

TEN - Overcoming Your Immunity to Change

Seeing how our self-protection motivations systematically prevent us from achieving exactly what we most desire is necessary. Insights can be powerful, even exciting, but they do not necessarily lead to transformation. Most people need a structure to help them channel their aspiration, test and gain distance from their big assumptions, and steadily build a new set of ways to bridge the gap between intentions and behavior. That is exactly what our immunity-to-change follow-up process is designed to do.

If you now have in front of you a map of your immunity system, you can see yourself with a foot on the gas (genuinely and urgently wanting success with your goal) and a foot on the brake (actively and continually producing exactly those behaviors most likely to *prevent* any progress on that goal). And you can see the very good reason why you are holding yourself back: You want to save your life as you know it. You can see, in your third and fourth columns, the reasons why every one of those obstructive behaviors feels necessary for your self-protection.

Don't expect the overcoming-immunity work to happen overnight; be ready to devote 30 minutes a week for a few months to the process. The heart of the process is testing your big assumptions. The purpose of each test you run is to see what happens when you intentionally alter your usual conduct and then reflect upon the meaning of the results for your big assumption. The purpose of a test is *not* to try immediately to improve or get better. Rather it is to get information: "What does this say about my big assumption?"

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Sample Test: Sue's assumption was "If I say *no*, others will see me as cold and uncaring." She decided to whom she would be willing to take the risk of saying *no*. Then she practiced what she would say. Regarding data, Sue planned to pay attention to how she felt when she said *no*, and also see what the recipient did or said in response. If she ended up feeling insecure, or that the other person saw her as cold or uncaring, or if the relationship suffered, those would all be signs that her big assumption was accurate. But if she didn't feel those things, she would question the truth of her assumption.

If your big assumptions prove not to be true, you will begin to consciously release your assumptions based on what you've learned in your tests. This takes mindful practice. Ultimately you will unconsciously and automatically release your incorrect or faulty assumptions.

ELEVEN - Surfacing Your Collective Immunity to Change

Making one's way through the exploration of *group* immunities presumes the set of skills and conceptual familiarities provided by putting oneself through the rigors of the *individual* assessment. If, for whatever your reason, you decide to ignore our advice to complete individual assessments first, we strongly recommend to you that you find some way to introduce the group to the concept of individual immunity before asking them to do a collective self-assessment.

First, your group needs to identify its specific collective improvement goal. In some cases, the group already knows and agrees upon the goal.

Second, take a fearless inventory of the group and individual behaviors contrary to the improvement goal.

Third, uncover your collective competing commitments.

Fourth, identify your collective big assumptions — as many as possible.

Fifth, test your big assumptions in formal and informal ways.

In actual practice, planned tests are just a way of getting started. As "action research" they offer a culturally friendly way for action-oriented groups to begin integrating the discipline of a learning organization into their routines.

Our experience is that the most powerful foundation for significant progress on seemingly intractable organizational challenges combines two strands of work: Individuals working on their personal immunity to change as it relates to a group improvement aspiration, combined with the group as a whole developing a picture of its *collective* immunity to change around *this* same aspiration.

CONCLUSION - Growing Your Own

How to Lead So People Develop

How can your organization become a home for the continuing transformation of talent? How can you help people make the leaps that can unlock their fuller potential? To foster real change and development, both the leader and the organizational culture *must take a developmental stance*, that is, they must send the message that they expect adults can grow.

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*A genuinely developmental stance: recognizes that adulthood is a time of ongoing development; honors the distinction between technical and adaptive learning agendas; cultivates the individual's intrinsic motivation to grow; assumes that a change in mindset takes time; recognizes that changing mindsets involves the head *and the heart*; and recognizes that neither change in mindset nor change in behavior alone leads to transformation—but each must be involved *to bring about the other*.*

Our conviction is that there is no expiration date on your ability to grow. No matter how old you are, the story of your own development—and the stories of those around you—can continue to unfold. We wish you big leaps and safe landings.