

Immunity to Change



With the newspapers and television full of stories about the fall flu season, I am thinking about the idea of immunity. Flu vaccines are designed to challenge our bodies to create antibodies for the specific viruses that cause the seasonal flu and, in 2009, the H1N1 flu strain too. Once someone has been vaccinated, they do not have to actively do anything further; their body's immune system takes over and does the rest.

Let's start by agreeing that the immune system is an amazing biological system. It protects us from disease and can be life giving and life saving. And yet there are cases where the immune system makes a mistake. It might reject something the body needs to heal, or in the case of an autoimmune disease, attack the very body it is meant to defend.

In the same way the immune system can turn on itself, many people and the organizations they are a part of have an immunity to change – all change. They make a commitment to change and then seem unable to keep that commitment, either passively or actively undermining the very change they claim to want. So what does an immune system that resists change look like?

Robert Kegan suggests that a change immunity system gone bad has three parts: The first part is the way we currently organize our world. The second is what we do to manage the discomfort, worry, fear, and anxiety we confront on a daily basis. The third is our desire to maintain the balance that must be preserved to maintain the status quo.

Let's take a picture of an imaginary EMS system based on Kegan's immune system idea:

1 – The way it is: our current commitment	2 – What we do/don't do instead	3 – Immunity: Our competing commitment
Be an organization that supports and trusts each other in order to provide quality patient care	<p>We tell each other how to do things rather than listen</p> <p>A decision isn't final unless we've given our personal opinion</p> <p>We don't share 100% of the information available</p> <p>We form cliques and exclude those who are different from us</p>	<p>We value our independence more than relying on our co-workers</p> <p>We believe it is more important to speak than to listen</p> <p>We reserve the right to judge and criticize each other</p>

No matter what our “official” commitment, the competing commitment makes our actions understandable. Often the competing commitment is part of bigger assumptions made by our culture, including examples such as:

- We support people by telling them how to do things the right way – they should just trust us.
- Unless we are personally involved in a decision, it cannot be a good decision where all options have been considered.
- Our best people are strong and don’t need support.

Do all managers need to start practicing group and individual psychology? Although managing and leading are two different things, anyone who sits behind the manager’s desk is asked to be an effective leader too. In order to manage operations successfully, all managers need to help people grow, develop, and overcome limitations – they need to lead. Creating the setting where people can grow is central to effective leadership.

Here is the digest version of Kegan’s ideas about how to overcome immunity to change. The first common ingredient is a gut-level urgency to change – it must move from “this is the way we ought to think/feel/act” to “if we don’t change, someone we love or something we care about will be at risk” or perhaps we get a glimpse of what is possible for the first time.

The second ingredient is engaging both the head and heart – no amount of thinking or feeling alone will allow us to change – new ways of thinking encourage new ways of feeling and new ways of feeling validate new ways of thinking –energy is released which leads to action.

The third ingredient is to setting our hand to do it – find one thing that we can purposefully change, not to enter a new state of “I am right,” but to collect data that will allow us to learn that the expected bad outcomes don’t necessarily happen with change – and to discover that we have new options that lead to wider understanding and greater accomplishment.

Organizations can become home to people who are open and adaptable to change and transformation when leaders send the message that development and growth are expected, “We will be growing and changing in order to reach our goals and experience new satisfaction in our work.” Leaders know that this will not happen overnight, but that it is a process of engaging people’s gut, head, heart, and hands. Leaders also know that change starts with being willing to change their own immunity.

I am convinced that there is no limit on our ability to grow and develop. We don’t graduate after high school or college or age 40. When leaders have the courage to engage people in growth and development, the energy is contagious.

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