

*The following is a highlighted summary of the book,*

**How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation** by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey

*The statements below are key points of the book as determined by James Altfeld and have been made available at no charge to the user.*

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WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT... AND WHAT WILL YOU DO TO KEEP FROM GETTING IT?

If we want deeper understanding of the prospect of change, we must pay closer attention to our own powerful inclinations not to change. This attention may help us discover within ourselves the force and beauty of a hidden immune system, the dynamic process by which we tend to prevent change, by which we manufacture inhibitors of change. If we can unlock this system, we release new energies on behalf of the new ways of seeing and being.

Here is your first question:

*What sorts of things – if they were to happen more frequently in your work setting – would you experience as being more supportive of your own ongoing development at work?*

Before you get going on this question, a few elaborations:

1. We intend no special or highly technical meaning for development here; you should feel free to think about what would be supportive to your own ongoing growth or development, however you wish to define it.
2. Don't edit your responses through a filter of reasonableness, possibility, or likelihood. We don't care if what occurs to you are things that you think have no chance of happening in your workplace. The question is just meant to create a thinking exercise. We're interested in whatever comes up for you, however likely or unlikely it is of being realized.
3. If you find it helpful, you may also (or instead) want to consider what sorts of troubling, diminishing, or constraining things – if they were to happen less frequently – you would also find more supportive of your development.

The Default Mode: NBC and BMW

*Oh, we're very good at this kind of talk where I work. We even have a name for it. We call it NBC talk.*

*NBC talk? What's that?*

*Nagging, Bitching and Complaining.*

In still other organizations, it is referred to as BMW: Bitching, Moaning and Whining.

In the movie, *A Thousand Clowns*, the main character, Murray says he's discovered that if you go up to people randomly at work or even on the street and tell them, "I'm sorry," they invariably respond in a way that suggest they do in fact carry around a storehouse of injured feelings about which they are subconsciously waiting for someone to apologize.

Ask people how they can be more supported at work and a torrent of rueful criticism is released: "If only ...", "I just wish....", "Why can't we...."

The Potential in Complaint

It is important to pay attention to complaints in a way people rarely do. There is untapped potential in a complaint. We would not complain about something if we did not care about it.

Next Question:

*What commitments or convictions do you hold that are actually implied in your earlier response?*

Select just one, about which you feel very strongly. To help you with this, complete the following statement:

*I am committed to the value or the importance of \_\_\_\_\_*

Examples:

- *More open and direct communication at work.*
- *Supporting my staff to exercise more individual initiative*
- *Securing sufficient resources and additional personnel support to thrive in my job.*

Regardless of the response you wrote, at least two things can be said about it:

1. It represents a commitment you do genuinely hold dear. Not something you feel you should hold dear, or one day aspire to holding dear, but genuinely hold dear right now.
2. It represents a commitment that is not, at the moment, fully or optimally realized.

What all this allows us to do is to identify what it is that you care about most in the situation at hand. To take some time to name what the most important issue or principle is at stake, and identify what that complaint shows you are committed to.

There are always players and conditions that contribute to things being as they are. So, in your case, put a list together of all the people you see as responsible for your commitment not being fully realized. Does your own name appear? Perhaps it should. To help you out, answer this next question:

*What are you doing, or not doing, that is keeping your commitment from being more fully realized?*

This is not an exercise to discover it's all your fault. It is merely an exercise to discover what role or hand you have in the situation. It's a chance to focus on your role, regardless of it being large or small. Here then are some examples of what we are talking about:

*I agree to take on too many of the things I am asked to do, and as a result, I never have enough time to devote to what I'm really committed to do.*

*I'm not actually asking anyone for what I want.*

*I'm not advocating forcefully enough for what I believe.*

*I don't speak up when people are violating the norm I value. Silently, I collude in it being Ok to talk behind one another's back.*

*When asked to get involved, or take over, I don't refuse.*

*I don't delegate as much as I could.*

*I am too often more than willing to be drawn into things I shouldn't be involved in.*

*I have a hard time saying No.*

*I don't really take a stand with my boss for the time I need to complete my assignments to my satisfaction. I just keep handing off to him on his schedule without talking about how much better the work could be with a more realistic time frame.*

Have you ever wondered why we have such a difficult time fixing these things? Ever wonder why, all those New Year's resolutions people make never get resolved? The answer appears to be, because there may be bigger forces at work, behind the behaviors of column two, and if we don't get these forces onto the table, they continue to run the show.

Too often, when we think of fixing these things, we come up with reasons why we can't.

*My boss may think I'm not really up to the job.*

*I think my boss is happy with half-assed work.*

Think about this. It is one thing to say I'm afraid if I ask, I'll be turned down, or I'm afraid to discover that my boss's standards are low. It's quite another to say, I may be actively committed to NOT putting myself in a situation where I can be disappointed, or I may be committed to not learning what my boss's standards really are. With this alternative language, we enter a different world. We take a step toward putting the bigger powers into play.

Here's how it works. Having identified the fear or discomfort associated with doing other than you are doing, this next step allows you to frame the fear. If the fear is more about learning that my boss doesn't really care at what level of quality the work is performed, I might write, "I am committed to not learning that my boss is willing to settle for mediocrity."

In essence, whatever we enter in the third column should have this one common feature: it names a particular form of self-protection to which we are committed, and which competes with the commitment in our first column.

For example, let's say you believe that people in your workplace have issues with other people, but the way it is handled is that everyone just talks about it with other people. That you never get to the person everyone has an issue with. So, in the third column, you might put... I think what I am really most afraid of in calling people on their backbiting and gossip is that people would see me as the Tough Woman, you know? The Activist, the Crusader. Deep down, this may be who I really am, but I've seen what happens when you're a woman. I want people to be comfortable with me and see me as part of the group. I don't really like being the odd person out.

Or, "I'd be able to grow and develop more if I didn't have to be Mommy around here so much. Everyone comes to me for everything around here." "My fear is that if I didn't step in when asked to, I'd be afraid they'd feel I was abandoning them and they'd be very unhappy with me. I fear that if I wasn't involved as I am, the outcome of the work would suffer and things would not come off to my satisfaction."

Third example... "My area of responsibility has grown too large for me to handle, and yet there are other things I see that I would like to take on, but can't without an assistant. But in giving this even more thought, it really comes down to the fact that I can't say No." The fear: "I hate all conflict with a passion. I would rather do anything than get into a fight, argument or confrontation with someone over the age of twenty-one. And by saying No, I know I'm going to be confronted."

The Three Columns Create a Pathway:

When read backwards, the three columns constitute a pathway. The third column ("I'm committed to avoiding all conflict at all costs"), leads to certain behaviors ("I don't or can't say No!") that in turn undermine the first column commitment ("I'm committed to securing sufficient resources...")

The first and third columns are in contradictory tension with one another, yet both are true and held simultaneously. The point being that so long as the third commitment is a part of the picture, no amount of altering the second column behaviors is likely to have a lasting effect.

In business, visions are articulated, but nothing happens. Plans are created, and even beautifully published; yet they often end up sitting on a shelf somewhere. "The plans make brilliant sense. We should carry them out, and we will." But, they don't. The mighty mountain heaves and gives forth a mouse.

Why does so little real change actually occur? Why do the reformers so often reproduce something that looks much like the original model?

There is no lack of answers to these questions, but the blame is usually assigned to other people or unanticipated obstacles.

Our Premise: It may be nearly impossible for us to bring about any important change in a system or organization without changing ourselves. The corollary is that for every commitment we genuinely hold to bring about some important change, there is another commitment we hold that has the effect of preventing the change.

We may, for example, be genuinely committed to fostering a more collaborative form of leadership in the exercise of authority, but we may also be committed to being in control, or having things go our way, or having the work product reach our standard. Serving the two commitments may actually have us working against ourselves.

If there is a negative in your third column commitment (for instance, “I’m committed to NOT being seen as holier-than-thou”), then remove the negative by modifying the words, to form a sentence stem like this: “I assume that if I were to be seen as holier than thou, then....”

If there is no negative commitment in your third column commitment (say, “I’m committed to avoiding all conflict at all costs”), then add negative wording, to form a sentence stem like this: “I assume that if I did not avoid all conflict, then...”

List the worst case scenarios and personal fears that make you not want to avoid conflict:

... Then I would regularly experience myself as outmaneuvered and ineffectual.  
... I would be constantly anxious and preoccupied.  
... others would be quickly drawn in with their own conflicts and all friendly feelings would vanish at work.  
...I would learn things about how others feel that would be devastating, and I would never get over it.  
...I’d be in tears.

So, whatever you have written in your third column, you are now going to list the things you assume are behind your actions.

Whatever rational disclaimers we might bring to our own Big Assumptions, we also have to acknowledge that, in some powerful nether region, it holds sway over us. And upon seeing it written down, you may just come to the conclusion: “This is not just an assumption, this is for sure the truth!”

Consider these:

I assume if I learn more about what people are really doing who work for me, then I will be responsible to act upon a million more things and I will drown under the weight of it all.

I assume if people feel completely comfortable with me, and I become a more and more accepted and integrated member of this group, then I will become what I hate, one of THEM, and lose my identification with, and connection to, my own people.

I assume if I tell people what I really think, then I'll be fired, unhirable, broke and my family will sleep in the streets.

I assume that if I really did make time to act on my goal, then I'd discover I'm not able to accomplish it.

I assume that if I were really to take a look at aspects of myself I'm hiding from my awareness, then I would so loathe myself as to not be able to go on.

I assume that if I were really to deal with it, then I'd have to decide to quit my job.

Chances are, in spite of all the work and hard effort you've put into identifying your Big Assumption, it too shall pass. Eventually, and over time, you'll forget about it. "Give me strength, O Lord," said St. Augustine, "to live a purer life – but not just yet!"

Repression is what psychologists call purposeful forgetting, forgetting for a very good reason, usually for the reason that remembering is going to cause us trouble. The way to eliminate repression is to involve colleagues and friends to help us remember. We need colleagues, willing partners, people we can talk to, whom we listen to and who listen to us. Specifically, we ask them to notice and keep track of what does or does not occur as a consequence of holding their Big Assumption as true.

**STEP TWO: Actively Looking for Experiences that Cast Doubt on Our Big Assumptions.**

When people are ready, we assign another kind of homework. We ask them, again in the interval between meetings, not to try changing any of their thinking or behavior, but this time to be on the lookout for any experiences that cast some doubt on the truthfulness of their assumptions.

Begin thinking about the biography of your Big Assumption. When was it born? How long have you lived with this assumption? Where do you think it got its start? What early, and possibly not recently examined, foundation does it rest on? How satisfactory a foundation does this seem to you to be in the present day?

The result of such work is not that people slap their foreheads and declare their Big Assumptions entirely false. What more often happens is the sort of thing that is common in adulthood. We add qualifications to our assumptions as riders, amendments, attachments, exceptions. We say, "I still hold my Big Assumption as basically true – but under certain circumstances, with these people, under these conditions, I can suspend my Big Assumption temporarily."

## Developing a Public Agreement:

In order to give you a taste of what we mean by a language of public agreement, let's see if together we can come up with even a single agreement about how you would want colleagues in this group to handle things, once this new organization gets started, if they find themselves out of sorts with you. Let's say they are significantly enough bothered in some way with you that this snag has now come to be a fundamental way they experience their relationship with you. What would you want them to do about it? Let's just hear some of your nominations or proposals, and then we'll see if we can agree about any of it.

*I'd want them to come to me about it.*

*Come to you?*

*Yes, Don't be going around talking to everyone else about it, running me down behind my back. If you've got a problem with me, come to me.*

*Yes. Come to me soon. Don't let it fester.*

*Not just soon. Come to me first!*

*Well, I'm not sure about the Soon part. I don't want our prototype college of the future to end up being "Whiny U." It might be better if the person would sleep on it for a while and make sure it's not something that's going to go away on its own before they come bothering me about it. I'm not a supporter of Soon, but I am a supporter of come to me first.*

*Yes, I agree. But I'd also want the person to come in a constructive frame of mind. Not just to attack, or to dump, but to talk about how things can get better.*

*But, you do want them to come to you first?*

*Yes, I do.*

Conclusion so far: We're not suggesting we've come to any real agreement yet, but there does seem to be a lot of consensus around the come-to-me-first part. Now, if everyone is in agreement on this, keep in mind that you are not only saying you want others to come to you first if they have a problem with you, but you also agree that if you have created a problem for someone, you too will go to the person first. Now, do you still want to make this agreement?

*Well, wait a minute. To be honest, if I'm really going to take this seriously and pretend this is a real situation, I'm not sure I want to be bound to go to YOU first. I'm the kind of person who need to think out loud, in conversation with someone else. I'd want to go to a friend and say, "Check this out. Here's what Rick did and I'm pissed off about it. What do you think?"*

*So maybe we should say the agreement is that you should come to me first, or, if you go to another, it should only be in the spirit of checking yourself out, not in the spirit of running the other person down.*

*Let's be real. I worry that if we allow that exception, we'll really end up opening the door we are trying to close, because you know as well as I do that when you*

*are talking with a friend and when you are upset it is easy for your friend to take your side and for the conversation to end up being less about a reality check and more about running the other person down.*

*Maybe what we need is a designated Reality Check Person, a rotating ombudsman, and this is the only other person you can go to.*

*Let's get even more real. Just because we have a come to me first agreement today, doesn't mean people are going to stop talking behind one another's back once we do start working together.*

You're right. What if we were to tell you we do not think the value of shared agreements is to prevent violations, but to create violations? Assume you've made this agreement and we wind the clock forward several months into the life of your new organization. Who do you imagine actually has the toughest time keeping this agreement?

*Any one of us! Just normal life and behavior on our part can kill the agreement.*

Scenario: You and I are sitting in a private office. You and I are old friends and have been through a lot of wars together. Our kids and families hang out together. We're close. So, I say to you, *Say, can you believe this Ann Marie? From one meeting to the next, I never know who she's going to set up next. Did you see the way she ran over Hal? Unbelievable, right?*

*Yeh. I wasn't too happy about that either. Come to think of it....*

So, how well do you think you did in keeping to the public agreement? Not good, right? Let's try again.

*The way she cut you off this morning must have really burned you. She's just so abrupt!*

*Actually, I have to tell you that I'm not really comfortable having this kind of conversation with you. Remember that agreement we made a few months back? I don't really want to get drawn into this. You and I are friends. That's a given. But if you have a problem with Ann Marie, I think we agreed you should take it to her.*

What we are pointing out here is that the person who may have the toughest job keeping to the agreement is the friend to whom the problem has been presented. It is an uncomfortable position to be in no matter how you look at it. It also takes some courage to not get drawn into the conversation and refer back to the agreement, reminding the person that s/he had a hand in its creation.

What it boils down to is that without agreement there can be no violation. Only it isn't just agreement, it is our sense of a collective offense. And in today's society, the offense has to be pretty egregious before it is considered collective. Leaving a baby in the car on a hot day in July for example would be considered a collective egregious offense by society. Therefore the language of public agreement is a vehicle for responsible people to collectively imagine a public life they simultaneously know they would prefer and know they will, at times, fall short of.

The two principal outcomes of a language of public agreement are:

1. The experience of organizational integrity
2. The use of violations as a resource for surfacing further inner contradictions for our learning.

The life of an agreement merely begins with its original ratification; it's real strength and vitality are demonstrated by use in response to the inevitable violations that its presence creates. In the example of the conversation given above, it was the initiator of the conversation who came to understand that he would not gain the approval of a colleague, thereby reinforcing the agreement and truly making the agreement a Public Agreement. When such violations occur, they should not be heard in the courtroom, but in the classrooms of life, just as it did in the example. In that example, also note that there was no admonishing going on, or criticism for the violation. It was merely pointed out.