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# THE REAL REASON PEOPLE WON'T CHANGE

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**P**ersonal immunity to change is a term not many people have understood, but have experienced. Competing commitments, or personal immunities to change, are most commonly seen in the workplace. Every manager is familiar with the employee who is resistant to change even though the employee has shown a deep commitment to the company and genuinely supported change in the past. Managers have been perplexed by this phenomenon for years until organizational psychologists got involved and studied the issue. Organizational psychologists discovered that this type of behavior comes across as resistance, but is in fact an effort toward a hidden self-sabotaging behavior. Managers need to understand how competing commitments work in order to overcome them and no longer have change-resistant employees.

The process for employees to overcome their immunities to change takes some time since it challenges the psychological foundations upon which people think the way they do. Organizational psychologists conducted a 15-year study that involved hundreds of managers working in a variety of companies. At

the end 15 years, they developed a three-stage process to help organizations discover what is getting in the way of change.

The first part of the process involves getting the employee to uncover their competing commitment. In order to achieve this, managers want to ask questions about the employee's work and what they would like to see changed. In general, people typically complain the loudest about things they care the most about. Once this is discovered, it is important to ask the employee what he or she is doing that is preventing them from fully realizing their competing commitment.

The next step is to invite the employee to forgo the behavior and to imagine what the possible consequences of that would entail. An example of a question could be, "If you imagine doing the opposite of the undermining behavior, do you detect in yourself any discomfort, worry, or vague fear?"

The final step involves getting the employee to admit his/her competing commitment out loud. The question organizational psychologists suggest to ask is, "By engaging in this undermining behavior, what worrisome outcome are you

committed to preventing?” Along with the final step, managers have to help understand why and how the employee has developed this fear. The term organizational psychologist associated with this was called big assumptions. Big assumptions are deeply rooted beliefs about oneself that one accepts as reality and as a result, competing commitments arise from these deeply rooted beliefs.

Lastly, by admitting to the competing commitment and the big assumption behind it, the employee can now finally challenge their assumption and recognize why they are engaging in their change resistant behavior. It is in this last step that the employee can commit to trying to improve their competing commitment since they have a better understanding of how it developed in the first place. After the employee states his/her new commitment, they need to stay focused on it and remember why they stated it so they can start to accept change.

**Tom’s Story:** Tom admitted that he believed in open communication but his subordinates tended to keep him out of the loop when something went wrong in his projects. After further talking with this manager, Tom realized he tends to shoot down the messenger when he/she brings him bad news and that is why he is out of the loop. Tom imagined himself listening calmly and openly to some bad news about a project and concluded that he was afraid he would hear about a problem he could not fix. After more questions from his manager, Tom admitted that his competing commitment was that he was committed to not learning about things he could not do anything about.

He was able to avoid his competing commitment by intimidating his staff and preventing them from delivering bad news. Tom’s competing commitment developed based on his big assumption that all leaders should be able to address and solve all problems. He believed he would be seen as useless if he could not solve all the problems that presented him, thus he avoided the problems. In order to work on his competing commitment, Tom stated his new commitment that read, “I am committed to hearing from my subordinates and maximizing the flow of information into my office.”

**John’s Story:** John was a talented African American software manager who valued close work relationships. Although he was a big believer in open communication, his sense of humor consistently kept his colleagues at a distance, which was causing John to undermine his own advancement. John believed that if he became too well integrated with his white colleagues, it would threaten his sense of loyalty to his own race group. Thus, in order to get his point across to his colleagues John would use sarcastic humor versus calmly explaining his reasoning. After many questions from his manager, John admitted that his competing commitment was that he was devoted to maintaining distance from his white colleagues. His competing commitment rose from his big assumption about losing his authentic connection to his racial group if he integrated too much with white people. In order to work on his competing commitment, John stated, “I am committed to high quality communication with my colleagues” and he continues to work on this.

Competing commitments do not represent weaknesses but represent some sort of self-protection mechanism that all of us create throughout our lifetime. Even though revealing competing commitments may seem embarrassing at times, it has been noted as a huge stress relief for the employee and employer as there is no more resistance between the two parties in the end. In order to keep your business up to date, managers and CEO's need to keep up with the times and incorporate change into their systems of work. When they are dealing with employees who want to push back against the proposed plan, managers and CEOs need to take the time to understand why their employees are truly pushing back. By trying this new approach of understanding competing commitments and big assumptions, it can result in a win/win relationship. The employee will feel more engaged and productive in their work since they will no longer be running around the same problem and the employer will be able to install newer systems within the organization with less employees who resist the change and more who support it.

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