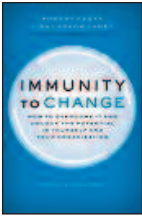




UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

BY ROBERT MORRIS



Immunity to Change

Robert Kegan and
Lisa Laskow Lahey

There are many reasons why it is so difficult to overcome what James O'Toole aptly describes as “the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom.” In my opinion, one of the most formidable barriers frequently involves a paradox: Whatever enabled an organization to prosper becomes the primary cause of its current problems. To paraphrase Marshall Goldsmith, “Whatever got you here may well prevent you from getting there.” In fact, Goldsmith would probably add, “And you are no longer ‘here,’ either.”

No one defends failure (except as a source of potentially valuable knowledge), but many people will vigorously defend the status quo because “it isn’t broken,” they prefer a “known devil” to an “unknown devil,” or they have developed what Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey describe as an “immunity to change.” In their latest book, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Harvard Business School Press, 2009), they focus on three critically important

problems that need to be solved for us to overturn the status quo and sustain change: First, what Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton characterize as the “knowing-doing gap” and our need to understand what it is and how to overcome it; next, “a deep-seated private pessimism about how much people really can change”; and finally, our lack of knowledge about human development.

Kegan and Lahey identify and then explain with rigorous precision “a route to genuine development, to the qualitative expansions of mind that significantly increase human capability at work—not by rehiring but by renewing existing talent.” They divide their material into three parts. First, they suggest new ways to understand the nature of change; then they demonstrate the value of a “deceptively simple process” by which to achieve and sustain individual, team, and organizational improvement; and finally they invite the reader to complete a self-diagnosis to identify various “immunities” (at all levels) that need to be overcome.

I was especially interested in the various devices that Kegan and Lahey provide. For example, the “X-ray” consists of three columns on which to identify Behavior Goals (e.g., be more receptive to new ideas), Doing/Not Doing Instead behaviors that work against the goals (e.g., giving curt responses to new ideas), and Hidden Competing Commitments (e.g., “To have things done my way!”). Throughout the book, the authors use this device to demonstrate how both individuals and organizations have specified desired goals, the changes needed to achieve them, and the “hidden” but nonetheless significant elements that could delay, if not deny, their achieving their objectives.

For me, some of the most valuable material is provided in Chapter 8, where Kegan and Lahey focus on three “necessary ingredients” that, for short-hand purposes, they identify as “gut,” “head and heart,” and “hand.” The extent to which a person is connected to all three will almost certainly determine their ability to achieve and sustain the desired changes. The two-pronged challenge is to establish and maintain a tight connection with each of the three necessary ingredients, and then to get them and keep them in proper balance with each other. Kegan and Lahey stress the unique role of each: the “gut” functions as a vital source of motivation to “unlock” the potential for change; “head and heart” work simultaneously to engage both thinking and feeling throughout change initiatives; and the “hand” metaphor correctly suggests the importance of doing what the mind perceives and the heart yearns to be done. The authors quote Immanuel Kant’s observation that “perception without conception is blind.” In this context, I am reminded of Thomas Edison’s assertion that “vision without execution is hallucination.”

Near the end of the chapter, the authors list what those who have accomplished adaptive change share in common. For example, they change both their mindset and their behavior. They are keen observers of their own thoughts, feelings, and actions to learn as much as they can about themselves and also about their impact on others. One of their more important objectives is to create more mental and emotional “space” for themselves; that is, to pursue more opportunities to learn, stretch, and (yes) fail, because they realize that every so-called “failure” is a precious learning opportunity. These individuals take focused, bold, and yet prudent risks and thereby

TEAM TIP

Look at the “Hidden Competing Commitments” in your team or group that might be standing in the way of desired change.

“build on actual, rather than imagined, data about the consequences of their new actions.” And paradoxically, the more they experience and the more disciplined as well as enlightened they become, the greater their sense of personal freedom. They find more numerous—and more significant—opportunities to apply what they have learned, both in their work and in their personal lives.

In the final chapter, Kegan and Lahey list seven crucial attributes of individuals and organizations that take

“a genuinely developmental stance.”

I suggest that those about to read this book examine this list first, as it will guide and inform a careful reading of the material provided. When concluding, they reassure their readers “that there is no expiration date on your ability to grow.” That said, “We wish you big leaps and safe landings.” In personal development as in climbing the world’s highest mountains, attitude determines altitude. Let the ascent begin! ■

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