



THE REAL REASON PEOPLE WON'T CHANGE

*Understanding the psychological dynamic called a "competing commitment"
and how to overcome it.*

*(Summary of an article by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey,
published in Harvard Business Review, Nov 2001)*

Every manager is familiar with employees who won't change. Sometimes it's easy to see why, but other times it can be very puzzling when the individual has the skill, capability and commitment to change but does nothing. So what's going on?

Competing Commitments

Often resistance to change does not reflect opposition or inertia, but rather a hidden 'competing commitment', which is often poorly articulated or even unconscious. Many of these 'competing commitments' are based on long-held beliefs that are an integral part of their make-up so they can be difficult to change.

Some examples of 'competing commitments' are:

- dragging one's feet on an assignment because one wants to avoid a next tougher assignment or future lack of work.
- avoiding teamwork or meetings because one wants to avoid the conflict that is associated with it
- using sarcastic disruptive humour to keep oneself at a distance from a work group you may not want to be associated with
- not progressing a contact because of a fear of being accountable for the results of one's work.

Diagnosing Resistance to Change

Kegan and Lahey's recommended solution for diagnosing this resistance to change is based on guiding individuals through a set of questions to uncover 'competing commitments'. For example:

6. What would you like to see changed at work, so that you could be more effective or so that work would be more satisfying?
7. What beliefs or commitments are implied by this recommended change?
8. What are you doing or not doing, that is keeping your beliefs or commitments to change from being fully realised?
9. What if you were to imagine doing the opposite of what you are currently doing, would that cause discomfort, worry or vague fear?
10. What if you were to actually carry out this opposite behaviour, what outcomes are you trying to prevent?

The resulting answer to the fifth question is the 'competing commitment' which lies at the very heart of an individual's immunity to change. These commitments usually involve protecting yourself from things like, not being in control, having to follow someone else's decisions, having to go along with decisions you don't like, not having to deal with problems you can't fix and so on.

'Competing Commitments' as Self-Protection

'Competing commitments' should not be seen as a weakness but some form of self-protection which is a normal form of human instinct. The reasons people are protecting themselves usually lie in some deeply-rooted beliefs about themselves and the world around them. These 'competing commitments' usually arise from some big assumptions we have made about the world.

People rarely realise they hold assumptions because they accept them as reality. It is only by bringing major assumptions to light that people can challenge their assumptions and take action to overcome their immunity to change. The type of question used to uncover these assumptions would be to start a sentence with the 'competing commitment' and ask individuals to complete the sentence. For example, "I am committed to not hearing about problems because I assume that *if I did hear about problems I can't fix, people would discover I'm not qualified to do my job*".

Five Steps To Overcome Resistance to Change

Kegan and Lahey recommend 5 steps on how to take action to overcome immunity to change.

Step 1: Record Current Behaviour

- make a note of what does and doesn't happen as a result of their assumptions

Step 2: Collect Contrary Evidence

- look for experiences that might cast doubt on the validity of their assumptions

Step 3: Explore the History

- explore how and when assumptions took hold, and how long the self-protective stance has been employed

Step 4: Test the Assumption

- consider making changes in one's behaviour and test out if assumptions are validated; practice in safe environments or where one can extricate oneself fairly quickly if it becomes too uncomfortable

Step 5: Evaluate the Results

- check out the results and look for more effective ways to operate in the future

The process described here is not an easy process, and tackling problems head-on in this way can be painful and challenging. The process, however, can be tremendously rewarding if 'competing commitments' are brought to the surface, and one can help individuals cope with the inner conflict that is preventing them from achieving their goals.