

Immunity to Change: An Exploration in Self-Awareness
Presentation Track

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50 Word Abstract

Why is personal change so difficult? If we hope to develop leaders, we need a better understanding of the change process. Based on the work of Kegan & Lahey this session highlights potential reasons *why*, despite our best intentions, personal change and development do not occur. Come and find out some reasons why...

Scott J. Allen Bio

Scott is a visiting assistant professor of business at John Carroll University and founder of the Center for Leader Development, an organization created to provide resources, tools, and services to businesses, organizations, and schools seeking to build leadership capacity in their employees, members or students. Scott is the co-author of two books slated for publication in 2008- (1) *The Little Book of Leadership: 50 Tips to Accelerate Leader Potential in Others* (Moonlight Publishing); (2) *Emotionally Intelligent Leadership: A Guide for College Students* (Jossey-Bass). He lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his wife, Jessica, and his son, Will.

Introduction

Why is it that we often want to change, but find that we are unable to do so? Why is change so difficult even when everyone and everything is aligned around the goal? The reason is that most of us have built-in immunity to change.

Based on their research in adult development theory, Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey have developed an innovative teaching methodology and activity called *Immunity to Change*. According to Kegan,

“We think we have discovered a powerful dynamic that tends to keep us exactly where we are, despite sincere, even passionate, intentions to change,” he says. “A recent study concluded that doctors can tell heart patients that they will literally die if they do not change their ways, and still only about one in seven will be able to make the changes. These are not people who want to die. They want to live out their lives, fulfill their dreams, watch their grandchildren grow up—and, still, they cannot make the changes they need to in order to survive.

“If wanting to change and actually being able to are so uncertainly linked when our very lives are on the line,” Kegan asks, “why should we expect that even the most passionate school leader’s aspiration to improve instruction or close achievement gaps is going to lead to these changes actually occurring?”

What this implies, says Kegan, is that more knowledge is needed about the change process itself, and more understanding of the “immunity to change.” (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/impact/stories/faculty/kegan.php>, para. 3, 4, 5)

This activity is an awareness-building exercise that makes explicit that which is currently implicit. *Immunity to Change* helps participants better understand their competing commitments and truly begin to understand the motivation behind behavior and why change, with all of the best intentions, can be so difficult to master.

According to Kegan and Lahey the primary objective to the Immunity to Change exercise is to: *Create insight into why change is so difficult – bringing to light hidden barriers.*

Theoretical Background

The Immunity to Change exercise is rooted in Kegan and Lahey's work in *Constructive Developmentalism*. This work has been applied to the leadership literature and a brief description is provided below.

Kegan, a stage theorist, asserts that individuals may never develop past certain ways of being. Rather than time, the individual is the agent of development and programs that aid in this process are worthwhile. *Constructivist/developmental theory* gives attention to how “individuals perceive or make meaning of the world around them” (Avolio & Gibbons, 1989, p. 286). Kegan & Lahey (1984) suggest that development is the ability to make meaning of experiences – regardless of age. How individuals interpret a situation or an event is dependent upon their life construct and developmental level; this is a subjective process. According to Kuhnert & Lewis (1987), *constructivist* personality theories posit that people differ in how they construct and make meaning of experiences in their physical, social and personal environments. The authors suggest that “understanding the process through which people construct meaning out of their experiences may advance our knowledge of how leaders understand, experience, and approach the enterprise of leading” (p. 650).

According to Day (2004), “Individuals at higher levels of development are able to use a greater number of knowledge principles to construct their experiences (differentiation) and to make more interconnections among these principles (integration). This results in a broader perspective on how things are interrelated (inclusiveness)” (p. 43). Therefore, an individual's *ways of knowing* guide his lives and actions. According to

Kegan & Lahey (1984) this does not link to age, because three different adults could experience the same event and interpret the happenings in three different ways. Kegan & Lahey (1984), define development as “a process of outgrowing one system of meaning by integrating it (as a subsystem) into a new system of meaning; what was “the whole” becomes “part” of a *new* whole. Kegan (1994) calls this the “subject-object” relationship. According to Kegan

‘object’ refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate and otherwise operate upon. All of these expressions suggest that the element of knowing is not the whole of us; it is distinct enough from us that we can do something with it.

‘subject’ refers to those elements of our knowing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in. We *have* object we are *subject*. We cannot be responsible, in control of, or reflect upon that which is subject. Subject is immediate; object is mediate. (p. 32)

For example, leaders who have little awareness of their emotions and how they affect others are *subject* to these behaviors; they do not have control or in some cases, the ability to reflect upon their actions. Kuhnert & Lewis (2001) describe it this way: “What is subject for some is object for those at higher stages of development” (p. 651). Kegan and his colleagues developed the “subject-object” interview to help determine an individual’s epistemology (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988, n.p.). As a result, according to Kegan, individuals make different meanings of leadership depending on their level of development. Kegan’s theory outlines five distinct stages of

development but, within the context of this discussion, I highlight three: *imperial* (stage two), *interpersonal* (stage three) and *institutional* (stage four).

The *imperial stage* (stage two) finds individuals focused heavily on individual needs and goals. An example offered by Kegan (1982) is that if individuals at this stage do something wrong, they are likely filled with worries of “being caught” rather than guilt. Kuhnert & Lewis (2001) posit that leaders at this stage only have the capacity to work out of the transactional leadership style (transactional leaders focus on task completion and compliance – these leaders rely heavily on organizational rewards and punishments to influence employee performance). The authors go on to suggest that “Stage two leaders may say that they aspire to higher order transactions (e.g., team spirit, mutual respect), but from the perspective of cognitive/developmental theory they have not developed the organizing processes (subject) necessary for understanding or participating in mutual experiences and shared perceptions” (p. 652). Leaders at this stage do not have the capacity to reflect on their agendas. They *are* their agendas.

At the *interpersonal stage* (stage three), leaders focus on personal needs and the needs of others. They can hold their own interests and the interests of others simultaneously. They are more likely to connect with those around them and experience increased levels of trust, connectedness and commitment to others. According to Kuhnert & Lewis (2001), “whereas the stage two leaders negotiate with their employers to satisfy personal agendas, stage three leaders sacrifice their personal goals in order to maintain connections with their employers. Thus, the key transactions for the stage three leaders are mutual support, expectations, obligation and rewards” (p. 652). Although still

working out of transactional leadership style, stage three leaders are moving away from their own needs to an interconnection between their needs and the needs of others.

Stage four is the *institutional* stage. Kegan (1982) suggests that individuals at this stage have developed a consistency across arenas, developing their own identity. This self-identity and reliance on personal standards and commitments is the hallmark of stage four. Stage four leaders, in a sense, “stand on their own.” As Kegan (1982) puts it, they move from “I am my relationships” to “I have relationships” (p. 100). They work through what Burns (1978) may call “end values.” At this stage of development, leaders may make their decisions out of a strong set of values and principles rather than goals or relationships. Moreover, the individual has the capacity to reflect and modify these values (Kegan & Lahey, 1984). According to Kuhnert & Lewis (1987), “unless leaders have progressed to stage four personality structures, they will be unable to transcend the personal needs and commitments of others and they will be unable to pursue their own end values” (p. 653). Because of this, Kuhnert & Lewis assert that transformational leadership begins at this level. Although pieces exist in stage three, it is here where an individual acts holistically out of a place of transformational leadership. Kuhnert & Lewis (1987) assert that “transforming leadership is made possible when leaders’ end values (internal standards) are adopted by followers, thereby producing changes in the attitudes, beliefs and goals of followers” (p. 653).

The *constructive/developmental* view of leadership has a number of implications for the study of leadership and leadership development. First, Day (2004) suggests that individuals at lower levels of development will likely construct leadership out of a place of dominance: a transactional place. According to Day (2004), “this is not a wrong way

to construct leadership, but it is inherently limiting because an individual leader is expected to act as a sort of hero” (p. 44). A more sophisticated level of leadership requires interpersonal influence, which may be more inclusive and allow the leader more flexibility. Helping leaders understand and examine where they work from develops self-awareness and provides additional tools for success.

Second, according to Avolio & Gibbons (1989), “A leader who operates at a lower developmental level than his or her followers cannot transform followers to a higher level than his or her own. Conversely, a leader who views the world from a developmental level that is not understood by his or her followers will also have difficulty transforming followers to his or her way of thinking” (p. 294). The leader may need to be aware of how followers make meaning and approach the conversation or relationship from their level. This is an important piece of the puzzle, because leadership development initiatives should meet people where they are; one size simply *cannot* fit all. A program developed and constructed at stage four may *sound* and *be* completely foreign to an individual at stage two. The concepts of stage four may be a jump. Day and Halpin (2003) agree and suggest “there is an inherent asymmetry in the development process in which those at higher levels of complexity can understand the thinking of those at lower levels (if motivated to do so), but those at lower levels cannot understand the thinking of those at higher development levels” (p. 14).

A third implication for leadership development is the concept of meaning-making and perception. VanVelsor and Drath (2005) exemplify this notion through the following suggestion: “what he learns will be framed and limited by the ways in which he can make what he learned meaningful. Everything learned will cohere within that developmental

framework” (p. 396). Each person views the world through a different lens depending on life experience and developmental level. This concept alone can help leaders make better sense of their situation and the environmental context. For instance, leaders who work out of stage three may begin to understand why some have a difficult time understanding them literally and conceptually. If surrounded by a number of competitive stage two team members, it will be a challenging task to work together and truly develop a sense of team; team members will be too busy thinking about their own needs.

Finally, Kegan’s thinking can increase the self-awareness of the leader. Learning about this and other theories allow leaders an opportunity to reflect on their own developmental stages and how this affects them and their associates. Leadership development initiatives that intentionally assist participants in perspective transformation likely have a greater effect on participants. *This* is the focus of the *Immunity to Change* activity.

Description of the Practice

The Immunity to Change is one way to help participants move through the different stages of development. In essence, its goal is to move that which is “subject” to “object.” The exercise itself uses a four column *Immunity Map* (See *Immunity Map* following References Section) which participants complete in response to a series of questions. The exercises moves quickly and each individual “constructs” their personal map. The basic flow of the exercise is that participants are asked a question, given time to think, invited to check in with a neighbor and have a discussion as a group. Then the next question is asked. The exercise takes (at a minimum) two hours to complete. Ground

rules are established for the partnerships and participants are told that they can choose whether to go “deep” or “shallow.” A sample warm-up question may be:

- Imagine you were to invite 5 or 6 people who know a lot about you to an unusual kind of meeting. These are people who know you well in the context of work (or not). These could be co-workers, family members or loved ones who know you in many contexts. These are people who know you well and wish good things for you. They are on your side. You have asked them to come to this meeting to tell you one thing: If they were to name the single thing they think would make the most difference if you were to improve, what would they say? In other words, what are one or two optimal arenas for improvement for you that they might suggest? This is an arena that, if you were to improve, would lead you to be even more effective, add even more value to your life and/or organization. What would their “frank” feedback be?

As participants move through the process the questions complete the *Immunity Map* which outlines some of the motivators behind commitments held by participants. In the end, the map clearly outlines why certain behaviors do/do not occur, competing commitments held by participants and those “big assumptions” that drive behavior – assumptions that may limit personal change or block development.

Results to Date

Kegan and Lahey have conducted the exercise hundreds of times and experienced great results. I have conducted this exercise twice and gathered data (Kirkpatrick’s Level I - Reaction) on one occasion. Based on the feedback, 16 of 18 reported that the program was “excellent” while the other two marked the experience as “good.” In addition, below

is a sample of comments received to the question: *What did you gain by attending this session?*

- I learned why I do certain things
- A better knowledge of what my weaknesses are none
- Learned about myself and my goals - therefore how to be a better leader
- A great tool by which is gauge my weaknesses and improve
- A great introspective technique for self improvement
- Self awareness and its importance in developing leadership skills
- Learn what drives me/behavior
- A lot of insight into the reasons behind my personal weaknesses and how to improve
- Learn about yourself before you try to lead others
- How to "look under the hood" that is myself
- A better process for evaluating myself

Conclusions/Recommendations

The Immunity to Change exercise is an excellent resource and could be an integral aspect of any leadership development program. Personal Growth Programs (e.g., Avolio, 1999; Avolio 2005; Cacioppe, 1998; Conger, 1992; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002; Popper & Lipshitz, 1993) – Personal growth and self-awareness permeates the literature on leadership development. Personal growth programs are “based, generally, on the assumption that leaders are individuals who are deeply in touch with their personal dreams and talents and who will act to fulfill them” (Conger, 1992, p. 45-46). Essentially, the purpose of these programs is to increase self-awareness and emphasize self-exploration. Conger (1992) suggests that four organizations/movements spawned the growth of these types of programs – National Training Laboratories, the humanistic psychology movement, Outward Bound and The Peace Corps. Avolio & Gibbons (1989) assert that, “after getting their own personal shops in order, charismatic/transformational leaders are free to look outward and beyond the time period in which they operate to

solve significant problems” (p. 285). The theory is that the self-aware leader will be better prepared to work with others.

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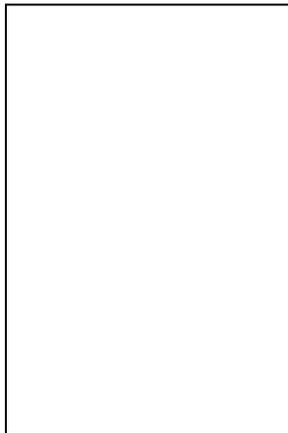
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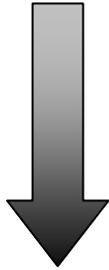
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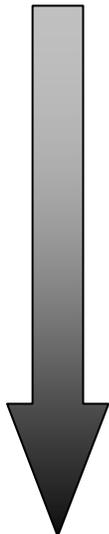
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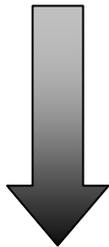
CONSCIOUSLY “IMMUNE”

FOLLOW UP WORK TO OVERTURNING YOUR “IMMUNE SYSTEM”

- STEP 1: OBSERVE THE BIG ASSUMPTION IN ACTION
- STEP 2: STAY ALERT TO NATURAL CHALLENGES & COUNTERS TO THE BIG ASSUMPTION
- STEP 3: WRITE THE BIOGRAPHY OF YOUR BIG ASSUMPTION
- STEP 4: DESIGN A FIRST TEST OF YOUR BIG ASSUMPTION
- STEP 5: EXAMINE THE RESULTS OF YOUR FIRST TEST
- STEP 6: DEVELOP / RUN / EVALUATE FURTHER TESTS
- STEP 7: CONSOLIDATING YOUR LEARNING



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