



A CURRICULUM FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

BY JANICE MOLLOY



How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

by Robert Kegan and
Lisa Laskow Lahey

We all know from personal experience that acknowledging the need to do something differently doesn't mean that we actually change how we act (just think of the piles of broken New Year's resolutions that litter our mental landfills!). We may blame ourselves for our inability to stick to an exercise regime or cast aspersions on our coworkers when a new departmental initiative fizzles out. But as Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey show in their book, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), the reason that many change processes fail is not lack of will, direction, or talent, but that our thoughts and behaviors often prevent us from making much needed changes, even when we're deeply and sincerely committed to doing so.

Kegan, a professor of education, and Lahey, a psychologist specializing in adult development, refer to our powerful inclinations not to change as "dynamic equilibrium," which they define as "a system of countervailing motions that maintains a remarkably hearty balance, an equilibrating process continuously manufacturing immunity to change." (Those of us steeped in the language of systems thinking will recognize this description as a balancing process.) According to the authors, much as we might protest to the con-

trary, the status quo fills some hidden need that ultimately takes precedence over our impulse to change.

Surfacing the inner contradiction between the desire to change and the need to maintain things as they are is difficult, because a web of tightly held assumptions keeps us from seeing this gap. But studying the factors that contribute to our "immunity to change" can serve as a rich source of transformational learning and ultimately lead to lasting results. To facilitate the process, the authors spell out what they call a "new technology for personal learning" built around different ways of talking to ourselves and others (see "A 'Technology' for Personal Learning" on page 9).

New Ways of Talking

These seven novel "languages" are tools that "gradually introduce you to your own immune system, your own dynamic equilibrium, the forces that keep the immune system in place, and the possibilities of transcending it." The first four languages work on the

internal or personal level; the final three operate on an interpersonal or organizational level. According to Kegan and Lahey, "The forms of speaking we have available to us regulate the forms of thinking, feeling, and meaning making to which we have access, which in turn constrain how we see the world and act in it." By moving through a series of inquiries, the reader begins to shift from "NBC (nagging, bitching, and whining) talk" to possibilities for transformational change.

In contrast to other approaches that focus on the positive, the authors believe that it's important to start by paying attention to people's complaints, because they represent untapped potential and energy. The first step (which corresponds to the first "language") is to reframe "what we can't stand" to "what we stand for." Readers record these commitments and other responses on a chart, which forms a map of each person's "immune system." The second step involves reflect-

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A "TECHNOLOGY" FOR PERSONAL LEARNING

Mental Languages for Shifting:

1. From the language of complaint to the language of commitment
2. From the language of blame to the language of personal responsibility
3. From the language of "New Year's Resolutions" to the language of competing commitments
4. From the language of big assumptions that hold us to the language of assumptions that we hold

Social Languages for Shifting:

5. From the language of prizes and praising to the language of ongoing regard
6. From the language of rules and policies to the language of public agreement
7. From the language of constructive criticism to the language of deconstructive criticism

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ing on what we're doing that prevents us from fully realizing our commitments. Doing so is more than just accepting blame or fixing a problem; it involves learning from the issue in order to truly change the way we think, so that over time the problem "solves us."

In the third step, readers identify the deep-seated, unspoken commitments we hold that conflict with our stated goal. For example, someone who articulates a commitment to communicating more openly and directly at work may also be tacitly committed to not being seen as the "Brave Crusader" or "Miss Holier-Than-Thou." Kegan and Lahey emphasize that the self-protective impulse embodied by the competing commitment is a normal, powerful human motive, and not a symptom of weakness or ineffectiveness. But unless we bring it to light, our efforts to change will be futile, and we will remain in the thrall of the dynamic equilibrium that keeps the status quo in place.

The fourth step is to explore the "Big Assumptions" embedded in the competing commitment. Most professional development activities are corrective rather than transformative, because they don't help us to explore and dispel the fears and myths that we accept as truths. These "truths" are often assumptions consisting of dire consequences that might result if we take actions to forward our goal; for example, "I assume that if people did

see me as a Brave Crusader . . . then I would eventually be completely shunned, have no real connections in my office other than the most formal and functional, and actually I'd find work a nightmare . . ." With the dread of this kind of outcome, no wonder most of us have a hard time adopting different behaviors.

Once we articulate these assumptions, we can then begin to dismantle them by looking for experiences that

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cast doubt on them, exploring how we came to hold them, and testing them in safe settings. These incremental changes in our thinking can ultimately lead to large shifts in our sense of the possibilities available to us and the actions we can consider taking. As Kegan and Lahey state, "Even small changes in our Big Assumptions can have big implications for permanently altering our once-captivating equilibrium."

"Language Communities"

After introducing the steps outlined above, the authors offer three additional languages for improving how

we interact with others. Through these novel ways of talking, interpersonal problems and conflicts become a curriculum for transformational learning on an individual and group level. By identifying a collective problem, creating an agreement about how to handle it in the future, monitoring when the agreement is kept and when it is violated, and exploring these violations in the spirit of learning, teams can create lasting changes in the ways in which they think and work together.

Throughout this book, Kegan and Lahey emphasize the importance of engaging in this work with a partner or through building a "language community" in order to inform and sustain the change process. They also forward the notion that effective leaders at all levels of an organization must recognize that supporting the transformational learning of others is a key part of their jobs. But perhaps the most important idea that permeates the authors' work is that, in order to combat and overcome chronic problems, people must change not just what they *do*, but what they *believe*. As difficult as that may sound, unless we have the courage to examine and update our veiled assumptions, we'll be trapped in a cycle of déjà vu all over again and again and again. ■

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