PRINT

You Don't Need More Willpower...

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Not being able to change doesn't mean we're lazy, stubborn, or weak. A pair of Harvard educators argue that our best-laid plans often fall through for smart, self-protective (and ingeniously hidden) reasons.

This past fall, 24 people gathered for a workshop at Harvard University, among them members of the university's human resources department, executives from nonprofit institutions, one labor union official, members of a prominent international consulting firm, a high school principal, a teacher—and me. We had signed up for the session to better understand why people struggle to make significant changes—why, for instance, their vows to improve their lives (go to the gym, be nicer, lose 10 pounds, drink less, clean up more, save money) are so often followed, sometimes in a matter of weeks or even days, by utter failure.

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The workshop is led by clinical psychologist Robert Kegan, PhD, and Lisa Lahey, EdD, experts in adult learning at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. They've spent more than 20 years wondering why it is that people don't change, studying those—the few—who have successfully broken a habit and the many who, despite repeated attempts, can't. Eventually, they arrived at a theory, the premise of which became the title for their new book, *Immunity to Change*. Their metaphor, invoking the body's exquisite ability to ward off disease and invasion, is apt: Our best efforts to change, the researchers claim, are routinely overwhelmed by forces within us.

Kegan and Lahey have spent decades working with small groups of educators who wanted to improve their skills as teachers and administrators. They now shepherd several thousand people a year through the process they've developed. Like their book, these sessions tend to be skewed toward organizations and their leaders, but their method works as well for individuals looking to make changes as it does for executives looking to tweak their management style.

Today, under Kegan and Lahey's guidance, our group begins to engage in some supervised soul-searching. They hand us a four-column worksheet that Kegan describes as "a mental map that functions as an X-ray." For the first column, Kegan and Lahey tell us, pick a goal, one that would make a significant difference in our lives. A New Year's resolution, maybe. Or the promise we've been making (and breaking) for years. In the second column, they ask us to list all the ways that we routinely kneecap ourselves.

As an example, they bring up a former workshop participant—a superstar CEO they call Peter. Focused,

disciplined, the co-founder of a multibillion-dollar company, he's the kind of person who decides to lose 10 pounds, does it in a few months, and keeps the weight off for years. But he's been less successful in softening his top-down management approach. In column one of the worksheet, Peter wrote that his goals were to delegate more and become more open to his staff's ideas. In column two, he easily identified how he sabotaged himself: by not seeking out other opinions, cutting off staffers midthought, and not empowering them to make their own decisions.

What's striking about Kegan and Lahey's approach is that it recognizes the often good, if poorly understood, reasons for Peter's behavior (and, by extension, our own). Our flat-out failure to bring about the change we desire is not for lack of good intentions. Whatever it is that we resolved to do or to stop doing in the past, they don't doubt that we meant it. While we beat ourselves up over our lack of willpower, our laziness, our weakness, our dark side that wins out time and again—Kegan and Lahey say those change-resistant behaviors have a very good reason for being.

"What you see as demonic is actually in some ways a very tender expression," says Lahey, "a protection of something you feel vulnerable about."

Kegan adds: "The behavior you're trying to extinguish or diminish, let's say, the way you're eating or overeating—you're only looking at it as bad." But, he says, it's just the tip of the iceberg. "And until you can get below the waterline, you can't see why this behavior is brilliant."

What lies underneath the surface is anxiety, which, Kegan and Lahey explain, they have come to appreciate as "the most important—and least understood—private emotion in public life." Most of us think of anxiety as panic attacks or stage fright, acute episodes brought on by a big presentation to the boss or some other high-stakes occasion. Or a condition specific to people who were traumatized as children or survived some harrowing event. But Kegan and Lahey see anxiety as our brain's background noise, revving up when we're confronted with something new, unfamiliar, or threatening, and operating most of the time at such a low volume that we don't even hear it. "We all have anxiety, just by virtue of being human," Lahey says.

We don't think of ourselves as continually fearful, Kegan says, because we've figured out how to manage this undercurrent of anxiety—whether it's our discomfort at meeting new people, our worry when talking to the boss, or our indecision in the jam aisle of the supermarket. "For instance, I may have a deep-running anxiety that you don't think well enough of me," says Kegan. "But I don't live my life every day like I'm walking on eggshells, because I'm very tuned in to what you want or need in order to continue to have a high opinion of me. I use my energy to make sure that I keep delivering what I believe it is that you want. As a result, I don't feel the anxiety because I'm handling it."

At this point in our session, Kegan and Lahey turn the discussion to column three to identify our own buried anxiety. They ask us: What would happen if we stopped the behavior that gets in the way of achieving the goals we've set for ourselves? The room goes quiet. That simple question triggers a litany of potential catastrophes —which turn out to be surprisingly personal.

As Kegan and Lahey explain in their book, this is the moment Peter the CEO realized that if he did delegate, he would lose the sense of himself as "the super problem solver, the one who knows best, the one who is in control —yesterday, today, and tomorrow." Peter's mind was in the grip of equal and opposite impulses, prompting him to describe himself as having "one foot on the gas and one foot on the brake." No wonder our attempts to change grind to a halt.

Kegan and Lahey give examples of other clients who resort to the same problem behavior, each of them in response to different obscured anxieties. One woman eats too much because she doesn't like the overtly sexual way men respond to her when she's thin. One man binges as a way of accepting the love of his big Italian-American family.

Kegan and Lahey are in awe of the ingenuity with which we—all of us—keep our lives under control, to make sure that our anxiety is kept at bay and our fears never come true. "And life could just go on that way," Kegan says, "except that the system, this anxiety management system you've built, charges rent. It's costing you something. And what does it cost you? It costs you your goal."

It takes a little time for our group to get to the bottom of the anxiety that motivates each of us. Then Kegan and Lahey lead us through the last step. They urge us to reframe our fears in the context of the "big assumptions" that underlie them—ideas we take for granted about the way the world works and our place in it. Our parents convey to us their understanding of life, Kegan and Lahey explain, and we often take their opinions as fact. For Peter, the belief that needed to be challenged was: "If I want something done right, I have to do it myself." Kegan and Lahey throw out other examples to our group, assumptions like "If I say no, I'll lose people's friendship and respect" or "If I paid attention to my appetite, I'd never stop eating." We find this section easy to complete. Within ten minutes, each of us lists a number of things we believe to be The Way Things Are.

In some instances, Kegan and Lahey say, these fears may prove to be justified. But they usually aren't. For all its intelligence, our psychological immune system is not infallible. Like our physical immune system, it sometimes sounds the alarm in situations when it shouldn't. "When it rejects new material, internal or external to the body, that the body needs to heal itself or to thrive, the immune system can put us in danger," Kegan and Lahey write. "It does not understand that it must alter its code. It does not understand that, ironically, in working to protect us, it is actually putting us at serious risk."

Traditional psychotherapy trusts that the truth will set the patient free, that the power of insight will overhaul the behavior you're looking to change. But as any disillusioned analysand can tell you, arriving at some deeper awareness of how you're screwed up doesn't necessarily make you less screwed up.

That's why this final step of the process is a little demoralizing. Confronted with the evidence of why our past attempts to change had been doomed to failure, we sit, staring glumly at our X-rays. "This is a perfect system you've created," Kegan tells us, and we have to admit he's right. As much as we want to finally make that New Year's resolution stick, it turns out we are equally committed to another, previously hidden, agenda. So Kegan and Lahey ask us to devise "experiments," starting out small, to test our assumptions. Someone like Peter, who is trying to break a lifelong control habit, might choose to delegate a task that isn't life-or-death to the most capable member of his staff and see what happens. Someone else might decide to say no to a dear friend and see how he or she responds. The man who struggles with his Italian family might commit to 24 hours of eating only when he's hungry and see how it goes. Surviving tests like these, Kegan and Lahey tell us, puts you in a position to question ideas you've understood as universal truths, and with those changes in your mind-set come changes in your behavior. In their years of experience, Kegan and Lahey have seen people make enormous shifts—they've lost the weight, stuck to the fitness program, learned how to manage their temper, finally cleaned up their office.

To our group, this kind of transformation feels daunting, but more promising than another round of New Year's resolutions, that's for sure. For the first time, we understand what we are up against—not the evil within us but

our own ingenuity, well-meaning but misguided. What a relief that turns out to be. Not a solution but a place to start.

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