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— Robert Kegan

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Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council.

## INNER CONFLICTS, INNER STRENGTHS

*The greatest barriers to change come from within;  
so do our greatest opportunities*

By DENNIS SPARKS

**JSD:** In *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*, you cited William Perry, who said, “Whenever someone comes to me for help, I listen very hard and ask myself, ‘What does this person really want — and what will they do to keep from getting it?’”

Then you write, “If we want deeper understanding of the prospect of change, we must pay closer attention to our own powerful inclinations not to change.” Still later you write, “The leadership idea is that we are not able to effect any significant change until we recognize the dynamic immune system by which we continuously manufacture nonchange.” What is that immune system and why is it so powerful?

**Kegan:** Your question puts a finger on the essence of what we’ve discovered in 15 to 20 years of working with individuals, schools,

and, most recently, school districts. The usual explanations about the difficulty of change say that people aren’t sufficiently motivated because they aren’t genuinely committed to the change. But from our perspective, those explanations don’t get to the heart of the matter. The idea of the immune system is our way of making sense of the fact that educators often have very genuine and powerful commitments to improving teaching and learning and yet at the same time operate in ways, often un mindfully, that work against that very commitment.

## COMMITMENT IN COMPLAINTS

**JSD:** In your book, you help readers identify these genuine commitments by asking them first to consider their complaints. You point out that complaints are passionate and that “where there is passion there are also possibilities for transformation.” How do you help people find the “transformative element or seed” in their complaints?

**Kegan:** Complaints are a tremendous resource to help people determine what we call their first-column commitments. We believe that people wouldn’t complain about anything unless they cared about something. Underneath the surface torrent of complaints and cynical humor and eye-rolling, there is a hidden river of passion and commitment which is the reason the complaints even exist. We ask participants in our workshops to turn to their complaints to learn about their commitments. It’s never hard to get people to tell us what bothers them, and even in schools or school systems that are working well there is a continuous channel of complaining and wishing and hoping that can be converted into commitments. Leaders can invite the expression of complaints, not for the purpose of wallowing in them or even trying to make them go away too quickly, but as a way to gain insight into the commitments that lie under them.

## START WITH COMMITMENTS

**JSD:** A moment ago you used the

term “first-column commitments.” Identifying those commitments is the first step in a multistep process.

**Lahey:** Yes, our method asks people to engage in a four-column exercise (see chart on p. 68) that helps them identify the immune system we just briefly described. To do that, we ask people a set of questions, each digging deeper. In the first column, participants in our workshops list commitments about which they feel passion. As Bob (Kegan) just noted, these commitments are sometimes revealed by their complaints. In the second column, we ask educators to note things they do or don’t do that undermine their first-column commitments. In column three, participants identify competing commitments they hold that are the basis of their column two behaviors. These competing commitments are often held with little or no awareness. They are typically forms of self-protection, like wanting to be liked or to feel in control. We ask people to assume that each competing commitment has a theory embedded in it about how the world works and how we work in the world and to ferret out what we call the big assumptions.

**Kegan:** Some examples might help. Let’s say a principal has a sincere first-column commitment to having a free flow of information to him from everyone in the school so that he has a good sense of what’s really going on. There are all kinds of evidence the principal really feels this



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— Lisa Lahey

Barriers to change	COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2	COLUMN 3	COLUMN 4
	Genuinely held commitment	What I do that works against my commitment	The competing commitment that generates column 2	My big assumption
<b>SUPERINTENDENT</b>	I am committed to operating less as a manager and more as a mentor with the principals.	I do not genuinely collaborate with the principals around the redesign of their schools. My non-negotiables are very large in scope.	I am committed to having things go my way, to dramatic and fast success which I think requires my playing an active, hands-on role.	If I do not exercise wide-spread authority and control, all forward momentum for change will be lost. The principals will not do enough of what they should, quickly enough, or at a high enough level.
<b>PRINCIPAL</b>	I am committed to powerful learning experiences for every child in my school and to functioning as my school's Chief Instructional Officer.	I spend too little time in classrooms and talking with teachers about their work and too much time as "plant manager," "chief scheduler," or doing other less essential things.	I am committed to not making messes for my superintendent, not losing her high opinion of me.	If I create a problem for my superintendent, it will irreparably harm my relationship with her.
<b>TEACHER</b>	I am committed to wholeheartedly participating in our instructional redesign plan.	I am not getting involved, avoiding, procrastinating.	I am committed to not being disappointed yet again, to not letting myself hope for real change when that does not occur, to not fooling myself.	If I let myself hope again and have my hopes dashed, I will not be able to recover.

way. At the same time, he identifies in the second column a number of ways in which he works against this commitment. He notes that he's not out in the school enough to pick up on things and to reach out to various constituencies. He's aware that he sometimes shoots the messenger. When people bring certain kinds of news to his office they leave wishing they had never told him these things. So he's aware that he's doing things contrary to his first-column commitment.

**Lahey:** Here's another example. Let's say a superintendent has discovered through this process a first-column commitment to empowering her principals. She then identifies the ways she is operating that unwittingly work against that commitment. One way is that she

makes herself available to teachers' direct petitions, which opens up a separate channel of influence that undermines the authority of the principals.

**Kegan:** When people espouse a commitment to something and then act in ways that are contrary to it, we often think of them as hypocrites ... because they do not walk their talk. Our experience is that when people are acting in ways that are contrary to what they espouse, it is usually because there are other forces at work. It does not necessarily mean that they are insincere about their first-column commitments. So where do these undermining second-column behaviors come from? We next ask participants to consider what would be lost if they altered the behavior in the second

column — were the principal not to shoot the messenger, were the superintendent not to solve problems and respond to pleas that should be referred to principals. People are usually able to identify the problem, often expressed in the form of a fear or worry. The principal realizes that although he wants to get all this information, he is worried about getting information he cannot do anything about. He is concerned that if everyone knows that he is aware of the situation and is unable to do anything about it, he'll look like a less effective leader. These worries, in turn, are translated into a competing commitment — he's committed, without ever having named it, to not having people in his school see him as an ineffective leader.

**Lahey:** The superintendent who keeps her door open to people who should really be referred to principals may be operating from a host of third-column commitments. It could be that she likes to be where the action is, to have her hands on everything — or that she enjoys the appreciation she receives for providing teachers with things they want. If the superintendent were to say to a teacher that the matter should be taken up with the school's principal, she would be depriving herself of being the person who doles out the goodies, which she realizes is a big part of the pleasure of her work. These commitments are just as real as her first-column commitments and create the inner contradictions that we call the immune system.

**Kegan:** The content of the first two columns is typically discussed in any kind of change process. People identify their goals and the barriers that prevent them from moving ahead with them. Column two is really an inventory of those barriers. Where we part company from accepted wisdom is in what happens next. The usual practice is to go to work eliminating the barriers, a brave and logical approach. We believe, however, that you cannot address the barriers in traditional ways because they come from a very powerful source inside us, and that until we get to the generator of these behaviors we aren't going to be able to change them.

#### **WE UNDERMINE OURSELVES**

**JSD:** When people discuss barriers, they are usually talking about things outside of themselves, like not having enough time or money, or the resistance of other people to change. What seems unique about your approach is that you ask people to look inward to identify barriers in the form of competing commitments and the big assumptions that most people have not considered before your invitation to do so.

**Kegan:** That's right. Many people are familiar with the SWOT analysis — strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. An examination of weaknesses

usually does not include an introspective search for how we undermine our own intentions. We don't see how our weaknesses are also a kind of strength. Threats are viewed as only external in origin. Our work invites people to understand how it's a natural feature of human existence to be pulled in multiple directions, both individually and collectively as organizations. We help educators see that the very same second-column behavior that can be viewed as ineffective from the perspective of the first column is powerfully effective when viewed from the third column. Another feature of our approach is that it respects and honors the brilliance and effectiveness of column-two behaviors relative to the third-column commitment. That's what tends to keep everything in place. Our work has helped us better understand the forces that keep change from occurring. These forces are less well understood when they are simply regarded as resistance and better understood in light of the competing commitments that create an immunity to change.

**Lahey:** The concept of the immune system enables us to see that part of us is moving in one direction and another part is using just as much energy moving in another direction. So it's a stalemate. It would be pretty depressing to leave things there, though. When we move to the fourth column to identify big assumptions, we find the lever for disrupting the immune system. Once we name the big assumptions that anchor the immune system — the things we hold to be true without question — we take them outside of ourselves to ask whether they are true, and if true, under what conditions. People often identify two or three big assumptions related to a competing commitment.

#### **BIG, BOLD ASSUMPTIONS**

**JSD:** Let's return to your examples.

**Kegan:** The principal's big assumption might be that if he received information that he didn't know how to handle he'd be overwhelmed, that it would be an entirely negative experience, and that he would fall into a pit from which he would be unable to extract

himself. Or he may assume that his faculty will see him as ineffective because he was unable to immediately solve the problem. The big assumptions of the superintendent who undermines her principals might be that if she doesn't have her hands on all parts of the organization things will fall apart, or if she is not the one giving out all the goodies her job will no longer be deeply satisfying. In these ways, big assumptions set the terms for the reality in which we operate.

#### **BAD CONCLUSIONS**

**JSD:** The examples you use are stated as absolutes and contain predictions of dire consequences should they be violated.

**Kegan:** That's right. Big assumptions always have what we call a BTB conclusion to them — big time bad. People believe that something cataclysmic will happen to them or to their organizations. The consequences are never trivial. Big assumptions set the terms for what you can and can't do within your world. The surfacing of these assumptions and the ongoing exploration of them creates a royal road for a reflective stance towards one's work. As a result of this reflection, the person may then alter his or her map of how the world works, which then permits other choices and actions.

**Lahey:** Big assumptions not only exist in the psyche of an individual, but also operate at collective levels within departments, schools, or districts. We worked with a district with several schools at each level. We clustered principals by levels so that all the elementary principals were together and so on. Each group came up with something that was repeated in different words by principals at all the levels. They agreed that one of their most important collective commitments was to having all students achieve at higher levels. We then asked all the principals what they were doing or not doing collectively that ran counter to that commitment. They said that they were not providing the professional development, time, or other resources necessary to meet that goal. They also said that they didn't

confront mediocre teachers.

Next, we asked the group to identify the competing commitments that would help us better understand those behaviors. The principals said teachers would react negatively if mediocre teachers were confronted and if they were asked to participate in more professional development. They also said as a result of those things, teachers would complain among themselves about the principals, which would upset the apple cart within their schools. When we probed this issue, they added that they assumed that teachers' complaints would reach the superintendent and the school board and that their jobs would be at risk. So here we have a collectively held contradiction, an organizational immune system.

**Kegan:** The change process becomes quite different when you recognize and attempt to overcome organizational immunities. Ordinary change plans address the barriers, but they neglect the greater powers at play that are giving rise to these behaviors and making them intelligent and sensible. It's like treating the symptoms rather than their sources. We ask leaders to consider how the barriers at an organizational level are brilliant and effective and consistent expressions of a hidden collective third-column commitment. Only then will leaders have a deep understanding of why change is so difficult at an organizational as well as individual level.

**THE POWER OF BIG ASSUMPTIONS**

**JSD:** The dire consequences described by the principals in your example may seem very valid and real to some of our readers. I guess that's why big assumptions are so powerful.

**Lahey:** There is an element of truth in most big assumptions. But the assumptions are so generalized that the principals in this example become afraid to take any action that could lead to any complaint.

**Kegan:** In the example we just provided, the superintendent and other district leaders were also in the room with the principals. They were blown away by what they heard and needed our time to

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— Robert Kegan

work it through. They couldn't believe that principals didn't feel that central office would back them up.

**Lahey:** One of the things that happens when we unquestioningly hold our big assumptions as truths is that we pay attention only to that which confirms them. We don't seek out counter examples to our big assumptions because we are so sure they are correct.

**Kegan:** We always tell people that surfacing and making big assumptions explicit does not presume that the big assumption will prove false. It simply allows us to examine them. Until then, they were just a given. But when we give people an opportunity to explore their big assumptions in actual practice, they almost always find that the assumptions are too globalized. They realize that their big assumptions are absolutely true in some respects with some people in some situations, but that there are a host of other circumstances in which they are not true. In our experience, people don't have to completely give up their big assumptions to produce significant improvements. Even small changes in big assumptions can lead to big changes in people's actions and sense of possibility.

**BIG CHANGES FROM SMALL ONES**

**JSD:** Some people believe big changes are required to achieve big results, but you are saying just the opposite.

**Lahey:** We don't expect that by simply naming the big assumption something magical will happen. We have a series of questions and a set of exercises

that we use to help people unpack it. In the example we just used, principals become aware that there are some types of complaints for which they would be fired and others that would even be received as good news by their superintendent. A very small change in principals' thinking in which they differentiated those complaints about which they ought to be worried from those that need not concern them would be very powerful.

**BEHAVIOR WILL FOLLOW**

**JSD:** You wrote in your book, "It is very hard to lead on behalf of other people's changes in their underlying ways of making meaning without considering the possibility that we ourselves must also change." Why is meaning making so important, and why must leaders change if they desire others to change?

**Kegan:** In the first part of your question, you put your finger on a key assumption of ours — that the most powerful driver for behavioral change is a change in how one understands the world. If you want powerful ongoing changes in teaching or leadership, you have to get at the underlying beliefs and conceptions that give rise to behaviors.

**Lahey:** This doesn't mean, though, that you don't ask people to try on some new behaviors as a way of changing their ways of thinking. It may be important for them to experiment with new behaviors.

**Kegan:** We think change in leaders is important because they play a large role in creating the culture in which everyone operates. In our work with districts, we make it clear that how the superintendent is operating affects how others approach change. For example, we worked with a superintendent who was committed to a much more collaborative relationship with his district's principals. A critical turning point came when he shared with them not just his first-column commitments, which subordinates hear from leaders all the time, but his second- and third-column lists as well. He actually told them, "I have to admit I also seem to have a commitment to maintaining more unilat-

eral control!” When leaders make public their engagement in the difficult processes of change they become extraordinary teachers. Leaders who themselves model learning support a much more powerful learning organization.

**Lahey:** We believe that leaders lead language communities. When leaders create the kinds of opportunities we describe in the book and encourage others to talk about their column-three counter-commitments, for example, we believe leaders will be more successful in leading school change. Leaders need to be willing to do the same. And they need to be clear that there will be no punitive consequences for those who participate.

**LEARNING TO DO MORE THAN COPE**

**JSD:** In your book you observed, “Much of what goes under the banner of professional development amounts to helping us develop more skills or capacities to cope, but cope within the worlds of our assumptive designs. The design itself is never in question, or even visible.”

**Kegan:** We make a distinction between informational and transformational learning. Informational learning is an important part of professional development, but by its very nature it goes into the existing form of our minds. Major change requires alteration in some of our basic, underlying beliefs. That is transformational learning. Our friend and colleague Ron Heifetz makes the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges require harnessing already existing kinds of thinking and knowledge. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, require creating new knowledge and new ways of thinking. Heifetz says that one of the biggest errors leaders make is addressing adaptive challenges through technical means. We’re saying something similar — that the challenges school leaders face are adaptive and require transformational learning.

**LEARN WITH A GOOD PROBLEM**

**JSD:** You wrote, “When we solve a problem quickly, the one thing we can usually be certain of is that we ourselves

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**Highlights:** Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey are co-authors of *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2001) and co-founders of Minds at Work ([www.mindsatwork.com](http://www.mindsatwork.com)), a consulting firm specializing in enhanced capacities for organizational and individual change.

are the same people coming out of the problem as we were going into it.” In your view, some problems are actually lessons from which we can derive important learning.

**Kegan:** Absolutely! Leaders are continuously faced with problems, many of which have to be quickly resolved. That’s the managerial side of leadership. But we suggest that leaders select a few good problems from which they can learn. And leaders can also invite every teacher and administrator to have a learning rela-

tionship with at least one good problem — one good problem that no one is expecting to be solved too quickly. In fact, the good problems — the ones we can learn from — are the ones we don’t solve at all so much as they “solve us.” They change us. This is what a good curriculum does. It changes the learner, and the adults in the school need a good curriculum no less than the kids! That is particularly important in schools, which after all are first and foremost about learning. ■