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Overcoming our 'Immunity to Change' - adapted from Kegan and Lahey (2009)

As leaders committed to making a meaningful difference, we often find ourselves pushing for change—within ourselves, our teams, and our systems. But even with the best intentions, we can stall. That's where Kegan and Lahey's **Immunity to Change** model offers powerful insight.

At its core, the model reveals that our *resistance* to change isn't laziness or lack of willpower—it's protection. We each carry an emotional immune system that defends us from perceived risks, even if those defences are holding us back from growth.
The process helps uncover the hidden commitments and underlying assumptions that are working against our stated goals.

Your ONE BIG THING - A meaningful, improvement goal that you really care about - the biggest thing that's holding you back.

What are you DOING / NOT DOING that is holding you back / getting in the way (that contradicts your stated goal)

Unearthing 'COMPETING COMMITMENTS' - fears or commitments that are being served by these contradictory behaviours.

Naming the Underlying Assumptions (beliefs) that are driving the hidden commitments. These "truths" often need re-examining before real change is possible.

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An example 'Immunity Map'

For most people, learning to delegate is a developmental challenge, rather than a technical one. Here's an example of **David's immunity map**, six months after a promotion into a senior position, reporting directly into the CEO. After a highly successful career, for the fist time he finds himself consistently overwhelmed, unable to prioritise, and it's beginning to impact his confidence

Your ONE BIG THING - A meaningful, improvement goal that you really care about - the biggest thing that's holding you back.
To better focus on a few critical things: delegate; clarify outcomes desired; accept different approaches; support small failures as learning; challenge the thought process and logic

What are you DOING / NOT DOING that is holding you back / getting in the way (that contradicts your stated goal)
I let new opportunities distract me, adding to my list
I accept more tasks and sacrifice non-work related things
I don't consistently balance time commitment to urgent and important rankings
I don't ask people to help me

Unearthing 'COMPETING COMMITMENTS' - fears or commitments that are being served by these contradictory behaviours.
I fear missing a good opportunity
I am committed to being independent and capable
I fear letting my team down
If I put myself first I feel guilty and selfish
I'm committed to being selfless

Naming the Underlying Assumptions (beliefs) that are driving the hidden commitments. These "truths" often need re-examining before real change is possible.
If I am dependent on others and unable to do many things well, I lose my self-respect
If I put myself first, I'll become what I dislike in others
If I don't find a way to get thigns done, I'll stop being valuable

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David doesn't delegate...

After sitting with his map for a few days, David had a new thought: he realised that his three hidden commitments were all expressions of what it meant to him to be a 'real' worker. He added the following to his map:

"I worry I'll abandon my values of what it means to be a worker. I'm committed to being loyal to my blue-collar roots."

This turned out to be a crucial insight because we can see that underneath his words is an as-yet-unrecognized view of 'delegating' as 'getting other people to do your work.'

With this view of delegating, how could it ever seem like anything but laziness or selfishness? Uncovering the source of this definition proved key for David's eventual bigger learning.

He (also) added an assumption:

"If I dont' add value by myself directly doing jobs that involve the guts of the business, I will not be a contributor, and I will be overhead."

His summary big assumption statement was this:

"I believe that leadership without doing is 'overhead' and 'worthless'. I'd walk away from my roots if I was not doing the work itself. I would be selfish, lazy, and spoiled, and lose my self-respect."

The behaviours of his **immune system** successfully protect him from feeling selfish, lazy or spoiled; they protect him from the apostacy of defecting to the 'other side' and becoming all that he and his people loathe; they enable him to feel like a *self-respecting*, hard-working guy who pulls his own weight, and can look squarely in the eyes of any blue-collar worker even as he assumes a different role.

His challenge is developmental, because it clearly implicates his very **self-identity.** The solution, therefore, needs to be to create a bigger frame on who he is, that includes delegation; **that makes delegation consistent with his self-definition.**

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Identifying the 'One Big Thing' - not just 360 degree feedback, but what we call '720 degree feedback'...

1. Finding the right goal

"It is of the utmost importance to get **the right improvement goal** in the first (place). It doesn't matter how great your learning technology is... if it isn't' the most important thing for you to change.

To help with this, get inputs from the people around you... asking them **'What's the single thing you think is most important for me to get better at?'**

And it works better if we don't only ask our direct reports, peers and managers - it cannot just be about work... ***"You've got it give it the spousal test."***

('I went to my wife. I said, "I''m focusing on one-big-thing, and you might be surprised to know i've got a little bit of a problem with control." ...she looks at me and she starts to laugh. "You've got to be kidding me! ... I've been married to you for twenty-three years, and you're just figuring this out?"

... including key people in your private life as well as your public life - dramatically increases people's attachment to improving on their improvement goals.

2. The importance of leadership buy-in - staying with the hard work of personal learning

"The person at the top needs to be a champion of this kind of work. The leader must be more than a mere supporter of an approach like this one; he or she needs to be an active advocate. We cannot succeed if the leader is only authorizing our participation... and when the resistance mounts, it is the leader who must help the group to renew its commitment to the journey.

Letting people in our your improvement goal immediately puts you 'on record' as working on something that your colleagues can 1, confirm will be valuable; 2, want you to succeed at; 3, witness progress; 4, celebrate success; 5, be inspired for their own learning.