



### Excerpt from:

*Immunity to Change*, by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, 2009, Harvard Business School Press, pages 314-316

It is worth thinking about what your organization or its culture regards as a *continuous* (versus periodic) priority. The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, we are told, is continuously being repainted. The day after its full repainting is completed, its next repainting begins. The city places a premium on continuously preserving its welcoming golden gleam. What does your leadership or organization show it wants to keep its eye on *continuously*?

It is ironic to us that even those organizations that have been influenced by the quality movement and think about “continuous improvement” of operations and systems usually do *not* think about continuously developing human capability. Since most systemic improvements are adaptive challenges, they require more than structural or operational redesign; they require transformations in talent to *sustain* the redesign. This is exactly the reason so many brilliant strategy consultations lead to little despite the client organization’s appreciation for the good advice and its leaders’ sincere intention to carry it out.

In contrast, most organizations look at the development of talent as a priority that can be met in a punctuated or periodic fashion. It is not one of the organization’s Golden Gates. We “send people off.” We create breaks from the work from time to time. We send them to the corporate university, to executive education programs, to leadership development institutes, like the bankers and the school principals. We give people sabbaticals.

In our work across public and private sectors the only real difference we see here is *how long* you can get people to take these breaks. School administrators will come to a program in the summer for two weeks. CEOs may be reluctant to come for more than a few days. But this is not a big difference. The basic model is exactly the same -- go off for a while, once in a while, get the batteries recharged with some good content, and bring back a new burst of energy to your organization. This is a model that sounds an awfully lot like another familiar work design, called *vacation*! Does it make sense to you, here at the dawn of the twenty-first century, with all we know today about developmental potential in adulthood, that our basic model for talent transformation should look, more than anything else, like our model for periodic rest and recovery?

What would your leadership or your organization look like if it were at the other end of this developmental continuum? It would pass this multipart test:

- We could come into your setting, randomly select several employees, including you perhaps, and everyone could answer the following question: What is the one most important thing you personally are working to get better at?
- Everyone, at every level, whether new to the place or the company founder, would be working on *a good problem* for personal learning. A good problem is one you are working on not so much to solve it, but for it to “solve you.” People’s answers, in other words, would name something that will require them to grow in order to accomplish it (versus some new technical skill they are seeing to acquire).
- They could tell us a way in which they continually have an opportunity to work on this growth.
- They could tell us the name of at least one other person in the organization who knows the goal and cares whether they accomplish it.
- Finally, each could tell us why it matters to them personally that they accomplish the change, how becoming different in just the way they describe would be a boon not only for the organization but for them individually.

There is no more perfect marriage of interests -- between the needs of an organization and the needs of its individual members -- than the ongoing growth of people at work. No “benefit” an organization provides its employees is a better investment than one that meets our deepest human hunger, to experience the continuing unfolding of our capacities to *see* more deeply (inwardly and outwardly) and to *act* more effectively and with greater range.

*Do the employees in your setting each have a good problem “that is working on them”?*