

Forward Motion Coaching Newsletter

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The Competing Commitment (It May Be the *Real* Reason You're Stuck)

People frequently seek coaching because they're stuck in some way. For some, the need is confidence-building, for others it's behavior change or skill development. But sometimes, no matter how hard a person tries, their progress remains inexplicably stalled. The situation can be as frustrating to bosses and colleagues as it is to the individual.

Organizational psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey developed the theory of a "competing commitment" to explain what they term "personal immunity to change."¹ The idea is that when people engage in behavior that thwarts their ability to achieve an outcome they genuinely want, the cause could be deeply held internal beliefs that act in opposition to the conscious desire. When these beliefs are uncovered, change is possible.

What follows is an adapted version of Kegan and Lahey's process for identifying a competing commitment. Begin by naming something that you are committed to doing, having or achieving. Next, ask yourself what you are currently doing or not doing that prevents the change from happening. Reflect on what your action or inaction is suggesting that you might be *more* committed to (this is the competing commitment). Then, identify the assumption that supports the competing commitment.

Here are two examples of how coaching clients worked with this technique.

Sharon had been unhappy in her line of work for several years. Although she knew she wanted a career in textile design, her efforts to change fields always stalled after two of three weeks of half-hearted activity. She had also recently interviewed for two jobs in her current field (which she didn't like), and was planning to start a lengthy and expensive program to identify career interests (which she already knew).

When Sharon tried the competing commitment exercise, her answers looked like this: *I am committed to working as a textile designer ... Instead of looking into what training is required, I'm applying for jobs that I know in my heart I don't want ... My bigger commitment is to my current job, where I am comfortable ... My assumption is that even if I train for design, I am not creative enough and no one will hire me.*

Meantime, David had talked for over a year about finding a partner in order to expand his business and take some of the pressure of "doing everything" off himself. However, despite identifying several highly qualified candidates who he felt enthusiastic about working with, negotiations always broke down at the eleventh hour, usually over insignificant details.

David identified his competing commitment as follows: *I am committed to finding the right business partner ... I refuse to concede on small requests, and blow the deal at the last minute ... My bigger commitment is to staying independent ... I assume that having a partner means I'll be answering to a boss, and won't be able to call the shots.*

It can take time to identify a competing commitment and its underlying assumption, so if you try this exercise don't pressure yourself to answer all of the questions at once. After completing this

process, the real work comes in changing deeply rooted assumptions (see March's coaching challenge for some ideas), which also requires persistence and frequently the assistance of a coach, counselor, or mentor.

Another useful tool for revealing "meta assumptions" is the Enneagram ("any-a-gram") of personality. Sharon, for example, noticed how her personality style gave her a tendency to shelve personal desires in favor of other people's plans (as a young woman, for instance, she'd dutifully complied with her father's directive to study business in college). David became aware of his habit of resisting commitments out of fear that he'd miss out on better opportunities (a habit that, ironically, tended to *limit* his options). [Learn more about the Enneagram with a free copy of my new guide, "*The Personality of Business, Manage Your Style for Greater Success.*" See below for details.]

March's Coaching Challenge: One way to start challenging an assumption is to become your own detective. Start noticing the times when you react based on a particular belief about yourself, other people, or situations. Think about the ways that your assumption is stopping you from getting the results you really want. Try to figure out how it originated – people can spend their lives in obedience to false assumptions that started in childhood. Begin gathering "evidence to the contrary" from your own life that demonstrates how your assumption is not always true.

Then, design a "pilot program" to begin testing new ways of thinking or behaving. Choose no- or low-risk activities, like volunteering, shadowing someone who's successful with the job or skill you want, scheduling informational interviews, taking a class or two. The key is to *take action and do something different*. I've found again and again that once people start taking action toward a meaningful goal, the situations, people, and ideas that they need seem to just "show up" without great effort or struggle.

¹ "The Real Reason People Won't Change," by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, HRB Onpoint, © 2001 Harvard Business School Publishing Corp.

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