

WHY WE FIND CHANGE HARD... AND THE SOLUTION

Every business person knows change is constant and that in order to survive, much less flourish, both individuals and organisations need to respond in innovative and new ways to the challenges they face.

Yet change is hard. This was made clear in a recent medical study that showed, even in the situation where a doctor told their seriously at-risk patients that if they didn't make changes to their personal lives (diet, exercise and smoking) they would die, only ONE in SEVEN actually made the changes! We have to assume that the other six wanted to live, so why didn't they change when the consequence was so dramatic? And, if this is the case, what are the chances of lasting behaviour change for the leader who says he wants to delegate more?

As a coach, much of our work is about helping our clients to change. If clients don't want to change they wouldn't need a coach. Yet, despite our best efforts, experience shows us that change often doesn't happen, or it can be temporary, with the old ways of behaving re-surfacing soon after our coaching has ended (or sometimes during).

It was this frustration with our clients, and the slight sense of being frauds as we see the lower chances of success in helping behaviour change, that led us to the work of Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey, and the solution to change that they outline in their book "Immunity to Change".

What Kegan and Lahey discovered is that we can often have hidden, competing goals and commitments that act against our stated goals. The effect of this is like trying to drive a car with one foot on the break and the other on the accelerator – both ineffective and tiring. The solution is to work with the individual (or team) to uncover these hidden commitments, which then allows for the possibility of sustained change. This is achieved by constructing an immunity map; the map is a four-column tool that takes the individual through the following steps:

1. What is it that you are committed to changing?
2. What are you doing or not doing instead?
3. What are your hidden competing commitments?
4. What are your hidden assumptions?

An example to bring this to life

We worked with a senior partner in a law firm who really wanted to get better at briefing and delegating to his team (step 1). When we explored this with him, we discovered a number of things that he was doing or not doing (step 2) including failing to brief his team at the start of a new matter; not telling them about key conversations he had with the clients; and not agreeing an agenda before client meetings.

This is a rather embarrassing list for a smart partner to own up to! The result of this behaviour was that the teams often went off-course, didn't get to the key issues and the partner was forced to step in and rescue the matter. This was a very inefficient way to work that had negative consequences for the quality of service, margins and associate development. In step 3, the partner discovered that he was committed to not briefing the team properly, allowing them to go into meetings without planning and to the stepping in and sorting the mess out himself. The reason for this was that he had a reputation in the market as a fire-fighter who stepped in when deals were going off-track and sorting them out. He was the go-to man in a crisis. This made him feel good. Finally, in step 4, the partner realised he assumed that he would not be valued by clients if matters ran smoothly, that he would no longer be successful, and that his practice would fail.

This was his "immunity map". You can now see that with those assumptions, his behaviour outlined in step 2 makes complete sense and that there is no chance of him getting better at briefing his teams and delegating to them (step 1).

With coaching support, the partner was able to accept that his assumptions were not necessarily true all of the time and therefore he was able to design a series of tests to gather more information about the validity of his assumptions. Very quickly he had started to brief his teams, share important information and prepare well for meetings. The result, unsurprisingly, was that his matters ran much more smoothly, there were fewer crises, margins improved and the associates reported being much more engaged and that they were learning from the partner. At the same time, clients kept instructing the partner and he continued to be successful in the market.

If this scenario is familiar to you or your teams, we would be delighted to talk to you about how we can help to reduce your immunity to change. Both Claire and Ian have trained with Kegan and Lahey and are accredited in the use of the immunity to change process.



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