Diagnosing Your Own Immunity to Change

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Immunity to Change:
How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization

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DIAGNOSING YOUR OWN IMMUNITY TO CHANGE

In the years since *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* was published, we have guided literally thousands of professionals through the process of constructing their own X-ray, or immunity map, and trained more than a hundred practitioners to guide others through the process. We noticed early in the work that while most people reported having a powerful experience, as many as 30 to 40 percent did not. Many of these people said it was "interesting" or even "worthwhile," but they clearly had not had as valuable a learning experience as their colleagues.

So we set out to identify and strengthen those places in the process where some people's maps lost compression. As a result of these revisions, we have greatly reduced our "failure rate." It is not uncommon now for nearly everyone who undertakes the process to develop an immunity map that feels powerful or intriguing (a 4 or 5 on a scale of 1–5).

If you have never gone through the process of constructing your own immunity map, you are about to be the beneficiary of these enhancements. If you read *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* and went through the map-making process described there, we strongly encourage you *not* to skip this chapter. We believe

you are likely to create a more powerful version this time through, as we help you to avoid the most common pitfalls along the way.

GETTING STARTED

We can't emphasize enough the importance of defining a good column 1 improvement goal. As an example, let us tell you the two different ways we got people started when we worked with Peter Donovan's senior team, which we introduced in chapter 2. The first way led to a perfectly interesting three-hour experience with absolutely no impact. The second method initiated a process that, over time, as you heard from Peter, positively altered the DNA of the leadership team of the company.

On the first occasion, we were given an afternoon of a three-day leadership retreat for the executive staff (eighteen members, including all the C-level leaders and their direct reports). The first time any of these people considered a first-column improvement goal was the very moment we stood in front of them at the offsite. We gave them a few minutes to think about three or four of the most important and challenging aspects of their job, and then we asked, "What would be most important for you to get better at—in order to perform any or all of these aspects *significantly better*?"

Each person easily came up with something, and each then proceeded gradually to build an X-ray showing how and why they systematically were preventing themselves from accomplishing this very thing. Many people found the experience of creating the map an especially intriguing way of spending a few reflective hours together. They remarked, as people often do, that they "couldn't see it coming," and appreciated the surprise of being "hit in the face" with something they hadn't seen in themselves. They thought the whole concept of an immunity to change was stimulating and illuminating. Peter thanked us for a productive session and assured us he thought the work would be valuable for the team.

But it wasn't.

We talked with Peter a year later and he concluded that what we had done had had absolutely no effect on anyone or anything in the

company. His interpretation was something we have since heard from many leaders who have gotten involved with our process:

> It's one thing if the purpose of the exercise is just to demonstrate the immunity to change as an interesting concept. Having people use their own experience is a clever way of getting them personally involved with a set of ideas. But if the purpose is really to bring about significant change in individuals—and, in our case, if the goal is to bring about significant change in a whole team—then *everything depends* on what people put in that first column! After all, even if you carry on the work after the diagnostic [the subject of our next chapter], it ends up being an investment in dramatic change only *along the lines of whatever is in that first column,* and if what is in that first column is not the absolutely optimal goal, then no matter how good the technology, it is being applied to the wrong thing!
>
> You can't just let people choose all by themselves what they put in that first column. We all need input. One of the big messages of your work is that we fool ourselves, right? So, since this is true, how can any of us be expected to be the best source of information on what it is we should really work at improving?

Peter and his two top lieutenants were intrigued enough to try again with a different approach. They saw that, like many organizations, they spent a lot of time evaluating their personnel, giving people feedback, identifying improvement goals—and then, a year later, they didn't notice much change. They had two thoughts:

- Perhaps the immunity-to-change process can "unstick" this familiar story, and ratchet up the ROI on all this assessment and feedback.
- People come out of our evaluation sessions with too many personal improvement goals. What if we identify just "one big thing" and focus all our attention relentlessly on that?

So energetically did they then draw people into the process of identifying their improvement goals that the term "one-big-thing," as

you saw in chapter 3, became a lasting part of the lexicon of the company. Every executive was asked to identify a single goal that "would excite you personally if you were able to make big gains on this goal" and "would clearly enable you to add more value to the company." The goal should not be something technical that you could accomplish by learning some new skill. Rather it should clearly involve your own growth as a person. At the same time, the goal should not be something that would require a complete personality transplant.

Before the next executive team retreat, every member got one-on-one feedback from several sources:

- The person to whom they report: "Here's the improvement goal that is going to make the biggest difference to me in evaluating you this year for bonus [or promotion, or whatever]."
- Peers: "Here's the thing I think would make you a better team member."
- At least one person who reported to them: "Here's what would enable me to serve you better."

The top leaders shared with each other what particular one-big-thing was shaping up for each of their direct reports, and then they pushed each other: "Are we each honestly excited about each person's goal? Do we all feel that each of these one-big-things would make a big difference for the company?" They also challenged each other regarding *their own* one-big-thing. In addition to each other, they consulted their executive coaches and, in some cases, they asked ownership and people from ownership's office, to make sure they had good improvement goals themselves. And they didn't stop with purely in-office canvassing. As Peter has described, they went home and checked to see whether family members also felt they would see big benefits were the person to make real improvement on the chosen goal.

A colleague of ours—an expert on research methodology—says, "You can't solve by brilliant analysis later on what you screwed up at the start in the original design." So how can we help you not to screw up your original design? Our first tip is this: don't expect to complete this chapter in a single sitting. You will need to get a little external

input even before you make your first-column entry. Talk to the people around you, at work and at home, and find out if the prospect of achieving your proposed goal brings a shine to their eyes. Ask them if they have an alternative goal to propose, something they think would be even more valuable for you; something they personally would be even happier to see. Don't enter your first-column goal until you are certain its accomplishment would be a big deal not just to you, but to people around you.

COLUMN 1: YOUR IMPROVEMENT GOAL

Once you have completed this prework, start to create your map using the template shown in figure 9-1. To help us guide you through your own X-ray, we are going to introduce Fred, a real executive, whose unfolding map will provide examples for your own. (Fred is the fellow we referred to in chapter 8, whose goal to be a better listener was made more urgent when he learned of its importance to his relationship with his daughter.)

FIGURE 9-1

Create your own immunity X-ray

1 **Commitment (improvement goal)**	**2** **Doing/not doing instead**	**3** **Hidden competing commitments**	**4** **Big assumptions**
		Worry box:	

So you've gotten some internal input and you have now entered your own first-column goal, right? (Okay, we know you haven't! You're just reading on from the prior pages. But c'mon! Your whole understanding of what the immunity to change really is will be much deeper if you have a direct experience of it as it applies to *you*! Take your time. Do your homework; then, and only then, enter your first draft of an improvement goal, your commitment, in column 1.)

Figure 9-2 shows Fred's original first-column entry. Fred was able to affirm all of the following about his goal, and, as you look at yours, you should be able to do the same:

- It's important to him. It would be a big deal for him if he could get dramatically better at this. He very much *wants* to get better at it; he even feels some urgency about getting better at it. It's not just that it would be *nice* if he could; he feels the *need* to, for whatever reason.
- It's important to someone around him. He knows that others would value it highly if he could get better at this.

FIGURE 9-2

Fred's first-draft column 1 improvement goals

1 **Commitment (improvement goal)**	**2** **Doing /not doing instead**	**3** **Hidden competing commitments**	**4** **Big assumptions**
To be a better listener (to not let my mind wander), to not get so impatient		Worry box:	

- He is clear that accomplishing this goal primarily implicates *him*. His focus for improvement in this area is on *himself,* changes *he* will have to make. (After all, it is possible for someone with his goal to feel otherwise, as in, "If only people didn't waste my time with boring or insignificant communications I would in fact *be* a much better listener.")

If your current draft of your first-column entry falls short in any of these respects, don't worry. That is a common shortcoming with first drafts of this exercise. However, if it *does* fall short, you should not just continue to your second column. That is another common mistake. The power and utility of your ultimate map will be maximized if you take the time to revise your entry until it meets all of the above criteria.

Although Fred's entry may meet all these criteria, we can see another that it does not meet, and this will give us a chance to illustrate what we mean by revising your first draft. He tends to elaborate on his goal in the negative—by saying what he does *not* want to do ("to not let my attention wander, to not get so impatient"). We have found that people tend to end up with maps they experience as more powerful when they start out by saying affirmatively what they want to *become* rather than what they want to *stop* being. Accordingly, Fred revised his first-column entry as shown in figure 9-3, and if you notice this tendency in your own entry, we suggest you do the same.

COLUMN 2: THE FEARLESS INVENTORY

From the sample X-rays you have seen throughout the book, you know that the next step is to take a fearless inventory of all the things you are doing (or not doing) that work *against* your first-column goal.

We will turn you loose to make these entries in your own second column in a moment, but first, some further clarification:

- The more concrete behaviors you can list (what you actually do or fail to do), the better. Fred, for example, initially wrote in his second column, "I get impatient." Similarly, someone

FIGURE 9-3

Fred's revised column 1 improvement goals

1 **Commitment (improvement goal)**	2 **Doing /not doing instead**	3 **Hidden competing commitments**	4 **Big assumptions**
To be a better listener (especially better at staying in the present, staying focused, being more patient)		Worry box:	

whose goal is to be better with difficult conversations might have initially entered, "I am uncomfortable with conflict." Neither of these are optimal entries because these are states of mind, not external behaviors. We would ask that person, "But what do you actually *do* or *fail to do* as a result of your impatience, discomfort, or other unpleasant feelings?" Before you create your own list, have a look at Fred's second-column entries in figure 9-4.

- The more items you enter here, and the more honest you are, the greater the eventual diagnostic power of your map will be. Keep in mind that no one need ever see what you enter, so take a deep dive, and tell on yourself. The purpose is not to shame or embarrass you, or assign fault. You will see shortly that the richer you make this column, the bigger the eventual payoff.

- Make sure that *everything* you enter provides a picture of you working *against* your own goal in column 1. (No doubt you are also doing things *on behalf of* your column 1 goal. Good for you, but that is not the nature of the column 2 assignment. We aren't looking for balance here. The best information for revealing your immunity will eventually be found in the things you do, or fail to do, that have the unintentional effect of *undermining* your improvement goal.)

- You should also be clear we are not asking *why* you are doing these things, or for ideas or plans about how you can stop doing these things and get better. The urge to explain our own ineffectiveness and/or to devise strategies to cure ourselves of our wicked ways is often very strong at this point in the process. It's understandable, since for many of us it is uncomfortable to look at a list of our foibles staring back at us in black and white, and we want to do something to make this go away. Try to resist these impulses. For now, you are just trying to go for descriptive depth and honesty. Just the behaviors themselves in all their embarrassing glory.

If you need further clarity or inspiration look at Fred's entries in figure 9-4.

If you get regular feedback, supervision, or evaluation, you may want to consider that input as an additional source of column 2 entries. If not, and if for any reason you are unable to create a rich list of your own counterproductive behaviors, we have a final suggestion, if you have the stomach for it: seek out a few people whom you trust and feel are on your side and just ask them if they can identify any behaviors (or avoidances) in your repertoire that tend to work against your goal. We guarantee you, *they have things to add to your list!* Thank them, and enter their observations in your second column.

Okay, over to you.

When you have finished making your entries, take another glance at the four criteria for column 2 entries, and check to see that your list squares with these. Don't read the next section until you have completed your second column and made any necessary revisions.

FIGURE 9-4

Fred's column 2 entries

1 **Commitment (improvement goal)**	2 **Doing/not doing instead**	3 **Hidden competing commitments**	4 **Big assumptions**
To be a better listener (especially better at staying in the present, staying focused, being more patient)	I allow my attention to wander off. I start looking at my BlackBerry. I make to-do lists in my mind, or even literally on a slip of paper. If I'm trying to listen to a client, I'll often start thinking of what would be an impressive response and stop listening to what he is saying. If it's my daughter, I'll often start thinking of what she should do differently, and stop listening to what she is saying. If it's my wife, I'll often feel "this is not urgent" and my attention will shift to something that I think is urgent.	Worry box:	

COLUMN 3: HIDDEN COMPETING COMMITMENTS

Have you been wondering about the empty square at the top of column 3 in figure 9-1? It's what we call the worry box, and it will help you develop raw material for your column 3 entries.

Step 1: Filling Your Worry Box

When you look at the X-rays throughout this book, it should become obvious that the column 3 commitments produce something unexpected for their authors. It is not until we complete the third column, after all, that we begin to see the hidden dynamic, the immunity to change, emerge. We begin to see a whole different set of competing commitments that live alongside the improvement goals of column 1. In chapter 2, for instance, we understood that Peter genuinely wanted to:

- Be more receptive to new ideas
- Be more flexible in his responses, especially regarding new definitions of roles and responsibilities
- Be more open to delegating and supporting new lines of authority

But when we got to the third column in his map, we learned that he also had commitments (or, more properly, these commitments also *had him*):

- To have things done *my* way!
- To experience myself as having a direct impact
- To feel the pride of ownership; to see my stamp on things
- To preserve my sense of myself as the super problem solver, the one who knows best— yesterday, today, and tomorrow

In looking at the third column of the various X-rays we've shown, you may have wondered, "However did they get people to see these things?" The hard work we hope you have been doing on the first two columns should now help you complete your own third column. The result, across the three columns, should be a picture—you will see in a moment—that intrigues you and can serve as a platform for eventually meeting your own adaptive challenge.

The first step in creating good entries for column 3 is to generate the raw material that will eventually get you there. Have a look at

your column 2 list and answer the following question about each of those entries: If I imagine myself trying to do the *opposite* of this, what is the most uncomfortable or worrisome or outright scary feeling that comes up for me?

Peter thought about what would be the most uncomfortable, unpleasant, or scary thing for him if he tried to actually share more of the authority and shaping of the company, and what he got to was, "Eeech. I'd feel less important; I'd *be* less important; I could be displaced, become a marginal player in my own company. Yuk!"

The "Eeech" and the "Yuk" are important. The goal is to locate an actual loathsome *feeling,* not just a thought or an idea about an unpleasant feeling. The goal is to let yourself vicariously experience a little of this feeling, and only then to put that feeling into words.

Go ahead and look at each of your column 2 entries and, in the worry box in column 3, jot down the biggest worry, discomfort, or outright fear that comes up when you think of trying to do the opposite of the behavior you wrote down.

We are at another critical point here, a place where, if you do not take this to sufficient depth, the map you come up with will not have enough power. If you haven't located a genuine "oh, shit" kind of feeling, you are probably not there yet. You have to really reach some fear, and if you haven't gotten there yet, you might ask yourself, "and what would be the worst about *that* for me?" *You need to get to a place where you feel yourself at risk in some way; where you are unprotected from something that feels dangerous to you.*

Many of you have probably gotten to this point all on your own. But since we want to increase the chance that nearly *all* of you will have a powerful map at the end of this chapter, let's take a look at a typical not-yet-there entry, and what you can do about it.

Fred took a first shot at this in his quest to become a better listener:

> If I think of not allowing my attention to wander off, what's the worst feeling that comes up for me? The first thing that comes up is just boredom and the next is impatience. I just hate the feeling of being bored, that what I am doing has no important point. I'm not engaged. It's like the feeling of waiting for a plane

> to land. I'm waiting for life to happen, but life is not happening. I'm having to listen to a lot of stuff that frankly doesn't matter, or that I already know, or that I got from the person in the first two minutes and now he is saying it all over again in some slightly different way. I hate that. The boredom often runs quickly into impatience. I haven't time for this. There are a lot of balls in the air, things that need attending to, and I've got to get moving. So, boredom and impatience. Two awful feelings, and those are the feelings that come up.

This is a very common example of not yet going quite deep enough in this step, not yet identifying what is really the anxiety in the wings here. We have learned that some people quickly identify certain kinds of negative feelings that are like valuable "book covers"—they've drawn the right volume from the shelf, but now they need to open the cover and read what is inside.

Boredom is one of these common covers. We get bored because we have disengaged. But often we back off for a very good reason! Often we have disengaged because of something awful we didn't want to feel. Something happened, very quickly, *before* the disengagement that led to the feeling of boredom. What is that awful something? When we asked Fred about this, he quickly got to a deeper place: "If I don't disengage with my teenagers, I'm left feeling like whatever I say, they are going to roll their eyes; I am going to feel humiliated by their disdain. That is actually a very awful feeling for me. If I don't disconnect with my wife, I often have a feeling of helplessness that the situations she is talking about are out of my control. There is nothing I can do about it. I hate that feeling."

Now we are getting to the self really being at risk!

The same is true of impatience. Again, this is a good start; a cover to a valuable book. But what is the text underneath the cover? Am I impatient because I feel I must be somewhere other than where I currently am? How come? What is the danger? Impatience, too, signals some risk to me, but what? Listen again to Fred:

> The impatience comes up in a variety of ways. I'll be listening to someone and something they say reminds me of something that

needs doing. If I don't allow myself to go there in my mind, I feel terror that one of the balls I am juggling is going to drop. I have a lot going on in my life, and the truth is that I'm not a very well-organized person. If I don't attend to the worry that has come up for me, I could forget about it, and something bad could happen.

Sometimes, with my kids, or with junior people in the company, the impatience has to do with an alarm that *they* are going to screw up. When I think of just continuing to listen, and stifling my urge to start giving my wonderful advice, I worry, for example, that my daughter is going to take a big wrong turn in her life.

So what was originally boredom and impatience we now see is:

- The fear of looking stupid
- The fear of being humiliated
- The fear of helplessness
- The fear of being out of control
- The fear of making a big mistake
- The fear of allowing someone else to make a big mistake (especially someone for whom I am responsible)

This is what went into Fred's worry box in column 3.

Now take a look at what *you* have generated for this step, as you considered doing the opposite of what you wrote in column 2, and see if you have reached this level of fear—feelings of being unprotected in some way against a danger or a risk you absolutely do not want to run.

Step 2: Generating Possible Competing Commitments

The actual entries for column 3, however—the hidden competing commitments—are not these fears in the worry box themselves. The fears, we said, are the raw material for generating third-column

commitments. The idea behind the immunity to change is that we do not merely have these fears; we sensibly, even artfully, protect ourselves from them. We create ways of dealing with the anxiety these fears provoke. We are not only afraid; we take action to combat our fears. We defend ourselves from what terrifies us. We are actively (but not necessarily consciously) committed to making sure the things we are afraid of do not happen.

This is the heart of a third-column commitment. It is a commitment to keep the thing we are afraid of from happening. Fred not only fears looking stupid; without his realizing it, he may also have a commitment *to not looking stupid*. (Or, more precisely, a commitment to not looking stupid *has him*.)

He does not merely passively "have a fear" of looking stupid; he actively behaves in ways that very effectively, even brilliantly, protect him from looking stupid to his teenagers. How does he do this? He disengages when they speak, makes himself bored, finds something else that needs doing in his mind. He worries that if he really stays present to them and listens, and tries to respond out of his listening, they are going to be disdainful and roll their eyes, and he is going to feel humiliated, a feeling that is almost unbearable for him. And so, he does a very intelligent thing—he withdraws.

His withdrawing is now perfectly understandable, to us and to him. It is perfectly sensible. On behalf of his commitment to protect himself from humiliation, we could say he should withdraw even more than he currently does! His behavior is highly effective. It just has one drawback: It will prevent him from making any progress on his improvement goal, a goal that is very important for him to accomplish. He can see here an expression of how he systematically prevents progress on his own goal. He is captive of a mental system that is working to protect him, to save his life as he knows it—a perfectly effective immune system.

Fred can now go ahead and convert *each* of the fears he identified into a possible third-column commitment (which he holds alongside the goal to be more present and be a better listener). As he fills in his third column, he will see taking shape the dynamic equilibrium that the arrows stretching across the first three columns are meant to suggest. In figure 9-5 he can see a picture of himself with one foot on the

FIGURE 9-5

Fred's column 3 commitments: The immune system comes to light

1 **Commitment (improvement goal)**	2 **Doing/not doing instead**	3 **Hidden competing commitments**	4 **Big assumptions**
To be a better listener (especially better at staying in the present, staying focused, being more patient)	I allow my attention to wander off. I start looking at my Blackberry. I make to-do lists in my mind, or even literally on a slip of paper. If I'm trying to listen to a client, I'll often start thinking of what would be an impressive response and stop listening to what he is saying. If it's my daughter, I'll often start thinking of what she should do differently, and stop listening to what he is saying. If it's my wife, I'll often feel "this is not urgent" and my attention will shift to something that I think is urgent.	I worry I will: Look stupid Be humiliated Be helpless Be out of control Make a big mistake Allow someone else to make a big mistake (especially someone for whom I am responsible) To not looking stupid To not being humiliated To not feeling helpless To not feeling or being out of control To not making a big mistake To not allowing someone else to make a big mistake (especially someone for whom I am responsible)	

gas (his genuine, even urgent, interest in being a better listener) and one foot on the brake (all those countercommitments).

We invite you to go ahead and generate some possible third-column commitments of your own. Each of them will be a commitment to *not* having the things you'd fear most (from step 1) occur. If your worry box holds something like "I'm afraid I will lose credibility" or "People will dislike me; see me as one of Them," then you might enter third-column commitments such as, "I am committed to not losing credibility" or "I am committed to not running the risk I will lose credibility"; "I am committed to not having people dislike me, to not having people think I have gone over to the 'dark side.'"

There is no sense in reading further until you have actually entered your third-column commitments. Have you done this? Do you now have a picture of your own version of the phenomenon of the immunity to change? Does your picture intrigue you? Do you find it interesting? Notice the questions we are not asking you. We are not asking if you feel you have solved anything. You should not feel that you have. We are not asking whether you are happy to see this picture. Is it an altogether pleasant experience to see your own immunity? Often it is not.

You will remember Einstein's injunction that it can be as important to see the problem clearly as to see the solution. All we are going for right now is a more adequate grasp of "the problem," the problem of your genuinely wanting to succeed with your first-column goal but not being able to do so. You should see the way you have a foot on the gas and a foot on the brake. And that picture, however temporarily unnerving, should at least feel interesting, should draw you in with the power of seeing something you did not know before. But it is also possible that you have long been aware of the personal issue that appears in your third column (you always knew that pleasing others was too big a thing for you, or that you were a control freak, or that you worried you were not smart enough), yet the new discovery may come from seeing, in a new way, how tightly this familiar issue is tied to your inability to succeed on the goal in your first column.

In whatever way the map, or X-ray, feels powerful, the important thing is that it does. What if it doesn't? Fred's map felt powerful to

him after writing his third-column entries because all of the following were true. See if these conditions are true for you, as well:

- Each of Fred's third-column commitments is clearly a commitment to *self-protection*. Each is tightly tied to a particular fear. If he noted in his worry box that he had a fear he would destroy his marriage by overworking, he wouldn't bleach out the self-protection by writing his third-column commitment as, "I am committed to a better work/family balance." We wouldn't see the danger from which he is committed to protecting himself if he framed it that way. Rather, he would write, "I am committed to not having my wife abandon me and my children hate me, and becoming a miserable, lonely workaholic."
- Each commitment makes some (or all) of the obstructive behaviors in column 2 perfectly sensible; he can see how, given X commitment, Y behavior is just exactly what anyone might do.
- He sees exactly why trying to succeed merely by eliminating his second-column behaviors won't work, because those behaviors are serving a very important purpose.
- He feels stuck because he sees that he is moving in two opposite directions at the same time.

We have learned that if your map does not yet feel powerful or intriguing at this point in the process, it is likely because your entries do not match these criteria in some way. Try to revise them so that they do, and see if your picture gets more compelling to you. Remember, the power or intrigue we are going for here is not yet one of solution or even a road to solution. The experience is not yet one of liberation.

So just what kind of power or intrigue are we talking about? This might best be illustrated with a story about a university provost who participated in one of our institutes. The program was expressly for university presidents, provosts, and the like. It was a summer

program at Harvard, and, as with all of our summer programs, we tell the participants to dress casually. There are always a few people who do not dress casually on the first day (probably because they are uncertain whether their definition of casual is someone else's definition of being a slob). This particular participant, a middle-aged woman, wore a beautiful power suit the first day and an elegant string of pearls around her neck. Every day, as the others became more and more informal in their dress and demeanor, she sat in the middle of the case conference room, with one lovely business suit after another. She sat with a dignified and erect bearing. And always with the pearls.

When we came to filling out the third column, we explained the criteria and what we were really asking them to go for in their entries. We said something like, "And if you get good entries in your third column, your map should stop looking like a collection of notes in response to a bunch of separate questions. Rather, you should begin to see a single, whole thing, across those three columns. You should begin to see a coherent picture. You should begin to see—"

And before we could finish the sentence, it was obvious that she had already gone ahead and made her third-column entries, and the wholeness, the "singleness," the coherence of her picture had hit her square in the face. This dignified, formal, erect woman with the pearls blurted out, to everyone's surprise and delight, "I can tell you what you'll see, all right. You'll see how you are—how you are *screwed*!!"

That succinctly sums up our aim at this point in the process—namely, that you now see more clearly how your own important goal is "screwed" by your core contradictions. That is, there is no way for you to move forward since every genuine, sincere, earnest step in the right direction is countered by an equal force in the opposite direction.

If your map offers you similar insight, then you have reached a paradoxical place in the process—namely, that it may only be by seeing more deeply how you are systematically preventing your own change that you put yourself in a dramatically better position to bring about that change! You will have succeeded in taking the first big step toward converting your change goal into a *good problem*.

Now what's the next step? You need to create a tool for adaptively (rather than technically) working on your change challenge. This tool is what completes the four-column exercise.

COLUMN 4: THE BIG ASSUMPTIONS

The intent of an immunity map is to support a way to treat adaptive challenges adaptively, rather than technically. This begins, we said in chapter 2, by creating an adaptive formulation, one that shows us how our first-column goal brings us to the current limits of our development.

We said an adaptive formulation will register on both the *thinking* and *feeling* levels. If we have succeeded in helping you make a powerful map so far, you have a glimpse of your own immunity to change as it involves the improvement goal you identified in column 1. You should now be able to see your own change-prevention system (how you systematically generate the very behaviors that prevent progress on your goal) and an anxiety-management system (how generating these behaviors helps to ward off some of your worst fears, which are associated with your actually making the progress you hope for).

One sign that you have come up with an adaptive formulation of your challenge is when you can see clearly why a technical approach—going straight to the obstructive behaviors in column 2 and trying to eliminate or reduce them—is not a winning plan. Given how well these same behaviors serve the commitments of column 3, you would be inclined to keep generating them (or their cousins)—unless you were able to reconstruct the immune system as a whole.

The most reliable route to ultimately disrupting the immune system begins by identifying the core assumptions that sustain it. We use the concept of big assumptions to signal that there are some ways we understand ourselves and the world (and the relationship between the world and ourselves) that we do not see as mental constructions. Rather, we see them as truths, incontrovertible facts, accurate representations of how we and the world *are*.

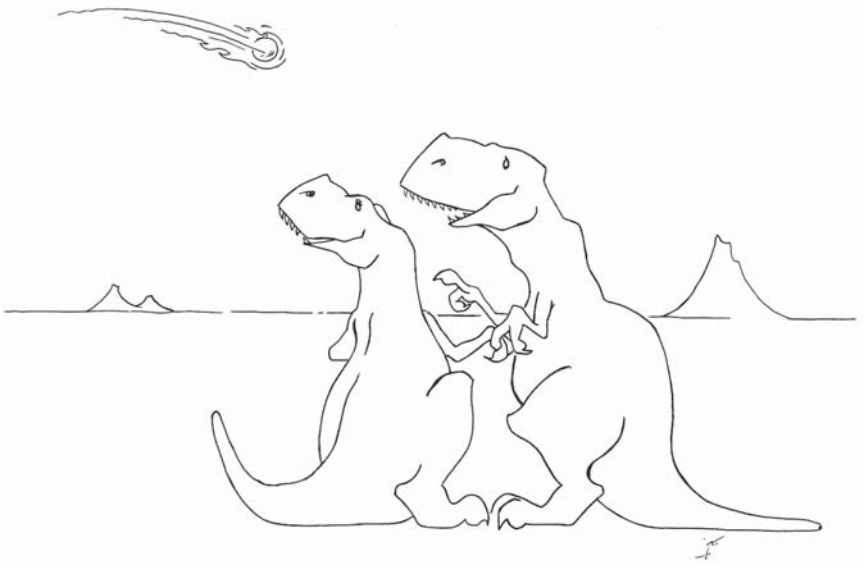
These constructions of reality are actually assumptions; they may well be true, but they also may not be. When we treat an assumption as if it is a truth, we have made it what we call a big assumption.

Some of our big assumptions are inevitably brittle and necessarily short-lived. There won't be too many more romantic nights for the dinosaurs in figure 9-6.

We are reminded of a Gary Larson cartoon: two airborne pilots are looking out through their windshield. We see an animal ahead of them enshrouded in fog. "Hey," says the pilot to his co-pilot, "what's a mountain goat doing way up here in a cloud bank?!" These pilots won't be able to hold their distorted assumption much longer. Unavoidable countervailing evidence is about to hit them in the face.

Interestingly though, there is a whole other class of distorted assumptions that is much more problematic, because we are so talented at holding the countervailing evidence at bay. In these instances we may be able to keep ignoring the evidence that our assumption is a distortion. We may continue to fly the airplanes of our lives, so to

FIGURE 9-6



Oh, look honey! Make a wish!

speak, with an inaccurate picture of reality. We can use our genius to compensate continuously for all the aerodynamic inefficiencies of our distorted mental model. We are able to keep the plane aloft—but at some cost.

In short, any mindset or way of constructing reality will inevitably contain some blind spot. An adaptive challenge is a *challenge* because of our blind spot, and our *adaptation* will involve some recognition of, and correction of, our blindness.

Thus big assumptions, like competing commitments, normally are out of sight. Making an assumption apparent involves bringing it from "subject" (where we cannot see it because we are so attached to it, so identified with or subject to it) to "object" (where we can now take a perspective on it from outside of ourselves). This is the underlying motion by which *greater complexity* gets created.

Once you have begun to surface some possible big assumptions underlying your own immunity to change, you will be in a much better position to work on your immune system, rather than being captive of it. While this would be very difficult to do "from scratch," the hard work you have already done in creating a picture of your immune system and, in particular, identifying your hidden commitments makes it much less difficult than you might think.

We asked Fred to take a good look at the third-column entries he finally made emerge. Then we asked him to brainstorm all the possible assumptions a person who had such commitments might hold. This was slow going initially, but once he got started, the possible assumptions began to flow. Figure 9-7 shows what he came up with.

In a moment we'll ask you to generate possible big assumptions underlying your own third-column commitments. Before you do, it may be helpful to consider the criteria by which Fred judged the robustness of his entries. All of the following were true for him and his entries, and you should be able to say the same:

- Some of the big assumptions you may regard as true ("What do you mean I *assume* some bad thing will happen? Believe me, some bad thing *will* happen!"); some of them you may see right away are not really true ("I can see that it is clearly not true, but I act and feel as if it *were* true"); and some of

FIGURE 9-7

Fred's full map

1 **Commitment (improvement goal)**	2 **Doing/not doing instead**	3 **Hidden competing commitments**	4 **Big assumptions**
To be a better listener (especially better at staying in the present, staying focused, being more patient)	I allow my attention to wander off. I start looking at my BlackBerry. I make to-do lists in my mind, or even literally on a slip of paper. If I'm trying to listen to a client, I'll often start thinking of what would be an impressive response and stop listening to what he is saying. If it's my daughter, I'll often start thinking of what she should do differently, and stop listening to what he is saying. If it's my wife, I'll often feel "this is not urgent" and my attention will shift to something that I think is urgent.	To not looking stupid To not being humiliated To not feeling helpless To not feeling or being out of control To not making a big mistake To not allowing someone else to make a big mistake (especially someone for whom I am responsible)	I assume there is a limited number of "chances" I get with my teenagers (that if they see me as "stupid" too many times, they will just stop listening to me entirely). I assume there is absolutely nothing positive in an interaction with my kids in which they dismiss and ridicule what I have to say; that such an interaction is clearly worse than no interaction at all. I assume my wife *expects me* to be able to help her solve the difficult problems she shares with me. I assume that "helping" is always a matter of helping someone *take a next step* in the right direction. I assume if I feel helpless there is no way I can be a good listener. I assume if I cannot be in control of the situation things are likely going to get worse.

FIGURE 9-7 (CONTINUED)

Fred's full map

			I assume if I make a big mistake I will not be able to recover from it. I assume if I do not help my kids or junior colleagues to avoid mistakes I am being irresponsible, letting them down, letting my family or company down, and that bad things are going to happen to them.

them you may be quite unsure about ("Part of me feels this *is* true, or true most of the time, but another part of me is not so sure"). However, there is some way in which you have felt, or continue to feel, that every big assumption you list is true. And you might be right. We reiterate, we are not saying all our big assumptions are false. What we are saying is that we can't explore how true or false they are until we have surfaced and tested them.

- It is clear how each of the big assumptions, if taken as true, makes one or more of the third-column commitments inevitable (e.g., if it is absolutely certain that I cannot recover from a big mistake, it then makes all the sense in the world that I would be committed to never making a big mistake). Taken as a whole, the set of big assumptions collectively makes the third-column commitments inevitable, and thus it is clear how they sustain the immune system: The third-column commitments clearly follow from the big assumptions and generate the behaviors in column 2; these behaviors clearly undermine the goal in column 1.
- The big assumptions make visible a bigger world that, until now, you have not allowed yourself to venture into. You see

how your big assumptions constitute a "Danger! Do Not Enter!" sign in front of this wider world (e.g., "I could, at least theoretically, step out into a world where I am not always in control, even where I feel helpless. I could enter a world where I do not give advice when it is not asked for, where I consider that my children are more forgiving than I imagine," and so on). It is possible that all these warning signs are completely appropriate and should be heeded, but it is also possible that your big assumptions are evidence that you are limiting yourself to only a few of the rooms in the mansion of your life.

Please generate as many possible big assumptions as you can. Check them against the above criteria. This last step in developing your X-ray may inspire its own "ahas," but that is not necessary at this point. The critical threshold in creating a good map is that once you have completed the third column, you can see and feel your own version of the immunity-to-change dynamic. Having completed this step, your map should feel intriguing, illuminating, or at least interesting to you.

"Okay, okay," you might feel, after seeing your own systematic prevention of the progress you desire, "This captures my attention. Who wants to have a foot on the gas and a foot on the brake at the same time!? But now, what can I do about it?" We are about to take up that very question in the next chapter of this book. In it you will see how identifying the big assumptions, which reinforce your immune system, actually puts you in a position to disrupt it.

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