

Manage immunity to change

Many leaders, like most people, have ambivalent feelings about change and this can result in mixed messages. Even if they agree the change is necessary, they are often nervous about how the change will impact them and their teams. Helping leaders to manage their own fears about change is as critical as managing the experience of other employees.

Competing commitment and big assumptions

According to research by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2011)¹ it's a psychological dynamic called a 'competing commitment'. As a leader, you need to understand how the dynamic works to overcome it yourself, and then successfully engage with change-resistant employees.

These competing commitments often rely on 'big assumptions'. A big assumption is an idea that you hold to be true, but may be based on inherited beliefs that are not borne out by the facts.

Big assumptions and competing commitments create immunity to change.



Templates to help analyse immunity to change

[Analysing immunity to change](#)

How to do it

It is possible to begin to address this ambivalence by using a simple diagnostic tool called analysing your immunity to change to help break through your resistance. You can use the same techniques with your employees. There are three steps:

1. Diagnose the competing commitment and big assumption
2. Identify the big assumption
3. Test and consider replacing the big assumption

Step 1. Diagnose the competing commitment and big assumption

1.1 List your improvement goal

List a change goal that would have a significant impact on your work, or one that you are seeking to implement. It could be personal (e.g. becoming a better listener or switching to a new career) or it could be organisational (e.g. implementing a new business process). List some specific actions required to achieve your goal.

1.2 Identify behaviours that keep you from your goal

For column two, consider what you are doing (or not doing) that's stalling your efforts. This needs to be a frank assessment of the actions and activities, over which you have direct control, that are supporting or blocking your progress towards this goal.

¹ Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. (2011) *Immunity to Change* Harvard Business Press



1.3 Discover your competing commitments

Here's where the real self-exploration comes in. Look at the behaviours you identified in the first step and ask yourself how you'd feel if you did the complete opposite (i.e. enable the change).

When completing your immunity to change analysis, your fears are listed in a worry box at the top of the third column. These are fundamental anxieties that are holding back desired change. The competing commitments are listed underneath.

1.4 Identify your big assumptions

Big assumptions are the beliefs that you hold to be true or correct, and they underpin the competing commitments that you have.

Assumptions are typically deep rooted. As you investigate and write down your assumption you should sense that you have pinpointed a truth. It is important that you try to establish this point of recognition. You may find it easier to do this by talking with someone else. Depending on the nature of your belief, you may wish to talk with a colleague or friend. However, if the belief is founded on deep-seated emotions, you may wish to talk with a professional coach or counsellor.

To help figure out what internalised beliefs are at the root of your competing commitments, try framing your competing commitments by asking, "if x happens, then y will eventuate." For example, one such statement might be, "if I don't retain the processes that have been working for me, I may lose staff and make myself redundant."

Step 2. Test and consider replacing the big assumption

This step takes you beyond the template. It is all about analysing the logic that is holding you back from embracing and effecting change. It is good to work this through with a third party where possible. It may be that members of your team have different competing commitments and this has to be tackled before any change can be undertaken. However, you may need to be sensitive about the types of information you want to share with specific people. The example below may not be one to share with your team without first considering it with others.

Example: I assume that I need to hold full control over a situation to achieve good quality outcomes and have difficulty delegating to others.

My big assumption is that others are inherently lazy and delegating only leads to disappointing outcomes. My inclination is to retain ultimate control for as many variables as possible, without realising that collaboration and leaning on peers often leads to better outcomes. I have received feedback that I don't delegate effectively and the longer I am in this role, the more it is affecting my career progression.

Imagine a different future, one where the change has happened successfully. Write down what you are going to do differently that will test your big assumptions.

Example: I will delegate low risk and small tasks to test if the assumption really holds. This will allow me to identify if my big assumption is valid, or if I can make incremental improvement over time.

A 'safe test' helps you to identify whether the big assumption is flawed. You can overcome your intellectual block by imagining a future where your big assumption doesn't hold. Remember this is difficult because you need to actively work against an idea about yourself that you have held to be true for a long time.



As your assumptions are based on deeply held beliefs, you will need some objective evidence to support your new positions. You may wish to keep a journal to observe your own thoughts in regard to the new positions. Is there anyone you'd like to serve as an observer who can give you feedback after the test? A professional coach can be very useful for this type of development.

Using your journal and working with your coach or a colleague, review your new assumption on these criteria:

- Is it safe? If the worst case were to happen, could you live with the results?
- Is it valid? Has this process actually tested your big assumption?
- Is the objective evidence you've collected relevant to your big assumption?
- Are the sources of your evidence valid? You should choose sources that are neither out to get you nor trying to protect or save you.
- Might it actually reinforce your big assumption? Are you setting yourself up to fail?
- Can it be done soon?

Finally, decide if your big assumption still holds. If it does not, then embrace change. If it does, then influence the change to get an outcome you and others can live with.

At the end of this process you may wish to ask yourself if you want to lead change. Change is not for everyone. Some people suit a more stable and predictable environment and ensuring that we are all working in environments that are optimal for our characters is critical to optimum productivity and performance.

