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Transformation Through Looking in the Mirror: Tackling Blind Spots and the Amygdala Hijack

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Pathways to Personal and Professional Transformation Through Increasing my Emotional Intelligence

As a young associate, I had the opportunity to work with one of the partners in the firm on a large case. He is highly intelligent and, at times, can be difficult to work with. Our firm was hosting interns and one of the interns was assigned to work with us on the case. She was only a couple of years behind me in experience at that time. When she came to meet with us for the first time, the partner said, “I don’t really care if you learn anything, and I don’t have time to teach you anything so if you want you can just sit there and watch.” (I’m paraphrasing – I do not recall his exact words). She sat there aghast, as was I. She looked to me for guidance and I could provide none, as I was a young associate myself. She did not work with us on the case after that incident. Many years later, I no longer worked with that attorney. However, one day I received a call from a lawyer who had applied to work with him. She asked me how my experience had been and, not wanting to burn any bridges, I simply told her that he was very intelligent, but did not suffer fools easily. Later, I saw the partner and he said, “I know she called to talk to you – I was worried about what you would say about working with me.”

Ultimately, this attorney has “failed upward” and remains very successful. However, I think it would be difficult to go through your career wondering what others said about you when asked. He is the type of person who does not appear to have many close friends or colleagues. Rather, he is simply “managed” by those around him. (Story provided by an Attorney colleague.)

In this white paper, we address pathways that will lead to growth in Emotional Intelligence (EI) and help us achieve personal and professional transformation, unlike the attorney mentioned above. Recognizing and dealing with Blind Spots and the Amygdala Hijack are critical components of this transformation.

Every day in airports, on television, in restaurants, stores, and other public places, we see obvious and often frightening examples of people jockeying for position, asserting themselves, claiming their rights, assaulting other people, either verbally or physically, trampling on the rights of others, etc., as illustrated above. We think to ourselves “how can people act that way”? Hopefully, we realize that the answer to that question must start with us as individuals – am I behaving in a way that contributes something of value in every setting in which I find myself, or does my behavior devalue others? Transformation can only result from rolling up our sleeves and digging into blind spots and the amygdala hijack and expecting change in our own lives.

EI basics

Generally, EI is divided into four categories, as explained in *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*: “Personal Competence” contains the two categories of Self-Awareness and Self-Management; “Social Competence” contains the two categories of Social Awareness and Relationship Management.¹ The authors describe these categories as follows,

¹ Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, (San Diego: Talent Smart, 2009), 23-24.

Personal competence is made up of your self-awareness and self-management skills, which focus more on you individually than on your interactions with other people. Personal competence is your ability to stay aware of your emotions and manage your behavior and tendencies. Social competence is made up of your social awareness and relationship management skills; social competence is your ability to understand other people's moods, behavior and motives in order to improve the quality of your relationships.²

In *Emotional Intelligence: Science & Myth*, Gerald Matthews, Moshe Zeidner, and Richard D.

Roberts define the Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) as follows:

Self-awareness consists of emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. *Self-regulation* Composed of self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, and innovation. *Motivation* Defined by achievement drive, organizational commitment, initiative, and optimism. *Empathy* Consists of understanding others, developing others, service orientation, leveraging diversity, and political awareness. *Social skills* Composed of influence, communication, conflict management, leadership, change catalyst, building bonds, collaboration and cooperation, and team capabilities.³

When applied to organizational leadership, EI takes on an even more complex meaning. Emotionally Intelligent organizational leadership involves, "driving the collective emotions in a positive direction and clearing the smog created by toxic emotions. This task applies to leadership everywhere, from the boardroom to the shop floor."⁴

Blind Spots

Hopefully, we do not need to be convinced of the reality of blind spots in our lives. In her book *Fearless Leadership: How to Overcome Behavioral Blind Spots and Transform Your Organization*, Loretta Malandro says that "Blind Spots are not flaws, nor are they deliberate; they are unconscious behaviors."⁵ She entitles Chapter 2 "The Blind Spots That Derail Leaders" (a sobering chapter title) and begins the chapter with these illuminating comments:

Let's not kid ourselves. Blind spots are the root causes of some of the most severe breakdowns faced by leaders, organizations, and societies. [...]Everyone suffers when

² Ibid., 23-24.

³ Gerald Matthews, Moshe Zeidner, and Richard D. Roberts, *Emotional Intelligence: Science and Myth*. Cambridge (MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 214.

⁴ Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee, and Richard E. Boyatzis, *Primal Leadership: Realizing The Power Of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2002), 169-248.

⁵ Loretta A. Malandro, *Fearless Leadership: How to Overcome Behavioral Blind Spots and Transform Your Organization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 34.

leaders are not awake to their blind spots. The work environment becomes lackluster and pessimistic. People spend more time talking about what is not working, than working. Productivity and performance drop. And mistakes and breakdowns are quietly covered up instead of openly discussed and resolved. No one takes accountability, but everyone freely hands out blame. An entire enterprise becomes focused on looking good instead of being effective.⁶

Malandro applies this issue specifically to organizational leaders as follows:

It does not matter how successful you are. In fact, most supposedly successful leaders are unaware of two things: 1) the impact of their blind spots on others and 2) the degree to which others work around them and avoid confronting the real issues. What these leaders fail to realize is how their behavior works against them in achieving the very results they want.⁷

She goes on to explain that the issue is not whether or not we have blind spots, but rather, it is how we deal with them:

The real culprits are not the blind spots themselves; the offenders are unidentified and mismanaged blind spots. The automatic nature of blind spots—their ability to appear anytime and anywhere—produces cycles of unproductive behaviors between individuals and groups that undermine change initiatives and business results. These cycles of unproductive behaviors also derail careers, sabotage success, and lead to ineffective decision-making and execution. Although people can see the impact of unproductive behavior, they look the other way. It is an uncomfortable situation to deal with because people do not have a constructive method to resolve difficult situations or issues.⁸

Inattention to blind spots simply because we can't see them can be deadly. We may be quite sure that some of those around us see them all too clearly. Blind Spots can cripple an office and destroy personal relationships, or at least make them more difficult than they need to be. It may become a conversation undercurrent inside or even outside the office. Can you believe he always says? She never tells you what you've done right! Can you believe how he tried to solve....? In meetings, this behavior shuts down vibrant discussion, as everyone around the table knows where the leader's blind spots are going to lead the discussion. Addressing this issue is one of the key roles of leaders. As someone without sight asks others to lead them down a path, we must seek help from guides around us who can see our blind spots. Malandro confirms that as leaders learned about their blind spots, they "were surprised that their actions had such a negative and crushing impact on others." Malandro also makes the important

⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

point that most of the leaders she worked with were good people who were simply ignorant of the problems they were creating:

The vast majority were oblivious and unaware of the impact of their unproductive behavior: they were committed, competent, and caring leaders who had no intention to damage people or undermine the organization. The overwhelming majority of leaders wanted to have a positive impact on others and experienced sincere remorse when they discovered they did not.⁹

Bringing this issue to light and asking for advice, help, and accountability requires a tremendous amount of transparency and vulnerability. If an organization truly wants to address unseen, but consequential behavior, it could help to work with an EI coach who can view employees more objectively and assist employees in giving each other constructive feedback. The coach can also develop a plan for systematic feedback, performance reviews, and help the leadership and the organization sustain an ethos of strong and continually-developing EI.

The Crucial Role of Feedback in Addressing Blind Spots

The process of giving and receiving feedback is one of the most important concepts, since we can come to see ourselves as others see us. Through reciprocal feedback, others learn how we see them. Feedback gives information to a person or group either by verbal or nonverbal communication. The information you give tells others how their behavior affects you, how you feel, and what you perceive (feedback and self-disclosure). Feedback is also a reaction by others, usually in terms of their feelings and perceptions, telling you how your behavior affects them (receiving feedback).

We must learn the critical importance of giving colleagues, friends, and family members express permission to give me feedback, and not simply focus on giving feedback to them. We usually assume that people and colleagues feel free to give us feedback, when in fact, often the opposite is true. So, we encourage you to be a feedback “receiver” as well as a feedback “giver.” It will serve you well.

The almost self-evident truth about blind spots is that, according to their name, they can't be seen by us. If you say to yourself – or others - “I don't have any blind spots.” Watch out! You might be the poster person for Blind Spots! If we say that we don't have blind spots, that could mean that, deep down, we are aware of our behavior but are determined not to see. The journey of discovering Blind Spots is one of the healthiest exercises in which we can engage.

Please be careful at this point about feeling overwhelmed. One suggestion is that we commit to address one issue at a time and take one step at a time, so it's doesn't seem to be too much. We can focus on one principle, one life-changing idea, and begin applying it to our lives, and then move to the next one. Later in this paper, we will discuss a personal EI X-ray that will help you on that journey.

⁹ Ibid., 36.

To this end, author and leading EI expert, Travis Bradberry, advocates that work to improve one's EI be undertaken one skill at a time and has found that most people will begin seeing "measurable, enduring changes three to six months after they begin working on a skill."¹⁰ Patience is a key component in this journey:¹¹

Facing the truth about who you are can at times be unsettling. Getting in touch with your emotions and tendencies takes honesty and courage. Be patient and give yourself credit for even the smallest bits of forward momentum. As you start noticing things about yourself that you weren't previously aware of (things you aren't always going to like), you are progressing.¹²

We believe the key factors for a growing and healthy EI and discovering and dealing with Blind Spots are humility, self-initiative, dedication, and personal investment. We cannot force individuals and organizations to grow in EI – we must want to do it ourselves. The starting place is a personal decision to engage on this topic and a selfless commitment to lead your organization and your family or friendship circle on this journey with you.

Self-Mastery and the Amygdala Hijack

As we commit to dealing with Blind Spots, and the importance of our self-awareness, we must take the next step toward self-mastery and self-management. If we don't take that step, we may be self-aware, but that doesn't always result in behavioral change.

Daniel Goleman succinctly addresses self-mastery and self-management as follows:

These are the basis for self-mastery: awareness of our internal states, and management of those states. These domains of skill are what make someone an outstanding individual performer in any domain of performance – and in business an outstanding individual contributor, or lone star. Competencies like managing emotions, focused drive to achieve goals, adaptability and initiative are based on emotional self-management.¹³

¹⁰ Bradberry and Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 53-55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³ Daniel Goleman, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*, (Florence, MA: More Than Sound, LLC, 2011, Kindle Edition), 258.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹² Regina Bailey, "Amygdala," About.com, <http://biology.about.com/od/anatomy/p/Amygdala.htm> (accessed October 3, 2014).

Goleman delineates two areas of the brain:

The key neural area for self-regulation is the prefrontal cortex, which is, in a sense, the brain's "good boss," guiding us when we are at our best. The dorsolateral zone of the prefrontal area is the seat of cognitive control, regulating attention, decision-making, voluntary action, reasoning, and flexibility in response. The amygdala is a trigger point for emotional distress, anger, impulse, fear, and so on. When this circuitry takes over, it acts as the "bad boss," leading us to take actions we might regret later.¹⁴

Regina Bailey defines the amygdala:

The amygdala is an almond shaped mass of nuclei located deep within the temporal lobe of the brain. It is a limbic system structure that is involved in many of our emotions and motivations, particularly those that are related to survival. The amygdala is involved in the processing of emotions such as fear, anger and pleasure. The amygdala is also responsible for determining what memories are stored and where the memories are stored in the brain. It is thought that this determination is based on how huge an emotional response an event invokes.¹⁵

The importance of the amygdala in regulating behavior is outlined:

The amygdala is the brain's radar for threat. Our brain was designed as a tool for survival. In the brain's blueprint the amygdala holds a privileged position. If the amygdala detects a threat, in an instant it can take over the rest of the brain – particularly the prefrontal cortex – and we have what's called an amygdala hijack. The hijack captures our attention, beaming it in on the threat at hand. If you're at work when you have an amygdala hijack, you can't focus on what your job demands – you can only think about what's troubling you. Our memory shuffles, too, so that we remember most readily what's relevant to the threat – but can't remember other things so well. During a hijack, we can't learn, and we rely on over-learned habits, ways we've behaved time and time again. We can't innovate or be flexible during a hijack.¹⁶

It is critical that we unlearn bad behaviors and discipline ourselves to engage in positive behaviors leading to measurable progress in EI and managing relationships with others. Unhelpful default behaviors can lead to relationships spiraling in the wrong direction and to responses that are themselves negative and reactionary. Altering behavior patterns can be accomplished and the fruits of improved responses will be measurable, remarkable, and encouraging. Just as some are able to break patterns of

¹³ Goleman, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence*, 282.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

abuse and unhealthy family histories, making a commitment that they will be the ones to break lifetime behaviors, so all leaders can establish new patterns of relating to others that will have positive effects through our families, those whom we supervise, and our organizations and firms.

There is a problem with the amygdala, and that is that it “often makes mistakes.”¹⁷ Goleman addresses this issue:

The reason is that while the amygdala gets its data on what we see and hear in a single neuron from the eye and ear – that’s super-fast in brain time – it only receives a small fraction of the signals those senses receive. The vast majority goes to other parts of the brain that take longer to analyze these inputs – and get a more accurate reading. The amygdala, in contrast, gets a sloppy picture and has to react instantly. It often makes mistakes, particularly in modern life, where the “dangers” are symbolic, not physical threats. So, we overreact in ways we often regret later.¹⁸

Goleman identifies the “five top amygdala triggers” in the workplace:

1. Condescension and lack of respect
2. Being treated unfairly
3. Being unappreciated
4. Feeling that you’re not being listened to or heard
5. Being held to unrealistic deadlines¹⁹

Goleman says many workplaces have workers who operate in “what amounts to a low-grade amygdala hijack”:

In an economic atmosphere with great uncertainty there’s lots of free-floating fear in the air. People fear for their jobs, for their family’s financial security, and all the other problems that a bad economy brings. And anxiety hijacks workers who have to do more with less. So in such a climate

¹⁵ Ibid., 282-283.

¹⁶ Ibid., 293.

¹⁷ Ibid., 293.

¹⁸ Ibid., 293.

¹⁹ Ibid. 293-309.

there are many people operating day-to-day in what amounts to a chronic, low-grade amygdala hijack.²⁰

How do we, our family members, the those we supervise recognize an amygdala hijack and deal with it? First, by paying attention.²¹ Goleman shares some coping mechanisms including understanding what is going on and disengaging; self-awareness; noticing familiar feelings that characterize the beginning of a hijack; taking steps to short-circuit a hijack earlier in its cycle; and heading off a developing hijack at the beginning.²²

Realizing a hijack is occurring or about to occur is a critical piece in properly dealing with an episode.²³ The relationship with clinical conditions is described as follows and is a result to be avoided,

For some people it may seem their “normal” – people who have gotten used to always being angry or always being fearful. This shades over into clinical conditions like anxiety disorders or depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, which is an unfortunate disease of the amygdala induced by a traumatic experience where the amygdala shifts into a hair-trigger mode of instant, extreme hijack.²⁴

Goleman delineates a number of keys in addressing the vital issue of avoiding amygdala hijacks. First, a “cognitive approach” should be taken, including reasoning with oneself, saying: “I can remember times when he was actually very thoughtful and even kind, and maybe I should give him another chance.”²⁵ Second, one should empathize: “Or you can apply some empathy, and imagine yourself in that person’s position. This might work in those very common instances where the hijack trigger was something someone else did or said to us. You might have an empathetic thought: Maybe he treated me that way because he is under such great pressure.”²⁶ Third, biological interventions are a possibility:

We can use a method like meditation or relaxation to calm down our body. But a relaxation or meditation technique works best during the hijack when you have practiced it regularly, at best daily. Unless these methods have become a strong habit of the mind, you can’t just invoke them

²⁰ Ibid., 309.

²¹ Ibid., 309.

²² Ibid., 309, 321.

²³ Ibid., 321.

²⁴ Ibid.

out of the blue. But a strong habit of calming the body with a well-practiced method can make a huge difference when you're hijacked and need it the most.²⁷

Strategies for avoiding knee-jerk reactions and negative, default behaviors can be determined by each of us in our individual Personal X-rays as described below.

Goleman cites the work of Richard Davidson, Director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Washington, at this point in a chapter entitled "Managing Stress." Davidson's studies have found,

When we're in the grip of a hijack or under the sway of distressing emotions, there are relatively high levels of activity in the right prefrontal cortex. But when we're feeling great – enthused, energized, like we could take on anything – the left prefrontal area lights up. People who have more activity on the left than right are more likely to have more positive emotions, and the more positive their emotions day to day. Those with more activity on the right are prone to having more negative emotions.²⁸

Davidson has also researched "'emotional styles' – which are really brain styles."²⁹ He describes two responses to an amygdala hijack as,

One brain style tracks how readily we become upset: where we are on the spectrum from a hair-trigger amygdala – people who easily become upset, frustrated, or angered – versus people who are unflappable. A second style looks at how quickly we recover from our distress. Some people recover quickly once they get upset, while others are very slow. At the extreme of slowness to recover are people who continually ruminate or worry about things – in effect, who suffer from low-grade amygdala hijacks. Chronic worry keeps the amygdala primed, so you remain in a distress state as long as you ruminate. Given the many realistic stresses we face, those first two styles – being unflappable and capable of quick recovery – are the most effective in navigating troubles of the world of work.³⁰

Goleman also addresses a third emotional style, designated as "depth of feeling": "Some people experience their feelings quite intensely, some people quite shallowly. Those who have stronger feelings

²⁵ Ibid., 341.

²⁶ Ibid., 354.

²⁷ Ibid., 354.

may be better able to authentically communicate them more powerfully – to move people.”³¹ Speaking the truth in an encouraging, helpful way; being a better communicator; and immediately addressing conflict are some of the strategies we suggest.

Research also demonstrates a correlation between people who flourish in life and positive emotional events:

There’s another piece of suggestive data about the left-right ratio. Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina finds that people who flourish in life – who have rich relationships, rewarding work, who feel that their life is meaningful – have at least three positive emotional events for every negative one. A similar positive-to-negative ratio in emotions has also been documented in top teams, where it’s five-to-one; the ratio for flourishing seems to operate at the collective level too.³²

An interesting exercise would be to poll team and family members; find out where they perceive us to be in terms of the positive to negative ratio; and take steps to focus on creating an atmosphere of positive emotional events, thereby leading to stronger interpersonal and team dynamics.

Before listing several strategies for dealing with an amygdala hijack, Goleman addresses a “sympathetic nervous system arousal”:

When we’re pitched into an amygdala hijack, whether intense or low level but ongoing, we’re in sympathetic nervous system arousal. As a chronic condition that’s not a good state. While we’re hijacked, the alarm circuits trigger the fight-flight- or-freeze response that pumps stress hormones into the body with a range of negative results, such as lowering the effectiveness of our immune response. The opposite state, parasympathetic arousal, occurs when we’re relaxed. Biologically and neurologically this is the mode of restoration and recovery, and it is associated with left prefrontal arousal.³³

The strategies listed by Goleman to deal with an amygdala hijack are,

1. Take regular time off from “. . . a hectic, hassled routine to rest and restore”
2. Schedule time to “do nothing” “whatever allows you to let go of leaning forward into the next thing in your on-the-go state.”

²⁸ Ibid., 354-366.

²⁹ Ibid., 366.

³⁰ Ibid.

3. Mindfulness, which is cultivating an “. . . awareness that is non-judgmental and non-reactive to whatever thoughts or feelings arise in the mind. It’s a very effective method for decompressing and getting into a relaxed and balanced state.”³⁴

Goleman’s suggestions should be layered on top of our own strategies and techniques that help us cope with the amygdala hijack issue and lead from an even-keeled, balanced perspective. The focus must be on our intentionality in dealing with these issues, which could be improved-upon as we study and learn more about these tactics and strategies in growing in EI.

Transparency and vulnerability are key elements in the process of increasing EI and dealing with Blind Spot. As EI increases, and as we become more self-aware, relationships in which we are engaged are improved. Uncovering and addressing Blind Spots; encouraging and accepting feedback; being aware of and implementing strategies to avoid amygdala hijacks; and developing a Personal X-ray are necessary components of this journey. As we accept responsibility for our own behaviors, and commit to see improvement, marked improvement will be demonstrated. This will result in a higher level of EI and better relationships among our teammates, firms, organizations, and family members.

Developing and Maintaining a Personal X-ray (*Immunity to Change*)

As discussed by Kegan and Lahey in *Immunity to Change*, in self-examination, three steps must be taken: draw on self-awareness, take seriously feedback received, and identify a “set of personal change goals” in order to develop a strong commitment to fulfill.³⁵ Establishing a record of commitments and preparing a Personal X-ray (to be defined in the following paragraphs) is a crucial step in this ongoing process.³⁶ As this is done, we uncover and analyze behaviors that cut against the commitments made and uncover “hidden competing commitments.”³⁷

As behavior was analyzed and addressed, responses vary from person-to-person, and personal courage will be a major issue. Kegan and Lahey address this reality: “Courage involves the ability to take action and carry on even when we are afraid.”³⁸ Recognizing that people deal constantly with fear is important, as is recognizing that there is an uncovering, through the use of the Personal X-ray, of “a constant, if unrecognized, anxiety running continuously through his or her life.”³⁹ Immunities to change, faced by

³¹ Ibid., 378-384.

³⁵ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 33.

³⁶ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 34-35.

³⁷ Ibid., 36.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 48.

everyone, “create blind spots, prevent new learning, and constantly constrain action in some aspects of our living.”⁴⁰ It is imperative that we develop strategies to overcome these obstacles through a focus on Personal X-rays and what those X-rays can uncover in our lives.

Personal X-rays can be used as a developmental tool and benchmark for improvement. Kegan and Lehey say it best:

Are you ready to start unlocking potential in yourself, your colleagues, your work group, or your organization? Are you interested in seeing what happens, for you or others, when once-countervailing energies are made available for other purposes? If so, what might be your next step? Our recommendation is that you have a first-hand experience of your own immunity-to-change. What would your own X-ray look like? What does an improvement goal of your own become when you convert it into what we could call a “good problem”? What would it really mean for you personally to work on your own “good problem” by letting it first “solve you”?⁴¹

Embarking on this journey could be a great journey for us personally or for our team or family members. Kegan and Lehey describe the development of a single goal:

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.⁴²

A Personal X-ray is a helpful self-examination tool described in detail in *Immunity to Change*. The Personal X-ray consists of four columns. The four columns are Commitment (improvement goal), Doing/Not Doing Instead, Hidden Competing Commitments, and Big Assumptions. A Personal X-ray depicting the Improvement Goals is included as follows:

1	2	3	4
Commitment (improvement goal)	Doing/not instead	doing Hidden commitments	competing Big assumptions
		<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Worry box: </div>	

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 225.

⁴² Ibid., 230.

Commitment/Improvement Goal

Criteria for each of these columns must be developed individually from the perspective of each person, perhaps with the assistance of a coach. Our commitment to higher EI and better relationship skills in managing others must satisfy the following objectives, as illustrated by an individual test-subject in *Immunity to Change*:

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.⁴³

There will be particular personal attributes on which each person needs to concentrate his or her efforts. These varied and were tailored to his or her life experiences, length of leadership experience, family composition and background, team composition, and leadership style. Patience, better listening, less anger, more resilience, more empathy, and reading others' emotions were examples of the types of behavior improvement markers which we all can seek. This first iteration of the Personal X-ray serves as a helpful template for continually repeating this X-ray process in the future for other behaviors as well.

Doing/Not Doing Instead

Kegan and Lahey address this section of the Personal X-ray:

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... 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.⁴⁴

One key at this point is to demonstrate openness to feedback and transparent vulnerability in our responses. Vulnerability and our willingness to share deeply personal struggles and victories will be a key

⁴³ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 232.

⁴⁴ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 234-235.

ingredient in the success of this Personal X-ray. The words of Kegan and Lehay provided the necessary framework:

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.⁴⁵

This exercise in column two is often the most difficult but at the same time the most rewarding. As these behaviors are identified in the realm of managing relationships, “lights” suddenly turn on and action is taken. Diligence, courage, and perseverance are required. The end-products are life-transforming.

Hidden Competing Commitments

An example given by Kegan and Lehay helps illustrate this section of the Personal X-ray. One person whom they studied had the following ideas to which he wanted to commit:

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 authority⁴⁶

However, the following “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 tomorrow⁴⁷

Does this resonate with us? Kegan and Lehay address this step with a comment on the very personal nature of the process:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 235.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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 meeting your own adaptive challenge.⁴⁸

Vulnerability is a key commitment to be understood and lived-out. Here is direction from Kegan and Lehay about the "Worry Box" and how it relates to "Hidden Competing Commitments,"

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; not 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'"⁴⁹

This effort at self-examination is further clarified by Kegan and Lehay,

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.⁵⁰

Finally, the summation of this argument by Kegan and Lehay:

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

⁴⁸ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 243.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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*.⁵¹

This process will actually serve as a perfect illustration of addressing “Blind Spots” in our lives. Discovering Blind Spots and affirmatively dealing with them can lead to a huge win for everyone and provide excellent pathways for change in a number of personal and professional behavioral arenas.

The Big Assumptions

Kegan and Lehey describe “The Big Assumptions” as follows:

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.⁵²

In further defining “The Big Assumptions,” Kegan and Lehey link this idea to Blind Spots,

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.⁵³

The question of greater mental complexity is addressed by Kegan and Lehey in chapter one of their book entitled “Reconceiving the Challenge of Change.”⁵⁴ One study showed that “increased mental

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 246-247.

⁵³ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 248.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 11-30.

complexity and work competence, assessed on a number of dimensions, are correlated.”⁵⁵ They state that “we are calling upon workers to understand themselves and their world at a qualitatively higher level of mental complexity.”⁵⁶ The authors quote Nathaniel Branden, “Today, organizations need not only an unprecedentedly higher level of knowledge and skill among all those who participate but also a higher level of independence, self-reliance, self-trust, and the capacity to exercise initiative.”⁵⁷ As we move into recognition of Blind Spots, and to a higher level of mental complexity, we are able to understand ourselves and our worlds better, and our work competence will be enhanced. Failing to learn more about ourselves, resisting positive change, or believing change is impossible will effectively end the process for us and our leadership teams. Kegan and Lehay state regarding the worker’s mindset,

However, many, if not most, of the change challenges you face today and will face tomorrow require something more than incorporating new technical skills into your current mindset. These are the “adaptive challenges,” and they can only be met by transforming your mindset, by advancing to a more sophisticated stage of mental development.⁵⁸

As greater mental complexity was being developed in the arena of EI, we will find clarity as we delineated our “Big Assumptions.” Give-and-take, humor, self-deprecation, and consistent application of EI principles, in humility, are key tools to be used. Kegan and Lehay address the importance of the exercise of defining “Big Assumptions”:

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

⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 29.

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.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Personal and professional transformation, including improving our EI, is possible if we commit to hard work and transparency. It won't happen overnight but will be a reality as we tackle Blind Spots and work to prevent Amygdala Hijacks. As we are successful, we will transform our firms, organizations, family, and interpersonal relationships. Positive change can be achieved and it will be of great value to us, and to those whom we impact, for the rest of our lives.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 250-251.