



# Overcoming Your Immunity to Change

EXCERPTED FROM

*Immunity to Change:*

*How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*

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## OVERCOMING YOUR IMMUNITY TO CHANGE

**S**EEING HOW OUR self-protective motivations systematically prevent us from achieving exactly what we most most desire is necessary. Insights can be powerful, even exciting, but they do not necessarily lead to transformation. Most people need a structure to help them channel their aspiration, test and gain distance from their big assumptions, and steadily build a new set of ways to bridge the gap between intentions and behavior. That is precisely what our immunity-to-change follow-up process is designed to do.

We begin this chapter with our own assumption—that you now have in front of you, from your work in chapter 9, a picture of your own immunity to change that intrigues you. It commands your attention and your interest. You can see yourself with a foot on the gas (genuinely and urgently wanting more success with the goal you have entered in column 1) and a foot on the brake (actively and continually producing exactly those behaviors most likely to *prevent* any progress on that goal). And you can see the very good reason *why* you are holding yourself back: You want to save your life as you know it. You can see, in your third and fourth columns, the reasons why every one of those obstructive behaviors feels necessary for your self-protection.

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So, how might you proceed if you want to do something about this—if you want to overcome your own immunity to change? Before you begin you should:

- Be ready to devote a few months to this process and not expect it to happen overnight
- Choose what form of support for the journey will work best for you
- Consider the variety of tasks and activities we have developed over time that may help you, steadily and progressively, to overcome your own personal version of the immunity to change

A quick word about each of these.

First, the overcoming-immunity work will not take years. Nor will you need to devote enormous amounts of time to it over the next few months. But we do find that you need to be willing to give it your attention consistently for about thirty minutes a week, and that most people notice significant and encouraging changes in about twelve weeks. This means you should obviously not expect to make your way through this chapter in a single sitting. You may choose to read it through, just to get a sense of the road map. But if you actually want to take the trip, you will need to regularly put the book down and *do things* before you can return and carry on.

Second, it's important to decide whether you want to take the trip alone or with company. You might prefer to work through your immunity on your own (using this chapter as a guide), but you have other options. You might find a partner—best of all, someone else who wants to overturn his or her immunity to change—and debrief together as you work your way through the process. Or you may choose to work with a coach who has experience with the full “coaching arc” and can both guide you and help you stick with it. (If you want to pursue this option, let us know and we can put you in touch with one of the many people we have trained.)

Finally, whether you do this on your own, with a partner, or with a coach, you can find your own best combination of exercises from the basic set of activities people have found useful for overturning the

immunity to change. We list these below in three phases, with a simple statement of the purpose of each. You have already seen many of these illustrated in prior chapters. And since each person's immune system is unique, not everyone needs to undertake every exercise.

#### OPENING MOVES: SETTING THE STAGE

*Honing your map:* Review and revise your immunity map as needed, so that it feels powerful to you and you have testable big assumptions.

*Initial survey:* Get external input on the importance and value of your column 1 goal, and create a baseline of how well you are doing on the goal at the start of the process.

#### MIDDLE GAME: DIGGING INTO THE WORK

*Continuum of progress:* Envision what full success looks like in achieving your column 1 goal.

*Self-observations:* Tune in to the big assumptions in action and stay alert to counterexamples. Recognize when and where your big assumptions are activated, and when they are inaccurate.

*Biography of the big assumptions:* For each assumption, ask: When did it get started? What is its history? What is its current validity?

*Testing the big assumptions:* Intentionally behave counter to how a big assumption would have you act, see what happens, and then reflect on what those results tell you about the certainty of your assumption. Do this process several times, running tests of bigger scope each time.

#### END GAME: CONSOLIDATING YOUR LEARNING

*Follow-up survey:* Get input (from the same people who completed your initial survey) on your column 1 goal. Compare your self-assessment of progress with what they see. Learn about the effect of your changes on others.

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*Identifying hooks and releases:* Take stock of the current status of your big assumptions; consider how to maintain progress, guard against future slippage (the “hooks”), and recover when you do (the “releases”).

*Future progress:* Once you are “unconsciously released” from your current big assumption, you may want to reengage the immunities process, especially around any unmet goals or areas in which you currently feel stuck or discouraged.

### THE HEART OF THE PROCESS: DESIGNING, RUNNING, AND INTERPRETING TESTS OF THE BIG ASSUMPTIONS

You have seen illustrations of most of these steps in prior chapters—especially chapters 5 and 6, with the cases of David and Cathy. So we are going to devote this chapter to the heart of the process, the activities that are most iterative, take the most time, and serve as the biggest lever for overcoming the immune system—namely, designing, running, and interpreting tests of your big assumptions.

#### *Designing Tests of Your Big Assumption*

The purpose of each test you run is to see what happens when you intentionally alter your usual conduct and then reflect upon the meaning of the results for your big assumption. The purpose of a test is *not* to try immediately to improve or get better. Rather it is to get information—a very particular kind of information: “What does this say about my big assumption?” Our experience tells us that it can be hard to keep this intention front and center, so before we put you to work, we want to share with you the most common challenge in designing a test.

Remember the overly enthusiastic tendency to act (without any attention to our mindset) that we mentioned in chapter 8? It’s this tendency that leads us, mistakenly, to an event-focused approach to testing the big assumption, where we assume that there is some

important action that, if we were able to take it, would “solve” the big assumption and neutralize its effects.<sup>1</sup> A common example is having a long-delayed, difficult conversation with a boss or coworker, surviving it, and moving on.

An event-focused approach views the successful completion of the test as the *concluding* step, the hurdle overcome or the obstacle removed. Once we conduct that test (especially if it seems like a successful experience), we can feel the relief and sense of accomplishment of having completed an important task. We can savor and appreciate the work that’s been done. This is all well and good, *but it is not learning*. For purposes of adaptive learning, it’s important to understand that the goal in conducting the test *is not just to perform the activity specified in the test*. We need to collect data about what happens as a consequence of that action, and then *interpret those outcomes to confirm or revise our big assumption*. In other words, the test has not actually been successful until its result is connected to our work on the big assumption.

With that as a backdrop, let’s put you to work. First, this exercise requires that you know exactly which big assumption you want to test. If you unearthed several big assumptions, now is the time to choose one. The two criteria for selecting are, first, that it’s a powerful assumption (it has a strong hold on you and it clearly limits what you experience as “in bounds” in order to feel safe); and second, that it is testable. If you aren’t immediately clear which of your big assumptions meets those criteria, see if the following questions help:

- Which big assumption jumps out at you as the one that most gets in your way?
- If you could change any single big assumption, which one would make the biggest, most positive difference for you?
- Is the big assumption so catastrophic that you could never test it? Hint: a big assumption with words like *die*, *be fired*, or *have a nervous breakdown* isn’t ripe for testing quite yet. (But don’t abandon that assumption; it probably has the advantage of mattering a lot. To make it testable, you may have to back up and unearth a prior assumption in the sequence that

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leads up to the catastrophe. For example, “I assume if I disagree with the boss I’ll be fired” becomes “I assume if I say X, my boss will get angry” and/or “I assume if my boss does get angry that he will find no value in my input” and/or “I assume if my boss finds no value in my input on one occasion, he will permanently end his support of me.”)

- Can you imagine some kind of information or data that would cast doubt on the big assumption? Is your assumption falsifiable?

Perhaps you are not yet sure whether your big assumption meets the “testable” criterion. To help you think this through, we are going to bring in a few real clients to serve as examples for your own comparison. We begin with Sue, the chief of staff in a large social services agency.

### Sue’s Test, Part 1

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Sue’s original big assumption was this: “If I am not accepted, then people wouldn’t like me and I wouldn’t have value.” She turned this into a testable assumption by identifying what she thought led to her not being accepted: “If I say no, others will see me as cold and uncaring.” She chose to focus her first test on the assumption that saying no would lead to damaging relationships.

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Now you try it. Write down your assumption as in figure 10-1.

FIGURE 10-1

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**Write out a testable version of your big assumption**

I assume that if . . .
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Once you've chosen a big assumption to test, the next step is to design your first experiment to challenge it. Start by asking yourself: what behavior changes would give me good information about the accuracy of my big assumption? Then plan what you will actually do and/or say to make sure you have a fair test. For example, deciding *that* you will say no when asked to take on another task doesn't address *how* you will say it. You could, for instance, bark out an immediate "no," or you could say something like, "I wish I could help you, but I have an overflowing plate right now." One of these ways of saying no is clearly a better test of your assumption that the receiver will be angry at you.

Next, plan for data collection: what information should you gather when you enact that behavior? Data can be external (others' reactions to the new behavior), internal (your own reactions, cognitive and affective), or both. This is the time to consider, in advance, what outcomes would lead you to question the validity of your big assumption. This is a crucial step. If you can't think of any data that could challenge or cast doubt on your assumption, that's a sign that you don't yet have a good test. In that case, you need to go back to the drawing board.

## Sue's Test, Part 2

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Here's how Sue planned for testing her assumption that "if I say no, others will see me as cold and uncaring."

First, she observed that the situation that most frequently activated her big assumption was when team members confided in her about other team members.

Next, she decided to whom she would be willing to take the risk of saying no.

She then practiced what she would say. (E.g., "This is important. I feel for you; I'm disturbed to hear this. But you're looking at the wrong person. You need to take this directly to this person. How can I help you to talk directly to this person, given I know this person?" Or "I hear your concerns; this is important; I want to listen without having to feel the need to fix." Or "I can't

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touch this—this is not about me. Our relationship is important, our agency’s relationship is important. You need to make a decision to talk directly to the person, or to go to her boss.”)

Regarding data, Sue planned to pay attention to how she felt when she said no, and also see what the recipient did or said in response. If she ended up feeling insecure, or thought that the other person saw her as cold or uncaring, or if the relationship suffered, those would all be signs that her big assumption was accurate. But if she didn’t feel those things, she would question the absolute truth of her assumption.

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In reality, however, we know that not everyone plans their tests.

### Claus’s Test, Part 1

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Claus provides an example of someone who did not plan his first test. This might well have been a plus for him, given that his big assumption is that he needs to be overprepared in order to be effective. When the very assumption the person wants to test risks getting activated by the planning process, test “planning” can be paradoxical. We have worked with many people whose assumptions are like this. For them, the task is to design an effective test without being controlling, overpreparing, attending to every detail in the process, and so on. In Claus’s case, it would have been counterproductive to overprepare a test to see if he could be effective with less preparation!

Here is his test: over vacation, Claus decided he needed to talk with a staff member about a reassignment. He hadn’t yet thought through how he would approach this person, but when he ran into him during his first morning back at the office, Claus, uncharacteristically, talked with him. “I had so much to do to catch up and I thought to myself, ‘if I don’t talk to him about this now, when will I?’ So I talked with him right then.”

What makes this a test, not just an event, is that Claus was attentive to what happened as a consequence of his acting on the spur of the moment. We will take a look at that data and

how he made sense of it when we turn to the interpretation dimension of testing.

Had he not acted spontaneously, we would have encouraged Claus to focus less on preparing a test per se and more on thinking through what he deemed “safe” conditions for a test. These would be situations (certain people, topics, meetings) where he would not pay a high price if it turned out that he was ineffective when less prepared.

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Having read about the purpose, common pitfalls, and features of a good test, we hope you have gained a good sense of what we are going for in this step and are ready to create your own test.

Here is the exercise. You’ll find a guide sheet for completing it in figure 10-2. In this step, we ask you to create a safe, modest experiment testing your big assumption. Your test should lead you to do something different from what you ordinarily would do when routinely holding your big assumption as true. This design is *preparation* for actually running your first formal test of this assumption.

A good test conforms to the following S-M-A-R-T criteria:

- S-M: It is important that your experiment be both *safe* and *modest*. You might ask yourself, “What can I risk doing, or resist doing, *on a small scale* that might seem inadvisable if I held my big assumption as true, in order to learn what the results would actually be?”
- A: A good test will be *actionable* in the near term. This means that the test is relatively easy to carry out (ideally, it doesn’t require you to go out of your way at all, but rather is an opportunity to do something different in your normal day) and can be conducted within the next week or so.
- R-T: Finally, you are clear that you are taking a *research* stance (not a self-improvement stance); you are running a *test* of your big assumption. A good test will allow you to collect data related to your big assumption (including data that would qualify your assumption or call it into doubt).

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FIGURE 10-2

**Guide sheet for designing a good test of the big assumption**

- 1a. Write below what you are going to do. (Make sure you are doing something different from what your big assumption would normally have you do.)
  
- 1b. Jot down how you think your test (1a) will get you information about your big assumption.
  
- 2a. Next, what data do you want to collect? In addition to how people react to you, *your feelings* can be a very rich data source.
  
- 2b. How will that data help you to confirm or disconfirm your big assumption (BA)? (What results would lead you to believe your BA is correct? What results would lead you to question the validity of your BA?)
  
- 2c. Is there anyone you'd like to give a "heads-up" to or ask to serve as an observer who can give you feedback after the fact?
  
3. Finally, review your test on these criteria:
  - Is it safe? (If the worst case were to happen, you could live with the results.)
  - Is the data relevant to your BA? (See question 2b.)
  - Is it valid? (The test actually tests your big assumption; see question 1b.)
  - Are the data sources valid? (Choose sources who are neither out to get you nor trying to protect or save you.)
  - Might it actually reinforce your big assumption? (Is it designed so that it surely will lead to bad consequences, just as your BA tells you? Are you setting yourself up to fail? Is there any data you could collect that could disconfirm your BA?)
  - Can it be done soon? (The person or situation you need in order to enact the test is available, you are reasonably certain you know how to do what you plan, and you can run the test within the next week or so.)

As a first step, consider what behavior you could change (start or stop doing) that would yield useful information about your big assumption. Here are some options:

- Alter a behavior from column 2.
- Perform an action that runs counter to a column 3 commitment.
- Start directly from your big assumption (column 4): “What experiment would tell me whether the if-then sequence built into the assumption is valid?”
- Go to your continuum of progress (see chapters 5 and 6 for illustrations) and enact a version of a next recognizable step.

If you’ve completed the exercise, including question 3, terrific—you have a high-quality design for the first test of your big assumption. Now is a good time to do whatever is needed to increase the likelihood that your test goes well. At a nuts-and-bolts level, remember to contact someone from whom you want feedback. You may want to let this person in on the bigger context of your request as well as the particular kinds of data you hope he or she can give you. The clearer you are up front about what you need, the more likely this person will be able to gather valuable data. Make a plan to debrief with this person as soon as possible after the test.

Here are some things you might find helpful to do before actually running the test to get yourself in the right frame of mind.<sup>2</sup> Practicing what you want to do increases the likelihood you will actually feel prepared to do something that you have little, if any, experience doing.

For example:

- Prepare notes for your test.
- Practice techniques for reducing or eliminating negative “mind chatter.”

You may want to imagine different ways the upcoming interaction could unfold and how you might respond and/or assert yourself according to each imagined scenario:

- Consider the implications of tone of voice, body language, choice of words.

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- Anticipate how your typical ways of saying things might lead to a foregone conclusion and consider whether there is a more productive approach you could take. Role-play in your head (or with someone you trust) if at all possible.
- Be prepared with alternative strategies for handling things that are often negative triggers for you.

Finally, anticipate things that might make it hard to collect quality data. Here are a few tips to consider:

- You may experience many feelings all at once. Your feelings may change throughout your test, so try to tune in to your emotional channel frequently.
- The more a person is under the grip of his big assumption, the less skillful he is at observing other people (their behavior and their inner states). One of the most essential skills for engaging in adaptive change is the ability to see and hear what is occurring with as little judgment as possible. Seeing and hearing more clearly is where the potential for change starts.
- It is very easy to slip from noticing into interpreting another person's reactions. That invalidates a test. Try to stay attuned to what the person said or did (e.g., he said, "This makes me mad" versus "He was mad at me"). Quality data are directly observable—words and actions, including nonverbal behavior, that could be captured by an audio- or videotape.

### *Running Tests of Your Big Assumption*

Finally, you get to take action. Go ahead and run your test! Remember to collect your data (both what you actually did and what happened as a result). If you don't end up running the exact test you planned, that's okay. Just make sure the actual test you ran still meets the criteria for an effective test (question 3 in the preceding section). If you conclude that your test was flawed, that's not a fatal problem, and it's not unusual. Just remember that you haven't yet generated data that's

relevant to testing your big assumption (so whatever happened doesn't confirm or disconfirm your assumption). Your next step should be to see whether you can still do the test you originally hoped to run or you need to design a new test.

Use the form in figure 10-3 to describe your actions and the consequences. Be as neutral a self-reporter as possible. In the next section, we will turn to making sense of, or interpreting, the data.

Before moving to the next step, double check that you have assessed the quality of the actual test you ran (versus what you planned) and the quality of your data, and concluded that both are valid. Once you've done that, you're ready to interpret what happened.

**FIGURE 10-3**

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**Guide sheet for running tests of the big assumption**

1. What did you actually do?

2a. What happened? What did people actually say or do when you ran your test? If you asked someone for feedback, what did she or he say? What were your thoughts and feelings at the time? (These are your data points.)

2b. Check the quality of your data to make sure it is valid. Is the data about other people's responses to you directly observable, or have you snuck in an interpretation? Would someone else in the room agree with your description? Were there any unusual circumstances in your test?

### *Interpreting Tests of Your Big Assumption*

Designing an effective test of your big assumption is one step. Running it is a next step. Now the challenge is to look at your data for the sole purpose of understanding what it suggests about your big assumption. Remember, the purpose of running a good test is not to see whether you improved, whether your behavior change “worked” (although this is not unimportant!), but rather to use the test results to reconsider your big assumption. You will know you are on track with this exercise if you can see what aspect of your big assumption, if any, is confirmed by the data, and what aspect, if any, is disproved.

The best way to illustrate this step is to pick up where we left off with Sue and Claus so that you can see what they did, what data they collected, and how they made sense of it. After that, we will invite you to interpret your data.

### **Sue’s Test, Part 3**

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This is the test Sue ran: When one of the two people she felt safe running her test with started telling her he was upset with another team member, Sue told him that she didn’t want to get involved and thought it was better for him to talk directly to the other person.

Here’s the data she collected. First, her inner thoughts and feelings: “I did it without feeling badly. And I didn’t let it worry me that I hated the interaction because it was short and charged. It was what it was and I didn’t worry about it throughout the day.” The external data? This fellow later called Sue to apologize for dragging her into the issue, saying “I just wanted to tell someone what was happening.”

Sue saw these results as initial disconfirmations of her big assumption. While she didn’t like saying no, she didn’t beat herself up for doing so, and she was glad not to be drawn into the conflict. More important, her colleague’s apology led her to see that setting a limit (at least that time) was perfectly acceptable.

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## Claus's Test, Part 2

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### And what about Claus?

Here's what happened when he spontaneously talked with his employee:

He recognized the moment as “a real breakthrough for me,” including that he felt out of his comfort zone. As for the external data, the other person expanded on the topic, which was unusual and a surprise to Claus, given that he thought this would be a touchy issue. Claus also noticed that they were having a real conversation, with back-and-forth between them. Finally, he also was aware that he liked “that I had the guts to do this and not fear failing, even though I tested without thinking about it.”

What did the data tell him about his big assumption? In his own words, “This one single experience tells me to not analyze things to death. I can more clearly articulate that I perceive wrongly that by spending more time on it or waiting, it will ripen. But it doesn't, and then I start feeling bad that I haven't done it. Lesson learned? Follow my instincts. Make sure that my head doesn't get in the way of my stomach.” He sees how his big assumption creates the false sense that overpreparation is required, when the reality is that it makes him increasingly anxious. He now knows that at least in this situation, his gut feelings were sufficient preparation.

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Here are a few tips to keep in mind when you start interpreting your data as in figure 10-4.

- What makes a “big assumption” more than merely an assumption is the belief, implicit or explicit, that what we assume is *always and completely* right. A big assumption automatically informs how we see reality; that is, it is “behind” the eyes, so to speak, rather than in front of the eyes.

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FIGURE 10-4

**Guide sheet for interpreting tests of the big assumption**

1. Take a look at the data you collected. What is your interpretation of what happened?
  
2. What alternate interpretation can you think of for that same data? When our big assumptions have a powerful hold on us, they direct us to predictable interpretations—ones that keep the big assumption alive and well. An antidote to this tendency is to push yourself to generate at least one additional interpretation of the data.
  
3. What does your interpretation tell you about the big assumption you tested? What aspects of your big assumption do you believe the data confirm? Which do the data disconfirm? Did any new assumptions emerge?
  
4. What are your thoughts about a next test of your big assumption? Pick up on what you've learned about your big assumption. What next test could you design to learn more? If you have additional big assumptions, you might want to test those too.

- A single big assumption is rarely completely and always right or wrong. The problem more often is that we tend to overuse big assumptions and overgeneralize their applicability far beyond their scope.
- The point of a test is rarely to reject a big assumption outright, but rather to help sharpen its contours so you have a realistic, data-based version of when, where, and with whom your big assumption is relevant. Even relatively modest changes to a big assumption can overturn an immunity to change.
- It is possible to run a valuable and complete test (for this step) without having been “successful” in some action. For

example, we may not have been able to hold the difficult conversation, but we gathered data that allowed us to learn something new about what holds us back, and this leads to a further refinement of our big assumption.

- No single experiment is likely to be conclusive by itself about a big assumption.

The final question in this exercise points to the iterative nature of testing big assumptions. Once we run a test and take stock of its implications for our big assumption, we design another test, one that will provide data on what we next want to learn about our assumption. David and Cathy, whom you met in chapters 5 and 6, and Sue and Claus from this chapter all conducted several tests, with each one leading the person to progressively revise the assumption. Often, the second and third tests are successive versions of the first one. What differs are the players, circumstance, or level of risk. It is the cumulative weight of several tests that, in most cases, begins to overturn the person's immunity to change—the whole purpose, let us not forget, of these exercises. Once the big assumption no longer has its force, the self-protective third-column commitment is no longer necessary, and we stop needing to generate the obstructive second-column behaviors.

#### Sue's Test, Part 4

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Let's continue to follow Sue's next test of her big assumption, "If I say no, others will see me as cold and uncaring."

Sue heard about a blowup between two of her colleagues. She prepared herself for what she would say if one of them came to her to complain about the other. She rehearsed her lines, including saying to herself, "I know I can't fix this, it's much bigger than I am," and she primed herself to be the reflective listener she wanted to be in that situation. When one of her two colleagues, Kati, walked into her office, Sue was ready.

What did Sue do? She reminded Kati of her four-column work and her commitment to not be in the middle these sorts

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of conversations. “I was careful not to join her in bashing Vicki. And I was careful not to tell her what to do, but instead was a good listener.”

What about the data? She paid attention to her feelings, including her comfort and anxiety levels, as well as Kati’s reactions to her. She found herself feeling good during the discussion, both because she was able to act and be present in the way she wanted, and because the conversation went in an unanticipated, but very productive direction, where Sue felt that she could raise an issue with Kati. Sue felt good about making herself vulnerable and having a quality conversation that led them both to feel they got something valuable out of their talk.

Sue saw this data as contradicting her big assumption; by setting certain limits, she actually experienced a closer relationship with Kati.

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As our self-observing skills get better developed, further tests of our big assumptions can occur quite fluidly. On these occasions we spontaneously act in ways contraindicated by our big assumption, but we become aware of this (at the moment or later) and use it as an occasion to ask, “What happened and what does that tell me about my big assumption?”

### Sue’s Test, Part 5

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Sue had many “spontaneous” tests. A significant one occurred when she had an altercation with her boss, in her view the highest-stakes person to be in conflict with. The event took place in a lead team meeting, when Sue said something that led her boss, Sam, to shout angrily at her. She was bewildered about how her statement led to such an extreme and negative reaction. Imagining that he didn’t hear what she said, she found herself asking what her responsibility was in the miscommunication. “I had to check in with the rest of the group—‘what did I say?’ They told me I was being very clear.” In a follow-up

conversation with her boss, Sam acknowledged that he had stopped listening.

Her conclusions: “For me personally, I hung with that conflict. I didn’t freak out about it, and didn’t carry it with me the whole next day. I didn’t obsess with it the way I would have six months ago. I now know my relationship with Sam can withstand conflict and that I could hang with him in his clear anger that day.”

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Very often, future tests reflect our wish to learn about further aspects of our big assumption that revealed themselves only through earlier testing.

### Sue’s Test, Part 6

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Again, let’s follow Sue’s testing to see a perfect example of testing deeper grounds. Once Sue realized that saying no was not risking relationships, she discovered a whole new learning curve: Could she say what she was really thinking without risking relationships? Could she, in other words, risk *creating* conflict?

“I did say ‘I don’t agree’ to Beth. That was a risk. Internally, I felt that I was pushing. For me it was a risk in the relationship; I took the risk . . . and the good thing is that the relationship stayed intact. I think I can continue to say when I don’t agree. But I want to be articulate in my disagreement and not just emotional! I don’t think I am as articulate as I’d like to be. A bigger risk would have been to say that I thought that we were avoiding the real issue.”

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Now it’s your turn to develop a second test. Return to the guide sheets provided earlier for the three dimensions of testing (designing, running, and interpreting).

If after a few rounds of testing, you wonder, “How do I know when I am finished?” and “How do I sustain my progress?” you are

most likely ready for the following exercise, “Identifying Hooks and Releases.”

### CONSOLIDATE YOUR LEARNING: IDENTIFYING HOOKS AND RELEASES

Figure 10-5 shows a developmental sequence in overturning an immunity. Take a moment to think about where you are in your journey by using the descriptions of “consciously released” and “unconsciously released”—and we assume that if you are this far into this chapter, you are surely past being “consciously immune.”

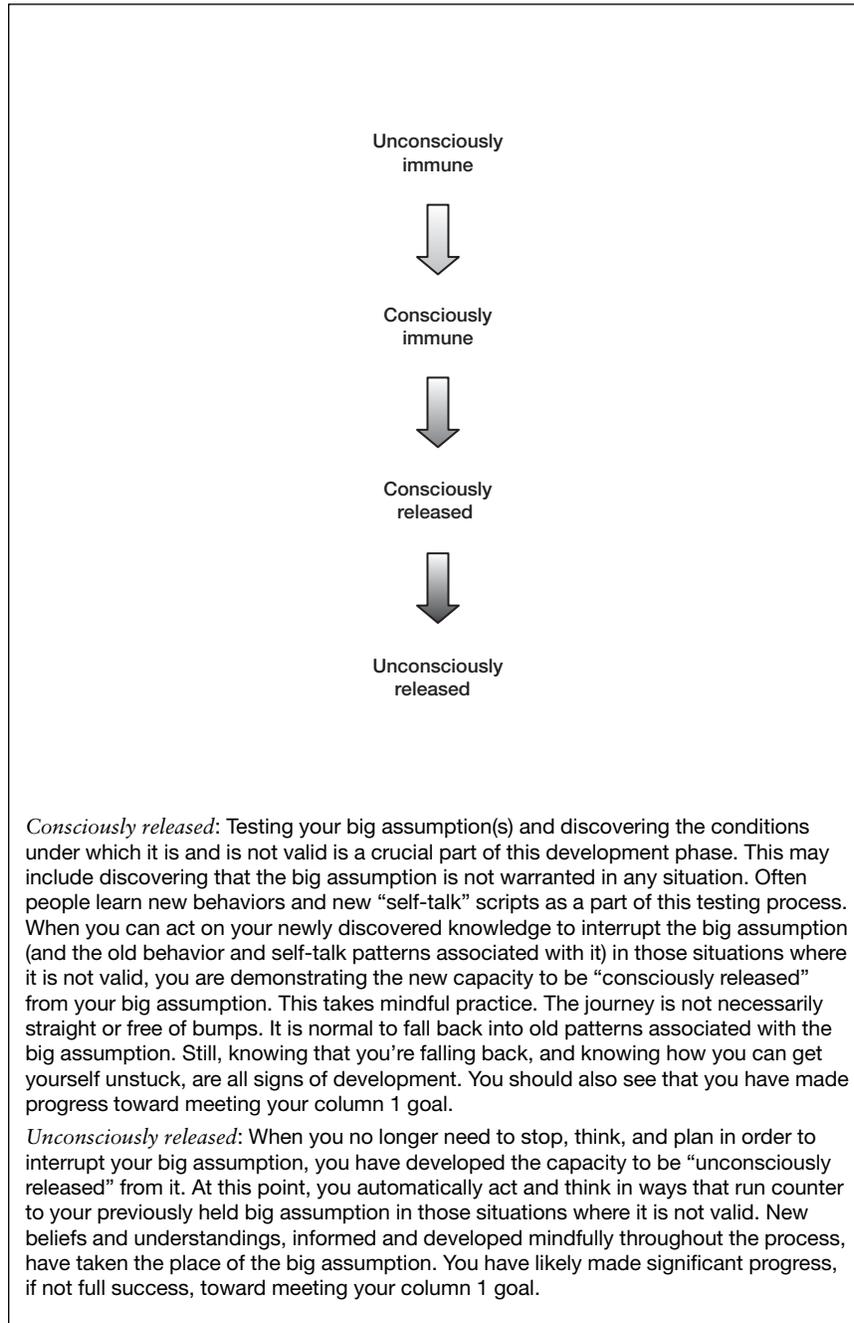
Which of these two descriptions speaks to you? If your self-assessment is that you are “unconsciously released,” then you may find this next exercise useful for simply confirming your sense of where you are. If “consciously released” better describes your current relationship to your big assumption, then one of the following two choices will be most relevant if you want to fully overturn your immune system and succeed with your column 1 commitment.

First, consider continuing with further tests of your big assumption. This is a good choice especially if you are aware that your big assumption grabs hold of you frequently. As we said earlier, the testing process is iterative and there is no set number of tests that will overturn an immune system. If you have been working solo, you might consider finding a trusted friend or colleague to partner with you in your next test design and interpretation. Having someone to talk with can be an enormous help.

A second option is to complete another exercise, which we call “Identifying Hooks and Releases.” Designed to increase the likelihood of your continued success, it asks you to take stock of the current status of your big assumption, assess your risk of getting pulled back, and plan for how to guard against slippage. It also leads you to generate the equivalent of a personalized tip sheet (see the italicized portion of “Cathy’s Completed ‘Identifying Hooks and Releases’ Exercise”).

So that you can see the potential in this exercise and get a clear answer to the question, “How do I know if I am done?” we want to remind you of the example Cathy gave us in chapter 6. As you read it

FIGURE 10-5

**From unconsciously immune to unconsciously released**

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this time, we direct your attention to the way it illustrates the benefits of identifying what *hooks* us into a big assumption, and what we can do to *release* ourselves from those hooks.

### Cathy's Completed 'Identifying Hooks and Releases' Exercise

---

Comment on where you now see yourself on the developmental sequence.

*I am somewhere between “consciously released” and “unconsciously released.” I have significantly revised my biggest “big assumptions” and no longer feel run by them. Instead, I have developed new understandings about myself and my value based on my “Houston event” and continued testing over the past months. I have every reason to believe these new views about myself will keep me from falling back into the old way I thought of myself and others.*

*I now have a lot of ways to reduce my stress levels, including how not to get stressed to begin with. I use these tools and beliefs regularly, sometimes consciously, and others times, upon reflection, quite unconsciously.*

Have you reached any conclusions or developed any hunches about conditions under which your big assumption is valid? Think about particular situations—who, what, where, and when.

*I no longer see any time when my big assumption is valid.*

Have you reached any conclusions or developed any hunches about conditions under which your big assumption is invalid? Think about particular situations—who, what, where, and when.

*Yes. In all of my work. And even in my relationship with my husband.*

Do you find your big assumption asserting itself in situations you know it shouldn't? If so, can you generalize about the conditions under which you are likely (more or less) to find yourself being sucked into the old patterns associated with the big assumption? What still sometimes hooks you?

*No, my "Houston event" blasted my big assumption. And since then, I have been learning how to help myself not get pulled back into that kind of thinking and acting.*

Have you developed key "releases" (i.e., self-talk that unhooks you) that you can readily use when facing your big assumption in real time?

*I had a plan with some of my team members, which was that I would use a code word or signal to indicate that I had entered into a high-strung state. But I haven't needed my code word, because my earlier steps to interrupt the emotions have been working.*

Have you developed new behaviors or ways of talking to yourself in situations that used to activate your big assumption?

*Yes. Overall, I am more self-aware and more self-regulating. I am better attuned to what sends me down the path to becoming high strung, and also when I'm on the path. I now have a robust set of effective ways I use to interrupt the cycle before it even starts or to interrupt it once it starts before I become overly emotional.*

*I use my mantra "I have calm."*

*I use de-stress balls.*

*When I feel high-strung emotionally, I take a breath both internally and externally to reflect before acting.*

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*When I am in a situation where someone is saying something that gets me agitated, I tell myself, “Be respectful and calm. This is not the end of the world. You are in control of this situation. You can listen respectfully and then politely disagree.”*

*When I feel something is wrong, I ask myself, “Is it me? Or is it something in the environment?”*

*When I am aware that I’m getting stressed, I ask myself, “What is in my control here and what isn’t?” And then look to make choices based on what’s in my control.*

*I ask myself: “Is this important enough to get hospitalized?”*

*I make more choices about what I can and can’t do with my time.*

*When I have a timeline, I will tell the person that I don’t think I can meet the deadline, or I tell them what I think I can and can’t have done by that time. Or I will ask them about whether there is any flex in the timeline given what is on my plate and other commitments I have agreed to meet.*

*I’ll say to myself, “This is what I can’t make happen in order to get my priority item taken care of.”*

*Around deadlines, I ask myself, “What will have to give, in order for me to meet this deadline?”*

*I conduct a process check re: my calendar. I make myself go home by a certain hour on most days and keep that promise to myself. When there are back-to-back meetings, I ask myself, “Is it important to me to attend all of these?”*

*When I broke my rule of going home by a certain hour, I would call Deb and say that I wasn’t going to be in the next day. She was fine about that.*

*“Is this so important that I should jeopardize my health?”*

*I pay attention to the value I am adding and what I'm contributing. (And I continue to see my value as not about the product.)*

*I pay attention to my feelings of confidence that have emerged through this process (letting go of the fear has helped me see what value I am adding).*

To what extent/how often can you use these “releases” to help you from being pulled into old patterns?

*Consistently.*

Think about situations in which you think your big assumption is no longer accurate. What new beliefs or understandings do you hold about “how things work” or what will happen in these situations?

*One of my original big assumptions was: If I were to let myself down, then I would feel like I'm not giving as much as I should be giving. That's now changed: my definition of letting down is now different. Before it was about doing, and now it's about being. Like if I didn't speak up or share my insights. It's the act of having the insights. I would be letting myself down if I no longer had the insights or didn't believe that they are of value.*

*Another of my original big assumptions was: I assume that a good team member—for everyone—is giving 110 percent. I still believe it. What's changed is that 110 percent is not about checking off tasks and making sure everything is perfect. Perfection isn't about crossing every t. It's about perfection in concept, intent, and in thinking about it.*

*Another original assumption was: I assume a good me is 150 percent. I still think that's true, I just define it differently. Even if it's three minutes. It's a sense that I determined the necessary energy and time that was appropriate. It's the amount of time and quality of thinking that makes for excellence.*

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*My biggest big assumption was: I assume that it's worth the risk for me to burn out than to not go the 110 percent. That's simply not true now.*

Any thoughts about what has enabled you to make the changes you have?

*Most importantly, I realized that my original big assumptions came out of my operating from a sense of fear. I was afraid that something I loved would be taken away from me and I felt like I had to keep proving over and over to everyone that I was good at this so they should know not to take it away. My "aha" about how my not getting accepted to medical school has kept me worried and afraid all these years was also very important. I realized I believed my not getting in was a reflection on me, that something was wrong with me. And I never voiced that belief; I just kept doing things to make sure that would never again happen to me. It's been a huge relief to unburden myself of that. Emotionally, it's exhausting to have carried that around. Now, I'm freed up from feeling that way.*

*This whole experience helped me to see that I actually am very good at what I do, and not only because of what I "do," but because of who I am and the unique perspectives I bring to the work. And I recognized that others see that in me too.*

*The "Houston event" was the catalyst for my understanding this about myself. That Teresa succeeded was a test of my not having to "do" and a confirmation of my value as someone with the particular skills, knowledge, and views I hold. Teresa succeeded because I had set it up as I did, and because I did write the objectives so clearly. My unique value was in the planning process. That newfound confidence was an enormous boost to my change.*

*I'm very scientific—without proof I don't believe it. It was a forced experiment—Teresa succeeding—my goals and vision were able to be realized without me doing it!*

*Everything followed from my letting go of my fears and developing my confidence. I kept trying out ways to be playful so I could reduce my stress and in the process found different techniques and self-reminders that worked for me.*

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At the very least, the answer to the question, “How do I know if I am done?” should be clear from this example. You are not “done,” of course, if you have not realized significant progress on your column 1 goal. But neither are you done if you have *only* realized significant progress, and not forged a strong and continuing channel, as Cathy demonstrates, between behavioral changes and changes in your mindset—that is, changes in your big assumptions.

Now it’s your turn to do this exercise using the guide sheet in figure 10-6.

Here’s one last question for you if you have completed the hooks and releases exercise: How do you feel about yourself for making the gains you did on such a challenging goal?

**FIGURE 10-6**

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**Guide sheet for identifying hooks and releases**

1. Comment on where you now see yourself on the developmental sequence.
2. Have you reached any conclusions or developed any hunches about conditions under which your big assumption is valid? Think about particular situations—who, what, where, and when.
3. Have you reached any conclusions or developed any hunches about conditions under which your big assumption is invalid? Think about particular situations—who, what, where, and when.
4. Do you find your big assumption asserting itself in situations you know it shouldn’t? If so, can you generalize about the conditions under which you are likely (more or less) to find yourself being sucked into the old patterns associated with the big assumption? What still sometimes hooks you?

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5. Have you developed key “releases” (e.g., self-talk that unhooks you) that you can readily use to help yourself when recaptured by your big assumption in real time?
6. Have you developed new behaviors or ways of talking to yourself in situations that used to activate your big assumption?
7. To what extent / how often can you use these “releases” to help you from being pulled into old patterns?
8. Consider situations in which you think your big assumption is no longer accurate. What new beliefs or understandings do you hold about “how things work” or what will happen in these situations?
9. Any thoughts about what has enabled you to make the changes you have?

### FUTURE PROGRESS

Once you are “unconsciously released” from your big assumption, you may want to reengage the immunities process, especially around any unmet goals or areas in which you currently feel stuck or discouraged. All the exercises in the process are reusable. These tools can be a resource to a lifelong approach to transformative change by helping you see how you can achieve other commitments through identifying, testing, and altering additional big assumptions. Yes, the implication here is that if you look hard enough, you will find other areas in which you are unconsciously immune. Developing the capacity to identify such areas is a key to continued growth.

The very first step, of course, is to develop a new immunity map—and you can use figure 10-7 to do so as often as needed. Notice that this worksheet includes a column for generating ideas. This is where you can brainstorm goals around which you might still be unconsciously immune. Once you’ve done this, return to the earlier portions of your immunity work to remind yourself of the unfolding exercises and how to do them.

FIGURE 10-7

**Immunity map worksheet**

Generating ideas	1 Commitment (improvement) goals	2 Doing/ not Doing	3 Hidden competing commitment	4 Big assumption	First S-M-A-R-T test
			<div data-bbox="886 611 1024 741" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;">Worry box:</div>		

These last two chapters seek to provide you a direct experience of the immunity to change in your own life (in chapter 9), and to put you squarely behind the wheel in the journey of overcoming it (in this chapter). In working with leaders it has been our experience that there is no substitute for this first-person understanding of the results the practices can bring. No matter how compelling you may find the ideas from a distance, we have found that your personal experience of the phenomenon is what will enable you to shift from merely sponsoring the work (in your organization or on your team) to being able to *champion* it—to model your own participation in it, and to

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have an authentic place from which to stand when the inevitable push-back surfaces.

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While our focus throughout chapter 9 and 10 has been on the *individual* at work on a personal improvement project, as you well know, *collectivities* (like work teams, departments, leadership groups, whole organizations) also have immunities to change. And, as you know from chapter 4, a number of such groups have benefited significantly from creating their collective X-ray. Remember, for example, the hospital clinic that was able to dramatically reduce prescriptions for drug-seeking patients, and to improve trust and confidence between the doctors and nurses in the unit—where earlier they could do neither. You or someone in your organization may want to help a group to safely and productively create a collective four-column map of its own. The next chapter will guide you in doing just that.

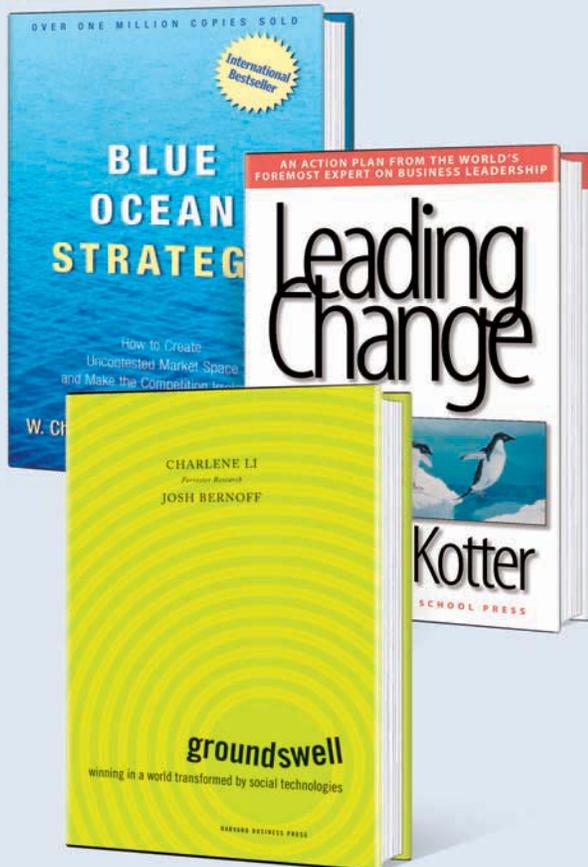
## NOTES

### CHAPTER TEN

1. We are indebted to our Harvard colleague Matt Miller for the distinction between an event-focused and a process-learning-focused approach to testing our big assumptions.
2. Our appreciation to Barbara Rapaport for these preparation suggestions.

# THE ANSWERS YOU NEED, WHEN YOU NEED THEM

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