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Why Reforms Encounter Resistance: How to Overcome Immunity to Change

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INTRODUCTION

Change can seem scary, even if it feels very necessary! Have you ever tried to make a substantial change – or even a small tweak – that you know will improve your government’s efficiency and results, and yet colleagues seem to resist your every move? Or have you tried to make a change in your own leadership style, perhaps to micromanage less or advocate more for controversial ideas, but you find yourself quickly reverting to old, familiar habits?

You may be experiencing immunity to change – the innate aversion to change that we all have. This phenomenon was first described by two Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty members, Robert Kegan and Lisa

Lahey, in their book *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*. While this framework has been used in many settings, we think it applies very well to change management challenges faced in procurement transformation efforts.

To learn more about the framework, see helpful links noted in the appendix. In this publication, we aim to provide a high-level overview of the framework and then explore ways you might apply this framework to common challenges faced on procurement teams, to ultimately overcome resistance to change so that you can advance your government’s goals for transforming procurement.

The Immunity to Change X-Ray

Immunity to change can thwart even the most dedicated changemaker if not handled thoughtfully. Most of us don't deliberately resist change. We likely have a competing commitment: a subconscious, hidden opposing goal that conflicts with the change that we, our team, or our organization wants to make.

It may be easy to point out where you see a goal to make a change isn't being achieved, but it's harder to diagnose the competing commitment at the root of that resistance. That's where the Immunity to Change X-Ray comes in: this tool is designed to help you diagnose competing commitments and big assumptions about change. The X-ray tool can be used to either think about a change you want to make individually, to coach a team member through a change they'd like to make, or to diagnose resistance your team or organization is facing. While this tool can be used for individuals or teams, it's best to start by examining your own immunity to change before turning outward to your team or organization. The tool asks you to fill in the following sections (see the Appendix for a blank tool to use in your government):

Commitment

This is the most important aspect of the X-ray. The commitment should be a change goal that you, your team member, or organization agree is urgent and important, but also realistic – it shouldn't require a dramatic personality overhaul or a major organizational culture shift! Your commitment shouldn't be technical, such as implementing a new software system, but rather growth-oriented, such as improving how you offer critical feedback to your direct reports, or your purchasing office learning to tolerate new types of risk.

What Are You Doing? What Are You Not Yet Doing?

This section of the X-ray is also called a "fear inventory," or a list of all the things you're doing or not doing that get in the way of achieving your commitment. List specific, concrete behaviors ("I don't follow up with my direct reports" or "We avoid exciting new opportunities because we perceive them as risky."), not vague mindsets ("I'm afraid of change"). Be honest with yourself and focus on what you're doing, not why you're doing it.

Competing Commitment

This section is where you begin to understand the hidden dynamic underlying your immunity to change. The fears (and avoidances) you listed in the previous section are usually perfectly understandable and often have common roots in protecting your job, reducing discomfort, or preserving a core aspect of you or your team's identity. But these fears also generate defense mechanisms that inhibit progress on your commitment. Considering the behaviors and fears you listed in the previous section, what does that lead you to realize you are also committed to that pushes you away from the initial goal you stated in the X-ray? This is your competing commitment. political adversaries may have underestimated how powerful procurement reform could be in fighting corruption.

Big Assumption

In this final section, you'll list the big assumption at the root of your competing commitment. What conclusion have you (perhaps subconsciously) reached about your stated commitment that's making you resist change? What is the psychological reason behind your competing commitment and the actions you're taking or not taking to inhibit change? Once you've identified this big assumption, you'll be in a better position to change your behavior.

Below we show four sample X-rays. After, we'll examine how you can use an X-ray to move towards action. oversight of different entities.

Scenario 1: Efficient Procurement

Your purchasing office is (finally!) transitioning from requiring paper hard copies of vendor proposals to moving to digital submission. You thought your staff, especially the administrative assistant responsible for collecting and filing the paper proposals, would be thrilled with the change – but to your surprise, she's been negative about the transition and has been dragging her feet on completing the required training for the new software program that will be used to manage the digital submissions.

Below is the administrative assistant's X-ray:

COMMITMENT	WHAT ARE YOU DOING?	COMPETING COMMITMENT	BIG ASSUMPTION
I am committed to efficiently processing proposals received in the new digital submission software.	I keep making tweaks to improve the existing process rather than preparing for the new process.	I am committed to putting a friendly face to government business and take pride in speaking directly with our prospective vendors and seeing that they have great customer experiences.	<p>If we shift to all-digital processes, vendors will no longer have a personal connection to the city and might not know whom to ask questions.</p> <p>If we shift to all-digital processes, I will no longer get the daily face-to-face interaction with the community and feel so satisfied from helping them solve their problems.</p>
	WHAT ARE YOU NOT (YET) DOING?		
	I have not taken the required training to learn how to use the new software.		

Scenario 2: Results-Driven Procurement

You are working with a department contract manager to prepare an RFP draft for an upcoming landscaping services procurement. These services were recently outsourced to contractors after having been provided by government staff for several years, and the contract manager is the former head of the in-house landscaping crews. When you try to discuss the goals of the RFP and where vendors might offer new approaches, the contract manager instead begins creating an extensive list of everything the crews need to do and exactly how they need to do it. Below is the contract manager's X-ray:

COMMITMENT	WHAT ARE YOU DOING?	COMPETING COMMITMENT	BIG ASSUMPTION
I am committed to drafting an RFP that procures best value landscaping services and results in property that is well-maintained and welcoming.	I have reviewed the list of activities and work plans from our previous in-house service list to inform RFP scope development.	I am committed to maintaining identical landscaping services as when the city delivered these services in house and retaining close control over how services are delivered.	<p>If we don't tell the vendors exactly how to do their job, they won't do it correctly. The city's landscaping will suffer, and I'll have to spend a lot of time and energy fixing their mistakes.</p> <p>If the vendors do their job differently than we did or do it better, they'll make us look bad.</p>
	WHAT ARE YOU NOT (YET) DOING? <p>I have not conducted research on what other governments are putting in their landscaping RFPs and have not yet conducted market research with the vendor community.</p>		

Scenario 3: Fair Procurement

You are the Chief Procurement Officer for a mid-size city whose mayor recently announced a city-wide commitment to local economic development. As a result, the City Council passed a requirement that for all contracts under a certain dollar amount, at least one quote from a certified small, local business must be solicited. However, many members of your staff fail to solicit these quotes, choosing to fill out the exemption form instead. Below is your department's X-ray:

COMMITMENT	WHAT ARE YOU DOING?	COMPETING COMMITMENT	BIG ASSUMPTION
Our department has a goal to purchase from small, local businesses whenever possible as a strategy to promote local economic development.	Our department is frequently filling out the exemption form rather than soliciting a quote from a small, local business, and electing to purchase from vendors we know well.	We are committed to making purchases as quickly as possible, so that we can deliver for our residents and keep projects moving.	If we conduct outreach to small, local firms and encourage them to provide a quote and deal with the pains of collaborating with a first-time contractor, we won't be able to so quickly make purchases and seamlessly obtain products and services.
	WHAT ARE YOU NOT (YET) DOING?	We are committed to having a good working relationship with vendors and enjoy working with vendors that we already trust and know will deliver the best product or service at a good price.	
	We are not conducting additional research to find certified small, local businesses who could supply the goods or services needed.		
	We do not conduct outreach to local business associations or tell small, local businesses that we know about contracting opportunities.		

Scenario 4: Strategic Procurement

You are the Chief Procurement Officer of Citylandia and spoke with the Chief Procurement Officer of neighboring Townsville at a business luncheon. Townsville recently raised their purchasing thresholds to unlock greater purchasing efficiencies and has encouraged you to do the same. Below is your X-ray:

COMMITMENT	WHAT ARE YOU DOING?	COMPETING COMMITMENT	BIG ASSUMPTION
I am committed to making reforms to our procurement rules and procedures, if those changes will improve the experience of city stakeholders and modernize our efforts.	I am speaking with mid-level staff in Citylandia about the purchasing threshold and how it affects them.	I am committed to myself and my team looking competent in front of city leadership – I am scared that we might face criticism or there might be lots of controversy about raising the threshold.	<p>If I bring this idea of raising the purchasing threshold to the city council, they might feel that we are trying to cut corners or go with incumbent vendors, and that might make them have less respect for our office.</p> <p>If I discuss an idea with my boss that I am uncertain about, she may feel that I'm wasting her time and am not capable of making decisions on my own.</p>
	I am speaking with peer government staff about their purchasing threshold and how Citylandia's compares.		
	WHAT ARE YOU NOT (YET) DOING? <p>I have not yet developed a plan or taken any concrete steps to raise the purchasing threshold.</p> <p>I have not spoken with senior leadership about raising the threshold because I fear it may be controversial.</p>		

You have your diagnostic X-ray - now what?

Now that you've identified the big assumption holding you or your team back, what can you do about it?

1. Start by observing your current behavior and looking for evidence that disproves your big assumption. Ask yourself about the ripple effects of your big assumption: what does or doesn't get done as a result? In the example directly above, you might find that actually your boss is excited to come in at the brainstorming stage of a reform and discuss the pros and cons with you.
1. After reflecting on your big assumption, prepare to test it. You'll want to come up with a scenario where you can put your big assumption to the test so that you can evaluate whether the assumption holds true. In the third example, you might identify that there are a few areas of city procurement where it will be relatively easy to identify small, local vendors. Working to get quotes from those vendors may not be quite so painful, and they might already do business with neighboring jurisdictions and won't find government contracting as overwhelming as you assumed! It's important to point out that not every big assumption will be proven false when tested. Some assumptions may be rooted in the truth. Even so, the test will often reveal a more effective way of acting on challenges and competing commitments.
1. Lastly, give space for staff time reflection. If you are trying to address a teamwide resistance to change, it may be helpful to give staff some time to reflect on their big assumption and observe the resulting behaviors on their own, then come together as a group to test that assumption. This could involve holding a reflection session to discuss the behaviors arising from the big assumption, then designing the test scenario as a group and then planning for how to come back together to evaluate it.

Conclusion

Tackling change in any organization, no matter the context or goal, is hard. But it can be especially hard in public procurement, where deeply entrenched processes and attitudes may limit your organization's flexibility. Thinking about what competing commitments might be working in opposition to your reform effort can be a helpful analytical tool to tackle the resistance to change from a new perspective.

Appendix A: Blank Diagnostic X-Ray

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Appendix B: Additional Resources

- [Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization](#), Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, Harvard Business Press (book)
- [The Real Reason People Won't Change](#), Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, Harvard Business Review (article)
- [Brené with Lisa Lahey on Immunity to Change, Part 1 of 2](#), Dare to Lead with Brené Brown (podcast)
- [Brené with Lisa Lahey on Immunity to Change, Part 2 of 2](#), Dare to Lead with Brené Brown (podcast)
- [Lisa Lahey: Immunity to Change](#), Harvard Business School (video)
- [Lisa Lahey: Seeing & Overcoming the Immunity to Change](#), The Leadership Circle – Asia/Pacific (video)

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The **Procurement Excellence Network** (PEN) is a free, online community for public sector leaders seeking to transform their jurisdiction's procurement practices. It offers virtual trainings, tools, templates, and coaching, while building peer connections for leaders as they launch efforts to make procurement more strategic, fair, and innovative. PEN is an initiative of **Partners for Public Good** (PPG), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that helps state and local governments use key operational levers—procurement, workforce, digital infrastructure, and budgeting—to drive public impact.

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