

## Book review

# Immunity to change: how to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey  
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Whenever a scholar like Peter Senge (the author of *The 5th Discipline*) recommends a book with words like “(...) *I know of no book that does a better job of helping leaders understand the commitment to change and how to put it into practice (...)*” [back flap], it seems worthwhile to take a closer look.

With ‘Immunity to Change’ Kegan and Lahey address the mystery of personal and organizational change in an original way. Their main message is that individuals, groups and organizations are not blocked by fears for change—as many claim—but more by existing, hidden mindsets. And, that most have not, yet, found ways to understand these mindsets and, therefore, have not learned to overcome them. Their approach boils down to the development of new learning; to paraphrase the authors, “(...) *what people genuinely intend to do and what they are actually able to bring about*” [p. ix] differs and makes most immune for change. Instead of focusing on simply technical learning, i.e. developing new skills, they claim that the development of adaptive learning should be mastered too, i.e. human capacity to learn and grow which requires rationality and emotion.

In an easy to understand way, the book takes us through three parts. Part one provides a new way to understand change. Change and be able to deal with it, becomes utterly important not from a coping but from a developing perspective. It requires more than learning new skills; it requires the ability to grow and reach new levels of mental complexity: the development from a ‘*socialized mind*’ via a ‘*self-authoring mind*’ to a ‘*self-transforming mind*’ [p. 16–21]. These minds differ in the way they understand, process and give meaning to external information impulses. The socialized mind follows socially shaped routines, the self-authoring mind can step back from these routines and make self-judgments on underlying principles and beliefs and decide on it to come to new routines, and the self-transforming mind, finally, can go further by stepping back from and reflecting on the limits of existing—what I prefer to call—routines, principles and beliefs (RPBs) and can create actions based on new RPBs. Part two of the

book shows Kegan and Lahey’s approach to overcome immunity to change for individuals as well as for collectives. Immunity maps are used to explore immunities in order to unlock by investigating underlying competing commitments and even deeper rooted assumptions. It shows how individuals and groups ‘fool’ themselves by unknowingly protect themselves from making the very changes they most desire. Finally, part three of the book invites us to try the approach ourselves. It deals with unlocking our potentials to shift to self-transforming minds by diagnosing and overcoming our immunities in order to prevail in personal and collective growth.

Are the insights and approach of Kegan and Lahey’s of value to professionals involved in integrated care? I think it is of great value. In the 1980s DiMaggio and Powell showed us that professionals are pressured by professional, collective norms. It means that professionals are enforced by these socially stated norms, i.e. act as socialized minds, in order to become and to remain a good professional. DiMaggio and Powell call this phenomenon normative isomorphism. Especially, in change processes professional norms can be the cause for ill performances and need to be changed. Unfortunately and too often, present RPBs are not understood and are causing failing change processes. Kegan and Lahey help us to see and overcome exciting, hidden mindsets, and with it they open the door to successful changes if we are willing to dig into our hidden immunities.

Integrated care settings can benefit from it too. The partners in the chain have to deal with an additional issue as the partners often use, or are forced to use, different mindsets. It explains why care chains are unbalanced and require change. In other words, mindsets must be unlocked and transformed towards shared mindsets that suit an integral perspective instead of individually transform mindsets which still might be in conflict.

Clearly, Kegan and Lahey are influenced by Argyris’ skilled incompetence thesis. Professionals quite often use practiced routine behavior (skill) to produce what they paradoxically do not intend (incompetence). With Immunity to Change the authors applied Argyris’ thesis to change, which makes sense as many have desired changed states but less are capable of reaching it successfully. An insight professionals in integrated

care can benefit from greatly as integrated care is subject to change too. On the other hand, it shows the Achilles' heel of Kegan and Lahey's book. The original, and from time to time brilliant, message is structured in a rather common way. It misses the accessibility of the 5th Discipline series, which is more helpful to get started with learning to learn. Nevertheless, *Immunity to Change* is more than useful and gives great value for money.

In conclusion, Kegan and Lahey's *Immunity to Change* is worthwhile as it helps to understand deeply rooted and hidden mindsets that create a natural but enforcing immunity to change. Not only do they show underlying mechanisms, they also provide insights how to unlock our hidden potentials and move forwards to

new levels of mental complexity. Without it, we might remain locked to create lasting changes—which many professionals are in need of nowadays. I value Kegan and Lahey's book with four out of five stars as it helps professionals to understand their own blockages and get them more successfully on their path of change. Inspired by Wittgenstein, the true value of *Immunity to Change* comes down to "*what is not understood cannot be changed*". Enjoy your journey.

Mark J.G. Govers, Dr.,  
*Assistant Professor in Organizational and  
Management Science,  
Maastricht University, School for Public Health and  
Primary Care*  
*E-mail: m.govers@beoz.unimaas.nl or mark@govers.name*