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Dear Reader,

Are you easily put off by people who complain? Have you ever shared that feeling with a friend or a colleague, expressing how difficult it is for you to be patient and deal with that employee, that peer or that relative who keeps complaining? Did you realize that by doing so, you are a complainer yourself?

In this month's issue we invite you to look at how a complaint can, in fact, be a helpful tool for gaining insight into one's deeply held assumptions. Special thanks go to my friend and colleague Rafael Echeverria, who put in my hand the valuable book of Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, *How the way we talk can change the way we work*^[1], which inspired me to build upon their thinking and adapt this article.

Enjoy the journey!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Know Thyself"

Inscription on the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, Greece

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The Game We Play Without Knowing

By Isabel Rimanoczy

I have asked myself many times what makes blaming and complaining such an easy choice when we face difficulties or situations that don't go as expected. I had believed that it was a natural reaction to

frustration resulting from things being out of our control. To compensate for that lack of control, we complain, and express our anger, and discomfort. While not always possible, we often try to find someone/something to blame! To allocate fault and responsibility to others is a quick way to organize the information, to create a cause-effect connection, to get rid of uncertainty and to explain the surprise or disappointment.

This serves two additional purposes: to blame others is a tacit statement that we would certainly do it better – if only we were in control – and at the same time it is relaxing to be a victim! It may sound strange to equate victimization with relaxation, but, to me, being a victim is similar to when we were carried around before we learned how to walk. What an idyllic state: we had no options to ponder, no decisions to make, we didn't have to face risks. We just let ourselves be taken where, when and how others considered appropriate. Naturally, pretty soon we DID have some ideas of what would be best for us, be it food or company, so we began to complain to be heard – and to get it. Continuing in this line of reasoning, we could see the cry as the first attempt to get some control of our lives. Not being able to do things by ourselves, we got others to do them for us. I have met many people who kept this early pattern alive finding that yelling or weeping are ways to get what they want. And, as long as there is someone out there ready to respond to that style of request, it works.

Many of us however have over time learned other options to get what we want: getting it ourselves, making requests, giving good reasons, advocating, giving instructions, pressuring, blackmailing, looking for agreements, etc.

The problem with complaining is that we imagine the complaint will have the magic power of making things happen. From the magic to the absolute powerlessness, there is just a small step. But as small as the step is, just as big is the price tag: feeling victim, without control or influence of what happens to us, without power to make things change is a depressing scenario, dispiriting, that spreads hopelessness and provokes social avoidance: people have enough with their own dilemmas, they don't need more and get out of your way.

How do we get out of it?

Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey developed an interesting approach and exit strategy out of blame and complaint. They encourage us to find the passion within the complaint. The assumption is that when we complain about something, we do it because we have an internal picture of what the reality should be, and when it is different from that picture, we air our disagreement. The stronger we feel about something, the louder the complaint. What the authors suggest is all that energy put into a complaint needs to be used. As with the martial arts, where the strength of the enemy is used against himself, the purpose is to utilize the force of the positive images we hold internally. So they ask what values or convictions lie behind the complaints. To give an example: if you complain about the lack of time you have to spend with your family, what are the values that are behind this complaint? They could be "Work/Life balance is important", "to spend time with my kids has a priceless impact on their lives", "to maintain a healthy relationship I need to invest myself in it", etc.

According to the authors, the values held are very deeply rooted, and are most important to the person making the complaint. They represent personal commitments, which are not being fully realized. To state those values and commitments is a key step in the process of moving from the complaint and beginning to focus not on what disturbs us, but on what we strive for, and stand for.

This strikes me as a new way to think of a complaint. When we are not complaining ourselves, we view

other people's complaints as a disturbing behavior that needs to be eliminated or avoided. The authors' suggestion is just the opposite, and it is to pay close attention to the complaint to uncover the precious commitments and values on which it is grounded. This is key information.

The next step is to find out what we are ourselves doing (or not doing) that is keeping the commitments from being realized. This doesn't mean that we have total responsibility for everything that happens to us. But it implies that in whatever situation we get into, there is *something* that we have done (or missed doing) that influenced the results.

Going back to the example: If my complaint is about lack of time to spend with my partner, my commitment and held value is that time together helps maintain healthy relationships. When I examine what I did – or didn't do – that prevented me from achieving that commitment, the answer could be that I take on too many tasks, that I cannot say 'No', that I have a difficult time setting priorities, etc.

Just uncovering these contributions is not going to change them – but it makes us aware of our part in shaping our reality. It gives us back control of our lives, it shows that we are sitting in the driver's seat, and while we cannot change the landscape, we can drive off the roads or stay on them. It shows that we have more choices than we were aware of, and that actually we were already making choices.

Another benefit of reflecting on our contributions is that we get a new opportunity to review our choice. Realizing that I am taking on more than I can handle, that I don't like to say "No", I am given another chance to decide whether that is what I want to do, or whether I decide that the consequences are not worth it.

Kegan and Lahey recommend taking another step and exploring deeper what are the reasons for acting or not acting. As in everything we do, we always have some good reasons --conscious or unconscious. We are not going to implement any lasting change until we uncover the major reasons behind our actions.

So the question that will help in this exploration is "What are my good reasons for acting this way? Continuing with our examples, my answers could be: "I am afraid to say 'No' because they may give the job to another person and find out he does it better than me", or "I accept all those tasks because I want to be liked", or "If I would spend more time at home I would realize that it is a bit boring and not intellectually challenging", "If I would be home earlier I would realize that my partner doesn't really have time for me either", etc.

According to the authors, this discovery helps us identify the "competing commitments", in other words, the commitments that we are holding, for different reasons, that counter the first stated ones, and seem to be stronger or more powerful, as we act upon those.

The competing commitments in our examples would look like this^[2]:

Complaint	Commitment	Contributions	Competing Commitment
I have no time for my family.	Time spent with family is important. I am committed to this value.	I am taking on more work than I can handle. I cannot say "No".	I am committed to demonstrate I'm the best person to do those jobs.

		I don't set priorities.	I am committed to be seen as a nice, available person.
			I am committed to avoid disruptions in my relationship with my partner.

These discoveries are not saying that our stated values and commitments are false. What happens is that we just hold competing reasons inside ourselves, and in each case our behavior is the result of acting on the stronger reasons.

The authors highlight how the commitments have a whole different meaning when seen in the light of the third and the fourth column of the above graph. It shows us our own "immune system", which prevents us from changing what we assume want to change.

The Big Assumption

The strength of the fourth column reasons originates in beliefs that we take as truths, but that actually are just assumptions. I assume that if I speak up I will be seen as a troublemaker and people will get out of my way, and I will be alone and socially isolated. If I spend more time with my family I will get so bored that I will want a divorce, get a lover, disrupting my family's life, and my friends and relatives will blame me for having broken up a solid marriage.

Or I will discover that I am not a priority in my partner's daily schedule, and this will cause us to make demands on one another, blame each other, get into arguments and ultimately tear the family apart. All this would make my life miserable...it would be the end.

Do these reflections sound exaggerated? Well, the way our assumptions operate, is that they have BIG consequences, always dramatic. That is where they get their strength. It's never about a little problem – the effects, threats, and dangers are huge, and impossible to handle. Avoidance is the only option.

The authors invite us to an exercise of uncovering what they call "the Big Assumption", the foundation of our "competing commitments". As in the example, they are never small.

The "Big Assumptions" have several characteristics:

- They are difficult to state out loud: they sound unrealistic, exaggerated even for ourselves when we have to state them.
- We know they are true for us, but at the same time we notice they sound a bit strange.
- They are based on little evidence, mostly on outdated bits and pieces of experiences, and many of them originated years ago during our childhood.

The question to get to our Big Assumptions is: How would I feel? What would happen to me? The Big Assumptions may end up true, but until we uncover them, state them, review them – we have no chance to make that conclusion.

And now what?

After this journey of diving into the depths of our unconscious reasons that define our behaviors, what happens next? What is the purpose of going one step further, uncovering the competing commitments and even the "Big Assumptions" that condition our behavior?

As classical psychology indicates, the very act of getting in touch with our unconscious motives, the simple expansion of awareness is already a major step into gaining control of our behaviors – which create our destinies. We go from being held by assumptions to holding them.

Kegan and Lahey recommend a four step process after uncovering the Big Assumption.

1. Observe the Big Assumption

Don't make any changes – just be alert and observe what happens as a consequence of holding as true the Big Assumption. Keep track of how it impacts different moments of your life. The surprise is that it probably will appear impacting areas where we didn't expect it to influence.

2. Look for experiences that challenge the Big Assumptions

It's still not the time to make any changes. Now act actively looking for information or events that question the validity of the assumption.

3. Explore the origins

Where did our Big Assumption originate? When was it born? How did it start? How solid is that foundation today?

4. Run a safe and modest test

Find a safe, small situation, to test what would happen if your Big Assumption were not true.

If the small test shows that nothing dramatic happened, it may not mean that the old, Big Assumption was false, that it expired or has to be thrown away. It may simply mean that "under certain circumstances" it is not true. This is enough for a start. We will have learned to be observant, alert, to what is conditioning our reactions without us being aware. We will have gained control, power, and expanded our understanding of ourselves. As Walt Whitman said: "I contradict myself. I contain multitudes."^[1]

^[1] Kegan, Robert and Lahey, Lisa L. *How the way we talk can change the way we work*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2001.

^[2] This four column graph is adapted from the graph proposed by Kegan and Lahey, who don't include a special column for the Complaints and give them slightly different names. I thought however that the complaint is a very powerful and real place to start, and came up with a wording of the questions and the headings of the columns that seemed more clear to me.



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