

Overcoming immunity to change

Change is hard

Change is hard and most of us fail despite best efforts to shift behaviours, even when the stakes are high. Determined to change this common reality, behavioural psychologists Kegan and Lahey, developed a framework that helps learners uncover the deeply embedded barriers to change before mapping new ways of being in a format that encourages and enables feedback and shared discovery.

I've seen this tool dissolve learned behaviours from childhood and in the process transform people's life. I incorporate it throughout my programs, ensuring every participant has a detailed understanding of their biggest development opportunities, what gets in the way of making change and what progress looks like. Participants share the tool with their colleagues, creating a culture of accountability and support.

Below I've mapped out the Immunity to Change process and illustrated each step with two different real-life examples from my personal and client experience. I've infused some steps with additional insights from The Conscious Leadership Group and Byron Katie. Templates are included at the end of this document.

Mapping your Immunity to Change

Step 1:

The first step is to identify a behavioural change you want to make. The best change commitments are those that will make the biggest difference in your work and life. In other words, there's plenty of skin in the game. If applying this in a work context, I recommend getting feedback on the behavioural commitment you're looking to make. That way you can test what change commitment will have the biggest impact on your effectiveness. Write this as a simple statement such as:

- *I commit to asking more open questions of others, listening more and speaking less in meetings and in other important conversations.*
- *I commit to asking for help sooner if I don't know the answer.*

Then capture what difference this change would make to you and others in your team or life. Be specific. This is another great opportunity for feedback – ask your colleagues and the people in your life what difference it would make to them if you were to achieve this commitment goal. This might look like:

- *More curious questioning will help all of us explore new possibilities, I will help people feel safe and comfortable sharing their ideas, everyone will gain from hearing other people's perspectives and I will feel less anxious about needing to dominate the conversation.*
- *I will be able to finish my work sooner and take on more responsibilities and will feel less anxious about not having the answer.*

Step 2

In step 2, we identify the specific behaviours that work against your goal and what they are costing you. Meaning, what are you currently doing or saying, or not doing and saying that you want to change?

- *Currently I am dominating conversations, talking over people and thinking about what I can say next to prove by point rather than really listening to the other person's perspective. This makes other people frustrated and like they aren't being heard or valued. As a result, they trust me less and our relationship is worse off for it. Plus our ideas aren't as good as they would be if we genuinely collaborated.*
- *Currently I am committed to being right by spending hours working out problems so that everything I do is perfectly error free. I don't ask my team for help even though that may know the answer. This costs me time, makes me feel stressed and means I don't have as much time to help other people in the team.*

Step 3

This is where it gets juicy and a bit confronting. In step 3 we reveal what we're currently committed to, which is fueled by the payoff we get from our current behaviours and what we're concerned about losing if we change. This insight reveals how we protect ourselves from perceived threats to our identity, security, approval or control. In other words, it's how we go below the line. By declaring these current behaviours, we take radical responsibility for our [hidden commitments](#), which is essential for change to occur.

Look for how we play out dramas, why we gossip and blame, or why we need to be right. Consider payoffs like being enlivened by the conflict, drama or story, avoiding negative feelings, staying in the familiar and avoiding the unknown, avoiding responsibility, and being right.

If this insight doesn't hurt a bit, then you probably haven't cracked it. To continue with the examples above:

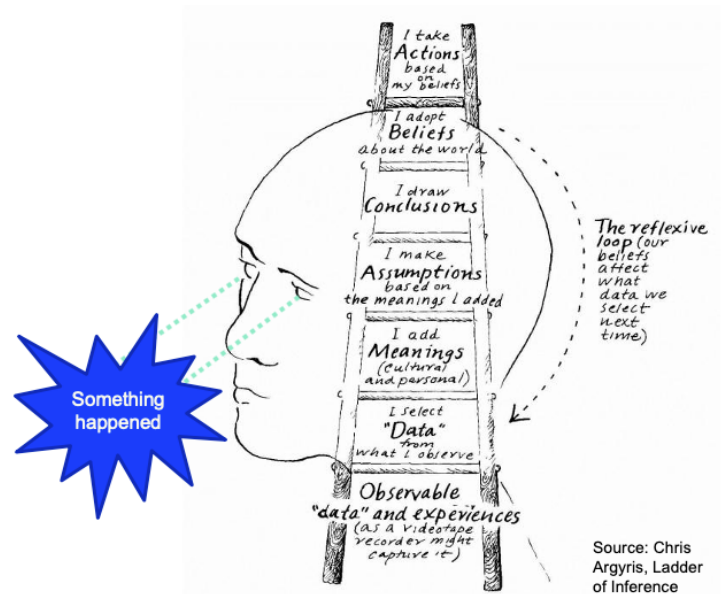
- *I'm worried that if I don't step in the team will waste time and won't come up with the best ideas, and that will make me look bad. The payoff I get is being right and always having the answer. I am currently committed to being right (especially more right and better than others), having the best ideas and proving that I'm more valuable than other people in the team.*
- *I'm concerned I'll waste people's time and they will think less of me if I ask them for help. The payoff I get is avoiding the fear of disappointing others. Currently I'm committed to pleasing others and protecting them from having to help me.*

Step 4

This step is about identifying the assumptions that underpin our hidden competing commitments. Everyone has deeply engrained beliefs that we've formed over a lifetime that underpin our current behaviours. When we tightly hold onto these beliefs and believe them to be true, it makes it almost impossible to achieve lasting change.

The ladder of inference model developed by Chris Argyris explains how we form beliefs. I like to think of these as stories we make up about what we observe. The stories we tell ourselves are incredibly powerful sources of suffering and joy. The key is to see them as just that – stories we make up and can re-write.

Here's how that played out for our two examples.



- *I assume the team won't make the best decision or can't come up with good ideas without my direct input. I assume I need to be heard (loudly and often) to be recognised as a key contributor. I need to make my point on all points and several times to be recognised as the smartest person in the room.*
- *I've got to be right and have the answer to protect people.*

Step 5

At this point we can see the underlying beliefs we hold and stories we've told ourselves that need to be challenged and re-written to achieve the behavioural shift required. If these beliefs are deeply engrained, they need to be further investigated and tested before we can loosen their grip on us. Keagan and Lahey offer provide some great questions for you to explore that more deeply and ways to test alternative assumptions.

	a)	b)
What's the assumption that underpins your concerns?	I assume the team won't make the best decision or can't come up with good ideas without my direct input. I assume I need to be heard (loudly and often) to be recognised as a key contributor. I need to make my point on all points and several times to be recognised as the smartest person in the room	I've need to protect people by always having the answer
When does it seem valid? When might it not be valid? When is it most likely to drive your behaviour? le what are your triggers?	This feels most valid when the stakes are high or the team seems to not have the right experience or expertise to deliver. It's not valid all other times.	Now that I reflect on it, it's never really valid.

How does this connect to your identity? When did it start?	From a young girl, my family told me I was the smartest in the family. Loud lively debate was encouraged and being an active participant gave me recognition and affection from my family.	When I was young my father was very controlling and aggressive and as the oldest child this was particularly targeted at me when I made mistakes. I felt I needed to be right to protect my younger sister.
How might you test it in a safe, small scale way in the near term? What data are you looking for to test your assumption?	I can practice being the last person to speak in meetings or not speaking at all and see how it impacts discussion. I can then ask the team for feedback on what difference it makes.	I will try to find the answer for 30 minutes and will then ask for help if I can't work it out myself. I will see what time it saves me.
How might you redefine your identity of assumptions to capture your new commitments?	I have shifted my view of what the smartest person in the room looks like and can see it's not the loudest or most vocal. Indeed, it's the one that let's others shine!	Inviting help from others is best for the team and that's how I can contribute best to this team.

[The Work by Byron Katie](#) is another powerful tool to set ourselves free from limiting beliefs. In this work, Katie (as she is known), encourages a more meditative approach where we reflect on a limiting belief we're currently holding onto and ask ourselves four questions:

1. *Is it true?*
2. *Can you absolutely know it's true?*
3. *How do you react, what happens when you believe that thought?*
4. *Who would you be if I could erase that thought from your mind?*

Once you connect with how much being right is costing you, it comes easier to see how a whole range of opposites might be equally as true, which is where the turnaround comes in.

Here's how these turnarounds worked:

a)

Current belief: I need to dominate for the team to make the best decision

Alternate stories:

I don't need to dominate for the team to make the best decision

If I dominate the team won't make the best decisions

If I dominate, I won't make the best decision

b)

Current belief: I need to protect people by always having the answer and being right

Alternate stories:

I don't need to protect people by always having the answer and being right

I don't protect people by always having the answer and being right

I expose people by always having the answer and being right

From there, we can capture evidence to support each of these alternative views. This exercise helps us let go of limiting beliefs by constructing a range of new ones, which in turn dissolves our original story.

Step 6

In the final step we map what progress looks like over time:

Commitment / improvement goal	First steps forward <i>What will you do to start making progress? What support can you ask from others?</i>	Significant progress <i>What will others notice? How will they feel? What will you feel?</i>	Success <i>How will you know you're no longer hooked by your immunity to change?</i>
I commit to asking more open questions of others, listening more and speaking less in meetings and in other important conversations.	I will share my commitment with others and invite feedback on my progress. I will set a reminder 'speak last' before key meetings.	Others will notice a more open, free-flowing discussion in team meetings. They will feel their ideas are valued. I will feel pleased that I'm making progress.	I will feel relaxed speaking last in meetings.
I commit to asking for help sooner if I don't know the answer.	I will set myself a 30 minute time limited to work out problems before asking for help.	Others will notice me asking for their help and offering to help with other activities due to have more time.	I will feel good about asking questions.

Learning more

This is a great [article](#) by Lisa Lahey on their research and model.

This [animation](#) is a little slow and daggy but covers the core aspects of the model for those who like visualisations.

For the complete picture, read the [book](#).

The best way to learn is by doing. Use the templates below to map out your immunity to change.