

The Seven Languages of Transformation

In agreement with Carol Dweck and the philosophy of Process Education, Robert Kegan and his colleagues assert that everyone can grow. But some things are more difficult to grow than other. He draws on the distinction made by Ronald Heifetz (1994, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*) between technical and adaptive challenges to show that many of the challenges adults face today are adaptive in that they ask us to adapt our level or stage of mental complexity rather than simply apply technical solutions. The misapplication of technical solutions to adaptive problems is a major source of dysfunction. In process education language, this is the distinction between learning and growing.

But why is it so difficult to grow? The problem lies in the affective domain and the seven languages of transformation constitute a methodology that uncovers the affective issues then gives us a stepwise means of overcoming them.

The methodology involves a series of shifts in the way we talk:

Personal Languages

1. From the language of complaint to the language of commitment;
2. From the language of blame to the language of personal responsibility;
3. From the language of “New Year’s Resolutions” to the language of fears and competing commitments;
4. From the language of big assumptions that hold us to the language of assumptions that we hold;

Social Languages

5. From the language of prizes and praising to the language of ongoing regard;
6. From the language of rules and policies to the language of public agreement; and
7. From the language of destructive and constructive feedback to the language of deconstructive feedback.

Step One – Generating our Complaints

What sorts of things – if they were to happen more frequently in your work setting – would you experience as being more supportive of your own ongoing growth and development at work (or in the Academy)? Jot down some thoughts below.

Before you get going on this question, a few elaborations:

1. There is no special or highly technical meaning for development here; you should feel free to think about what would be supportive to your own ongoing growth or development, however you wish to define it.
2. Don’t edit your responses through a filter of reasonableness, possibility, or likelihood. Don’t worry if what occurs to you are things that you think have no chance of happening in your environment.

3. If you find it helpful, you may also (or instead) want to consider what sorts of troubling, diminishing, or constraining things – if they were to happen less frequently – you would also find more supportive of your development.

Here are a couple of examples:

- *People would stop gossiping*
- *My supervisor would respect my workload*

Step Two – Uncovering Our Commitments

The default language in these situations generally is BMC language – bitching, moaning and complaining. But don't discount this: there is untapped potential in a complaint. We would not complain about something if we did not care about it.

What commitments or convictions do you hold that are implied in your earlier response?

Select just one, about which you feel very strongly. To help you with this, complete the following statement:

I am committed to the value or the importance of _____

Here are a couple of examples:

- *More open and direct communication at work.*
- *Securing enough resources and additional personnel support to thrive in my work.*

Regardless of the response you wrote, at least two things can be said about it:

1. It represents a commitment you do genuinely hold dear. Not something you feel you should hold dear, or one day aspire to holding dear, but genuinely hold dear right now.
2. It represents a commitment that is not, at the moment, fully or optimally realized.

What this allows us to do is to identify what it is that you care about most in the situation. To take some time to name what the most important issue or principle is at stake and identify what that complaint shows you are committed to.

Step Three – Moving from Blame to Assuming Personal Responsibility

There are always players and conditions that contribute to things being as they are. So, in your case, put a list together of all the people you see as responsible for your commitment not being fully realized. Does your own name appear? Perhaps it should. To help you out, answer this next question:

What are you doing, or not doing, that is keeping your commitment from being more fully realized?

This is not an exercise to discover it's all your fault. It is merely an exercise to discover what role you play in the situation.

Here are a couple of examples:

- *I gossip myself*
- *I agree to take on too many of the things I am asked to do, and as a result, I never have enough time to devote to what I'm really committed to do.*

Step Four – Moving from “New Year’s Resolution” Language to Uncovering Fears and Competing Commitments

When we become aware of the role we are playing in generating the situation at hand we often feel remorse. The same is true for less than healthy habits. What we tend to do next is speak the language of “new year’s resolutions:” I’m going to stop gossiping from now on – and I’ll call others on it too!” or “The next time my supervisor wants to pile on another project, I’m just going to say no!”

But we usually don’t follow through. Why is that?

The answer appears to be, because there may be bigger forces at work and if we don’t get these forces onto the table, they continue to run the show.

The fact is, when we think of fixing these things, we come up with reasons why we can’t.

Here are a couple of examples that follow from the examples above:

- *If I call them on their gossip, they will think I’m acting “holier than thou”*
- *If I say no, my supervisor may think I’m not up to my job*

These fears point to an underlying self-protective commitment that competes with the commitments you uncovered in step two.

Here are a couple of examples:

- *I am committed to being liked by my coworkers*
- *I am committed to pleasing my supervisor*

The commitments in step two and step four are in contradictory tension with one another, yet both are true and held simultaneously. As long as the second commitment is a part of the picture, no amount of altering behaviors is likely to have a lasting effect.

In business, visions are articulated, but nothing happens. Plans are created, and even beautifully published; yet they often end up sitting on a shelf somewhere. The mighty mountain heaves and gives forth a mouse.

Why does so little real change actually occur? Why do the reformers so often reproduce something that looks much like the original model?

There is no lack of answers to these questions, but the blame is usually assigned to other people or unanticipated obstacles.

The fact is, it may be nearly impossible for us to bring about any important change in a system or organization without changing ourselves. The corollary is that for every commitment we genuinely hold to bring about some important change, there is another commitment we hold that has the effect of preventing the change.

Step Five: Uncovering our Big Unconscious Assumptions

Getting down to the Big Assumptions is where this methodology comes to life. This is where you really see how your emotional operating system is programmed, how you're wired to carry yourself through life. Your Big Assumptions relate directly to your competing commitments. They answer the question: "What do you assume would happen if the thing you're trying to prevent in step four came true."

They're usually in the form of "if, then" statements:

- *If I don't engage in the gossip, then others will reject me and my life at work will be miserable*
- *If I don't say yes, my supervisor will not like me anymore and I might even get put on a performance improvement plan or even fired*

Big Assumptions reveal the lens through which we view the world. These are the ideas that have us, that dictate our approach to life and guide our choices, whether consciously or unconsciously. By creating visibility into them, we shine a light on the things that hold us back from change.

The competing commitments and big assumptions steps of the change methodology are also where it's common to feel discouraged.

It isn't always comfortable to discover the ways we undermine our own progress, but it is necessary if we want to truly break free of our limiting beliefs and achieve the goals that have been eluding us for so long.

Step Six - Actively Looking for Experiences that Cast Doubt on Our Big Assumptions

So now what?

At this point you have shed some light on the systems and structures that are obstructing progress toward your goals. It's a simple but challenging process, so you should definitely feel good about the work that you've done so far. Unfortunately, most people go in a pretty predictable direction at this point. "Ah ha! Now I see what I've been doing to block myself and I'm going to stop doing it!"

If only it were that easy...

The **REAL** next step challenges you to subdue that part of the brain that is screaming for ACTION. If you launch directly into action, you're missing the point and going back down the same road we've been on that has failed to yield the results you want.

Don't try changing any of your thinking or behavior just yet. Instead, be on the lookout for any experiences that cast some doubt on the truthfulness of your assumptions.

Begin by thinking about the biography of your Big Assumption. When was it born? How long have you lived with it? Where do you think it got its start? What early, and possibly not recently examined, foundation does it rest on? How satisfactory a foundation does this seem to you to be in the present day?

The result of such work is not that people slap their foreheads and declare their Big Assumptions entirely false. What more often happens is the sort of thing that is common in adulthood. We add qualifications to our assumptions as riders, amendments, attachments, exceptions. We say, "I still hold my Big Assumption as basically true – but under certain circumstances, with these people, under these conditions, I can suspend my Big Assumption temporarily."

Next, the task is to design one or two SMART experiments that test the veracity of your Big Assumption:

- **Safe & Modest** experiments that don't turn your whole life upside down. Just look for a SMALL change you can make that would challenge the Big Assumption.
- **Actionable** - your test should be about trying a different behavior. Something you can actually do, not just a thought or idea.
- **Research-based** - remember, this is just a Test.

The task at this point is ***not to change your entire behavior***. You simply want to act against your Big Assumption in a SMALL way and observe what happens as a result. The goal is to collect data — not to "improve" yourself.

The SMART test is about gradually building up a psychological space between ourselves and our Big Assumptions in order to move from being subject to them, to objectifying them, where we can look at them, turn them around in our hands, and consider altering them.

Here are a couple of examples:

- *Maybe I'll just bring up the subject of gossip when we're actually not gossiping*
- *Maybe I'll ask my supervisor for input on prioritizing all my projects*

This one little experiment won't result in the change you want, but it will help you become brave enough to attempt another little test, and then another. You will find that, over time, these little tests will become bolder. And ... eventually we will have mastered that Big Assumption. It won't have that big emotional hold over us anymore.

Step Seven – Moving from Prizes and Praising to Ongoing Regard

The previous steps are ones that we can take on our own, although they often work much better if we work with another person – someone we trust. By pairing up, we become “growth buddies.”

But the next steps in the methodology are bigger – they must involve the whole team or the whole organization.

Everyone wants to feel that their work is meaningful and that they are valuable. The key here is to move from giving indirect, nonspecific praise, prizes and competitive awards to providing direct, specific and behavior-focused feedback whenever it great performance happens.

Being specific means telling that person how they have impacted the lives of others or more specifically how’s it’s affected you.

Let’s compare the two approaches:

Praise and Prizes	Ongoing Regard
Creates winners and losers	Helps everyone become aware that their actions have significance
Frequently communicated indirectly – said about a person	Communicates admiration directly to the person
Usually global, not explicitly stating what the speaker values	Communicates specific information that is linked explicitly to the speaker’s values
Often characterizes the other person - evaluative	Non-evaluative – characterizes the speaker’s experiences not the person being appreciated
Non-transformational	Transformational potential for both the speaker and the person being regarded
Draws energy out of the system	Infuses energy into the system

Step Eight – From Rules and Policies to Public Commitment

Whenever behaviors happen in the workplace that are destructive and annoying, the first impulse is to create a policy to prohibit it. Alternatively, additional policies may be created to REQUIRE certain behaviors.

The problem is – if people don’t agree WITH or agree TO the policies ... in reality, they will often be ignored.

Take the gossiping issue discussed above for example.

One person taking steps not to gossip is not going to make a big difference in the culture of an organization if everyone else continues to gossip.

So, what about creating an “anti-gossiping” policy?

The fact is – anyone upholding the policy is likely to be seen a “holier-than-thou” ... just exactly what was feared in step four, above.

So what can we do?

Developing Public Agreement

To get a taste of what the language of public agreement is all about, let's consider what you would like to happen if something you do or did really bothers annoys, bothers, or angers someone else. What would you want them to do about it?

Most of us would say that we'd want them to come to us to discuss it. And certainly, we would not want them to be going around talking to everyone else about it, putting me down behind my back. Generally, there does seem to be a lot of consensus around the come-to-me-first idea.

Now, if everyone is in agreement on this, we are not only saying we want others to come to us first if they have a problem with us, but that we also agree that if someone has bothered and angered us, we too will go to the person first. That's hard!!

If we are honest with ourselves ... this probably won't happen. We're MUCH more likely to go to a friend and say, "Here's what Rick did, and I'm pissed off about it. What do you think?" And when we are talking with a friend about our upsets is easy for the friend to take our side and for the conversation to end up being less about a reality check and more about putting the other person down.

But what if we had the following conversation as a team or organization?

1. What's one thing we could do in this organization to make it a happier workplace for everyone?
2. We all dislike having others talking about us behind our back – let's work on an agreement that will make this much less likely to happen
3. First – do we all agree to do our best not to talk behind each other's backs? (Everyone should agree specifically verbally, looking at each other in the eye. Even better, sign and pledge in front of each other)
4. Second – and this is the hard part – we need to create an agreement about how to act as the person who could be RECEIVING a behind-the-back complaint. It is really HARD to call someone out for bad behavior! The best way to handle this is to publicly agree to a script for both the complainer and the behind-the-back recipient of the complaint. It could go something like this:
 - Recipient - Actually, I have to tell you that I'm not really comfortable having this kind of conversation with you. Remember that agreement we made a few months back? I don't really want to get drawn into this. You and I are friends. That's a given.
 - Complainer – Oh my goodness, you're right. I messed up. I'll go and talk to ____ directly.
5. These conversations are not easy, and they will need practice. It is often a good practice to role play two things:
 - Going directly to another to make a complaint
 - Managing a behind-the-back complaint conversation.

What we are pointing out here is that the person who may have the toughest job keeping to the agreement is the friend to whom the problem has been presented. It is an uncomfortable position to be in no matter how you look at it. It also takes some courage to not get drawn into the conversation and refer back to the agreement, reminding the person that s/he had a hand in its creation.

The two principal outcomes of a language of public agreement are:

1. The experience of organizational integrity
2. The use of violations as a resource for surfacing further inner contradictions for our learning.

The life of an agreement merely begins with its original ratification; it's real strength and vitality are demonstrated by use in response to the inevitable violations that its presence creates. In the example of the conversation given above, it was the initiator of the conversation who came to understand that he would not gain the approval of a colleague, thereby reinforcing the agreement and truly making the agreement a Public Agreement. When such violations occur, they should not be heard in the courtroom, but in the classrooms of life, just as it did in the example. In that example, also note that there was no admonishing going on, or criticism for the violation. It was merely pointed out.

Step Eight: Managing Conflict through Deconstructive Feedback

We all know the value of constructive feedback, even though most organizations fail to deliver it well. Destructive feedback continues to be the norm.

Destructive Feedback	Construction Feedback
Vague: Offers no specifics, but makes a blanket condemnation Blaming: Attributes the problem to personality or an unchangeable trait Threatening: Makes the person feel attacked Pessimistic: Offers no hope for change or suggestion for doing better	Specific: The manager says exactly what the person is doing wrong Supportive: Gives the sense that the criticism is meant to help the person do better Problem-solving: Suggests a solution or offers help to find a way to improve a: Gives the message soon after the problem occurs

But constructive feedback is not enough. Many a relationship has been damaged and a work setting poisoned by perfectly delivered constructive feedback!

Constructive feedback rests on the assumption that the provider—say, a supervisor—has the only correct view of the situation. The supervisor is privileged to:

- Say what the employee is doing wrong;
- Offer help;
- Suggest a solution, and;
- Give a timely message.

The recipient's role is to listen, accept, and gratefully receive.

This assumption is counterproductive to learning, because the provider of the feedback has little, if any, reason to determine if they are in fact right. If we take a deconstructive approach, we come to the conversation with the same feedback in mind but knowing that we may not be totally right or may even

be wrong. That turns the endeavor from finding clever ways to help the person see it our way to exploring what's been happening and whether our criticism is warranted.

The language of deconstructive feedback is not about making conflict or criticism disappear. It is designed to engender learning and growth on the part of everyone.

When we take a deconstructive approach, we come to the conversation with the following beliefs and understandings:

1. There is probable merit to my perspective.
2. My perspective may not be accurate.
3. There is some coherence, if not merit, to the other person's perspective.
4. There may be more than one legitimate interpretation.
5. The other person's viewpoint is important information to my assessing whether I am right or identifying what merit there is to my view.
6. Our conflict may be the result of the separate commitments each of hold.
7. Both of us have something to learn from the conversation.
8. We need to have two-way conversations to learn from each other.
9. If contradictions can be a source of our learning, then we can come to engage not only internal contradictions as a source of learning but interpersonal contradictions (i.e. "conflict") as well.
10. The goal of our conversation is for each of us to learn more about ourselves and the other as meaning makers.