IMMUNITY TO CHANGE

HOW TO OVERCOME IT AND UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL IN YOURSELF AND YOUR ORGANIZATION

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LEADERSHIP FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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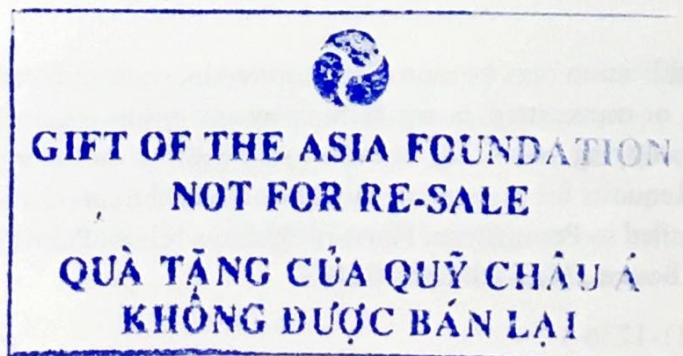Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss,
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has literally taken us our whole professional lives to write. Advance reviewers say you will find here an entirely novel but thoroughly "road-tested" approach to bringing about significant improvements in individuals and groups in the workplace.

Well, it's true that our road is well paved: The ideas and practices you will learn about here have been put to good use by a national railway in Europe, an international financial services company, one of America's most admired technology companies, the leadership of a statewide child welfare agency, superintendents and their principals in several U.S. school districts, senior partners in the world's leading international strategy consulting firm, and the fastest-growing labor union in America.

But it has also been a winding road, and to tell the truth, we didn't set out originally to work on the problem we are now getting credit for solving—how to close the gap between what people genuinely *intend* to do and what they are actually *able* to bring about. Twenty-five years ago we would have been of little use to these organizations. Though we knew then we were on a trail worth a lifetime of exploration, we had no idea or plan that it would bring us to leaders and their teams in public and private sectors in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

We began as academic psychologists researching the development of mindsets and mental complexity in adulthood. With one of us (Kegan) taking the lead in the development of a new theory, and the other (Lahey) taking the lead in developing the research method and assessment procedures to test and refine it, we proceeded, in the 1980s, to uncover something that has been fascinating us—and fellow researchers and practitioners all over the world—ever since.

We discovered the possibility of life after adolescence! Despite the popular—and, at that time, even scientific—belief that our minds, like our bodies, don't get any "taller" after adolescence, we found that some of our adult research subjects were able to evolve whole patterns of increasingly complex and agile ways of apprehending the world.

While few attained the most advanced growth patterns our investigations revealed, it was apparent through longitudinal research (carefully assessing and reassessing the same people over many years) that when people *did* evolve it was always in the same sequence. Each new mental plateau gradually overcame the systematic limitations of the prior one. Further research eventually demonstrated that each qualitative leap forward enhances not only people's ability to *see* (into themselves and their world) but to *act* more effectively as well. (You will learn more about these mental plateaus in the first chapter of this book.)

But we also saw that many people did not evolve a whole new mental system after adolescence, and if they moved at all it wasn't far. Since we have always been educators at heart (and have spent our university lives not in a school of management, but a school of education), we wanted to know whether one could do anything to support these shifts in the expansiveness and complexity of our mindsets. Were such advances just a matter of fate and random variation, completely out of our hands? Or could people actually be helped to grow? This took us further down our road, throughout the 1990s, and led us to a second discovery.

We had been studying the evolution of mental development from the outside, as it were, seeking to describe the structure of each way of meaning-making, why it created the reality it did, what changed in a structure when it evolved. But now, without our quite realizing it, we were finding our way into the inner dynamics, in particular a sort of "master motive" that keeps us on our current plateau. We uncovered a phenomenon we call "the immunity to change," a heretofore hidden dynamic that actively (and brilliantly) prevents us from changing because of its devotion to preserving our existing way of making meaning.

We first introduced readers to the concept of immunity to change in our 2001 book, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We*

Work. There we presented a deceptively simple process—distilled and refined over many years—by which people can uncover the hidden motivations and beliefs that prevent them from making the very changes they know they should make and very much want to make (whether the goal is "being more courageous in my communications" or "losing weight").

The reception to that book has been enormously gratifying, as it has been to watch what happens when we personally guide people (now several thousand a year) through this process (as we will guide you, if you wish, in chapter 9). They repeatedly say things like, "I never saw that coming!" and "I got more out of that in three hours than three years in therapy!" But the truth is, what people are raving about is the power and clarity of a new *insight* they are having (and the speed with which they get to it). And we all know there is a big gulf between insight and the ability to act upon it.

We knew we had developed something powerful and practical, but we were still a long way from satisfying the reader's true goal (not just greater insight into *why* one person can't delegate or another can't deliver upward feedback, despite his firm resolve, but the ability to actually *do it*)—and a long way from satisfying our own (being able not just to see the internal mechanisms that perpetuate a current mindset, but also to help someone transcend its limitations).

Shortly after *How the Way We Talk* was published we went before a group of chief knowledge officers and human resource heads from *Fortune* 500 companies and large international NGOs. They belonged to a consortium that previewed promising new ideas and practices still in the development stage, and gave the "inventors" the frankest possible assessment of their value. We didn't talk to them about what we had found or invented; we simply asked them to try the process themselves for a few hours under our guidance.

When they were done they all said the same thing, but their reaction was best summed up by one CKO: "I've got good news and bad news. First, the good news: I've spent twenty years in the field of capability-building and performance improvement, and what you have just done with us is the single most powerful piece of learning technology I've ever seen. It's like you've conceived the jet engine in the era of the prop plane, and you've demonstrated here you can get