

Book Review

Immunity to Change

by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey

Introduced by Professor Santina Bertone

Book Review Editor

In an era of ‘Supercapitalism’¹ competition is unrelenting and ubiquitous. Innovation and change become the keys to survival for organisations. Yet the human factors in organisations are often last to change in response to these pressures. In Peter Hayward’s review of *Immunity to Change* we learn there are tools to uncover the deep seated psychological barriers to change within organisations and how to expose those barriers so that they can be tackled.

Peter Hayward’s review explains how people in organisations don’t mindlessly cling to old attitudes and ways of doing things. They do so because of the power of assumptions – myths, misconceptions, fallacies – that validate their way of operating. His review notes the practical ways proposed in Kegan and Lahey’s book to address these barriers and connect successfully with the people issues in organisations. As such, the book is of potential benefit to all innovators, whether they be in business, government or the not-for-profit sector.

Santina Bertone

Review

This book was first published in 2009 so it is not a ‘new’ book. I think this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of leadership but I think it slipped by a lot of practitioners and so I am delighted to have the chance to draw it back into attention.

By way of background Robert Kegan is a developmental psychologist and educator based at Harvard Graduate School of Education where he is William and Miriam Meehan Professor in Adult Learning and Professional Development. His previous two books, *The Evolving Self* (1982) and *In Over our Heads* (1994) are where Kegan promulgates his theory of adult development. Both books are not easy to read unless you have a fair background in developmental psychological literature. Nevertheless, I commend both to you if you are interested in this intellectual space.

¹ Robert B. Reich (2008) *Supercapitalism The Transformation of Business, Democracy and Everyday Life*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York.

Immunity to Change is the most accessible piece of work that Kegan has done to date and so I believe it is worthy of a wider audience. If you have tried one of Kegan's earlier books and found the going tough or you have never heard of Kegan at all then this book might be the best place for you to engage with his ideas.

This is the second book that Kegan has co-authored with fellow "minds at work" colleague Lisa Lahey and perhaps her input has made this book more user-friendly. One of the useful things that Kegan and Lahey do in this book is that they offer the reader a new take on an age-old problem; that is, why people or organisations don't manage to change when they say they want (or need) to do so. The book starts with a quote that gets your attention at the outset:

"A recent study showed that when doctors tell heart patients they will die if they don't change their habits, only one in seven will be able to follow through successfully."

Kegan and Lahey's work belongs to the lineage of practitioners (Argyris – *Organization Learning*, Schon – *The Reflective Practitioner* and Senge *The Learning Organisation*) who have wrestled with the same or similar challenge and if you are familiar with any of these then you will find Kegan and Lahey's work a very useful addition.

The book presents a diagnostic heuristic that can be applied to individuals and organisations that, when applied thoughtfully, can uncover the 'immunities to change' that are preventing desired change from occurring. It goes on to suggest approaches to reduce the strength of these immunities. The book also contains myriad examples and case studies of the use of the diagnostic – both individual and organisational. Another nice aspect of this diagnostic is that it is very compatible with other ideas around learning, behaviour and development. So while it is a new perspective on an age old challenge it does not require a complete rethink of everything people know and have found useful. Much of what you may already like to use is probably perfectly compatible with the diagnostic.

Kegan and Lahey call the diagnostic – The X-Ray. It is quite straightforward to apply. You are first asked to identify the desired goal that the person/group wishes to achieve. The next step is to identify all the behaviours and inactions that occur which directly undermine the stated goal. Done carefully there will be a lot of these to list. The third step is to take each of the behaviours and inactions and to ask "what is the 'hidden' commitment that this action is actually keeping?" In effect this makes you switch your view of something that you might first see as defeating a goal to instead something that achieves another goal. Both the second and third step can be done privately but are even more powerful if other affected parties (family, workmates, team members) can participate. Finally when the 'hidden commitments' are uncovered then the last step in the X-Ray is to sweep all the commitments up into what is called 'The Big Assumption'. This is the underlying epistemological or worldview that makes all the hidden commitments reasonable and proper – it is the core of the immunity to change. This is not a small step but if reached is quite profound for those involved.

From there Kegan and Lahey go on to show how you test, challenge and ultimately validate (or not) the 'Big Assumption'. If the big assumption is shown to be fallacious, as it often is, then the power of the immunity to change is negated and so movement is now possible.

I have found this book useful as an educator and as a practitioner. As an educator, while the book has a strong academic lineage, it is very accessible and allows strong linkages to prior theory. As a method it allows the student to practise on themselves in order to learn the underlying ideas because everyone has points in their life where they wish to change and then seem to 'self-sabotage' those wishes. As a practitioner this is a nice tool that integrates other knowledge and that also is scalable from the individual to the organisational.

Peter Hayward