

# Coaching Ethics and Immunity to Change: A Response to Kjellström

David Zeitler<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The *Immunity to Change* coaching process has risen in popularity since creators Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey published their second book using this method, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock the Potential for Yourself and Your Organization* (2009). Sofia Kjellström (2009) recently published an article taking a critical perspective on the ethics of using ITC in educational and vocational contexts. I argue herein that when used properly, the ITC process avoids most of the criticisms that Kjellström brings to bear on this issue. Furthermore, it is argued that private life and public life (Freud's "love and work") are already inextricably intertwined, and methods like ITC give employers and employees the tools needed to navigate what are often highly charged issues, that we might increase our quality of life and increase our efficiency. Finally, the article summarizes the relationship between Subject/Object Theory and ITC, while also addressing the issue of developmental transformations in the coaching process.

**Keywords:** Business consulting, coaching ethics, coaching methods, developmental level, executive coaching, higher education, Immunity to Change.

## Introduction

In the outstanding "rockumentary" *Pink Floyd: Live at Pompeii*, director Adrian Maben asks front-man Roger Waters if the dramatic increase in their use of synthesizers is bad for the future of music. Does this introduction of new technology into music mean that it is somehow easier to make...is the equipment, in fact, making the music? Maben captured the Floyd at their finest moment – recording their seminal *Dark Side of the Moon* at Abbey Road studios. In addition to some of the most sublime rock music ever recorded, the album includes an early version of the kind of music that would explode two decades later, "electronica." Not only, then, is *Dark Side of the Moon* one of the greatest rock albums of all time, it also portended a new musical genre. It was while recording one of these "synthesizer" songs (*On the Run*) that Maben asked his question. Surrounded by his technical equipment, the ever sharp Waters wastes no time in responding: "It's like saying give a man a Les Paul guitar and he becomes Eric Clapton, and of course *that's not true*; give a man an amplifier and a synthesizer and he doesn't become... *whoever*; he doesn't become *us*."

---

<sup>1</sup> **David Zeitler** is an Assistant Professor in the Integral Theory Program and Integral Psychology Program at John F. Kennedy University. He is co-author with Elliott Ingersoll of the book *Integral Psychotherapy: Inside-Out/Outside-In*. David spent two years as a psychotherapist in locked psychiatric wards with dual diagnosis populations. He has served as an associate director of Integral Institute's Integral Psychotherapy Center, where he helped to develop and present seminars on Integral Psychotherapy and Integral Theory. David holds a black-belt in traditional Kung-Fu and teaches Chen style Tai-Chi.

Email: davidzeitler@integraldynamix.com



The *Immunity to Change Program* (ITC) is like the synthesizers and band in the above example. ITC is both a *structure* and a *process*. This dynamic is true of any musical instrument and individual (or group) using those instruments. Alone, the instrument (structure) may look good, but it is only when played (process) that you can make music. Synthesizers, however, are not *one* instrument but an electronic representation of *many instruments*. With them, musicians have enjoyed a new freedom to isolate or merge different sounds like never before. A new world opened up for them. And this is what the ITC processes provide for coaches and consultants: the opportunity to use several instruments in order to assist people who would like nothing more than to make positive changes in their lives (or, their organizations). But not everyone can be Eric Clapton.

Sofia Kjellström (2009) makes a few good points in her critique of ITC, particularly in terms of *how* ITC *can* be used. She appreciates the power of ITC, and has specific criticisms regarding both the structure and processes of ITC. I will be addressing four general areas in Kjellström's paper: her focus on behavior; her conclusions on the ethics of *generalizing* the value of ITC (between psychological capacities and between public and private life); *methodology* issues; and her use of *developmental dynamics*.

Before diving into my analysis, I would like to be as transparent as possible. I have been studying and teaching developmental psychology for almost fifteen years, and my interests and focus have always been on Subject/Object Theory. Additionally, I am currently in training to be certified as an *Immunity to Change* coach. I have been using the ITC mapping process since 2004, generally during workshops that are part of an overall seminar. My motivations for writing this response paper stem mainly from the fact that I have witnessed many trainers and teachers use the ITC method with wildly varying levels of success. I respond here to Kjellström's article because I want to begin a conversation about application-value that I hope will extend beyond ITC and into the larger coaching industry. We stand at a precipice – in a few years, all forms of “coaching” will likely be subject to licensing and other forms of oversight. Those of us who enter into the dialogue now will be much better poised to adapt to the coming changes. With any application, there is the value of the “expert” (here, the coach), the value of the “tool” (here, ITC), and the value of the “process” (here, coach-coachee relationship). As per Integral Theory, all three must rate highly in order for any effort to be considered valuable (Wilber, Patten, Leonard & Morelli, 2008). Here is a summary of my response to Kjellström, which I will unpack below. Kjellström's focus on behavior as both the *source and aim* of ITC is fundamentally flawed. Behavior is one of several components important to the work. Kjellström also makes several arguments about the plausibility of generalizing the value of ITC to business contexts based on her experience in using it as a course assignment; this comparison is not easily supportable. Additionally, her methodology was flawed (to her credit, she acknowledges this may be the reason that she received mixed results). Finally, there are specific dynamics of development, and dynamics of ITC, that Kjellström does not take into account which, when taken into consideration, address most of her criticisms of ITC (Kjellström, 2009, p. 122-127).

Kjellström organizes her discussion into the following three general areas:

- The role and competence of the facilitator.
- The expectations and capabilities of the participants.
- The mental demands and assumptions of the process.

(Kjellström, 2009, p. 116)

The following is my summary of her main points, which I will address herein:

- ITC *requires a level (Self-Authoring-Mind)* that is beyond most people.
- ITC assumes that *change is always beneficial* to all people.
- ITC may be *inappropriate for use at the graduate level* (or equivalent).
- Participants should be able to *enter and leave the process at-will*, without fear of reprisal.
- Consent must be *continually renewed* throughout the program.
- Complexities of mind are *not used to screen* for optimal value to participants.
- *Critical evaluation of transformational exercises* is essential for ethical issues.
- A more ethical approach is to allow the *determination* to change to arise from individuals.

(Kjellström, 2009, pp. 129-130)

## On Behavior

In their books *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (2000) and *Immunity to Change* (2009), Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey make it clear that merely addressing *behavior* is rarely the most optimal or sustainable way to assist someone (or an organization) looking to make lasting change. In fact, they make every effort to point out that “...if they can make the changes they need by ...creating some plan to extinguish certain behaviors and amplifying others...then by all means that is exactly what they should do” (2009, p. 38). Throughout these books, they reinforce the fact that addressing *behavioral* change is complementary to their intention, which is to address the underlying *immunities* that people enact. Behaviors are *symptoms* of these underlying immunities. These countervailing behaviors are identified by the individuals (and teams) themselves, and are not exogenously identified.<sup>2</sup>

At several points in her critique, Kjellström incorrectly identifies *behavioral* change as the major goal of the ITC method: “The [ITC] methodology addresses two questions: why changing human behavior is so difficult, and why achieving desired behavioral changes does not happen as often as we would prefer” (2009, p. 117); “The ITC process has two parts...the second [of which] is a series of exercises designed to create change in behaviors” (2009, p. 118). There are also places where Kjellström juxtaposes behaviors and values as components of ITC, but values are incorrectly characterized as the motivation for the true goal of behavioral change: “[Competing commitments] serve as a new explanation of why certain behaviors are not performed, since persons hold values that are in contradiction to and in competition with the other” (2009, p. 119). ITC is indeed concerned with behavioral change; but it is *equally* concerned with *qualitative* change in one’s interior dimensions. The fact that exterior behaviors *also* change is important, but this view alone misrepresents the full spectrum of value offered by ITC.

---

<sup>2</sup> I follow Kjellström here in her use of the biology terms *exogenous* as an external influence, and *endogenous* as something that arises from within the individual.

## On Methodology Issues

One of the difficulties I had with Kjellström's critique was that there are many places where the sophisticated and nuanced presentation of ITC as I have come to know it is reduced to its surface features. This can be seen in her highlighting of behavioral change without the necessary addition of the interior changes that parallel these behavioral changes; it can also be seen in the fact that Kjellström occupied a dual-role (she was the leader of the class, as well as the coach for the class; this is a problem, because leaders are encouraged to do the process alongside of their employees, or in this case, students); finally, Kjellström never discusses the iterative nature of the ITC process (i.e., this is not a linear process; it is more like a chaotic-attractor, where each iteration of a map or test helps clarify one's big assumption, the essence of ITC work). I can still make out the surface features in her critique, but the iterative nature (the deeper structures *within* the structure, and the processes *within* the process) do not appear to have been taken into account.

This tendency to approach ITC using only its surface features is a thread that runs through Kjellström's method and critique. Additionally, she leaves out some important changes made to the ITC processes between 2000 and 2009, despite a cursory recognition that "...there are substantial elaborations" and additional items "...to support and extend the process" (2009, p. 119). In fact, beyond the original two structures/processes (a Map, and running a test), there are *five* additional structures/processes (listed below in bold), and several *iterations* of each of the seven main components, not including any new Maps that may arise (or if the client is interested in pursuing them):

1. Immunity to Change Map (an X-ray of one's psychological immune system)
2. Personal & Professional Surveys (a "720 degree" approach to relevant feedback; Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 65)
3. Immunity Map Biographies (life-history structured around the Immunity Map)
4. Continuum of Progress (a "visionary statement" of desired goals for thoughts, feelings, & behaviors)
5. Self-Observation (a process of moment-to-moment noticing, structured on the Immunity Map)
6. Running Tests (safe, modest, actionable (i.e., near-future), objective-research-stance tests)
7. Consolidating the Learning (the integration of unconscious "release" with "new assumptions")  
(Kegan & Lahey, 2009)

In other words, the ITC process as it now stands is a far more thorough and integrative procedure. Like the synthesizer Pink Floyd used to make their music, there are many, simultaneously moving parts. On the surface the procedure is linear; but in practice, like many things in life, it is anything but linear. We must allow ourselves to meet reality where it is, and not where our maps *indicate* it should be. Kjellström does not mention this crucial distinction, a theme woven throughout the ITC literature.

There are several methodological issues that I have with Kjellström's research. For starters, she believes that the first step in the ITC process is to "...*uncover* the commitments to change"

(my emphasis; 2009, p. 118). This is not a correct characterization of ITC. The first step in the process has always been to gradually step-back from the things that *we say we want*, so that we can *look at them*.<sup>3</sup> This step is similar to the kind of thing that individuals do when creating a five year plan, or when business organizations create a *SWOT* template (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). This process, as a “natural” occurrence, may or may not involve the “reality-testing” needed for “uncovering,” as Kjellström puts it. What *is* something that requires “uncovering” are the assumptions behind the ways that we stifle our own achievement (more on this important distinction later).

Kjellström does not explain the “modifications” (2009, p. 120) that she made to the ITC process, nor what she specifically means when she critiques some of her students’ “barely acceptable” ITC maps (p. 121). She does, however, give us several clues as to what some of these modifications were; this includes requiring that students share their experiences with one another (p. 121); having students create their own tests (p. 121); requiring that students include early childhood experiences when generating their biography (p. 121); and making the “admission of vulnerability” (p. 121) necessarily a part of ITC. Kjellström also used two vastly different pedagogical formats for delivering ITC, an online version and a campus version. Finally, the ITC process was obligatory. Each of the above methodological issues bears directly upon the level of success that one is likely to achieve when delivering this content, as I will explain below.

Kjellström admits that as the facilitator, the following issues “may have” (2009, p. 122) affected her research: reasons/intentions for ITC use were withheld; success/failure not held as natural results of the process; hopes/benefits for results not shared; the outcomes were grade dependent (rather than goal success). (p. 121)

Kjellström makes cursory acknowledgment that a key issue of participant control over *how much they share* is indeed a part of the ITC format, yet does not take this into account in her methods or analysis of her own results. In fact, she mentions this “requirement” to share as a reason why she ceased to make ITC processes a course requirement. My response to this is twofold: 1) Kegan and Lahey are clear that individual participant sharing should properly be a voluntary activity (though this can be a complex issue when used in a business context; more on that point below); 2) depending upon the type of graduate class, the ITC process may not be ideal for learning *about* ITC or Subject/Object Theory.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> In an excellent yet sadly obscure article, Robert Kegan and Gil Noam speak specifically to this issue of “uncovering” vs. “developing.” They explicitly state that there is an important difference between uncovering to reveal something that is present yet inaccessible, and the “gradually corrected forms of self-other confusion” (1989, p. 422). This is the essence of moving subject to object, a differentiation that allows for the interior (psychological) and exterior (behavioral) change that only together can be called “adaptive.”

<sup>4</sup> For example, a group-process course or effective-communications course may be appropriate, but a course on theory may be inappropriate; however, because Kjellström describes only the students’ programs and not the courses in use, there is no way to determine whether this was a skillful application of ITC.

In fact, ITC advises users that sharing is voluntary. The advice is to work in groups of two and in small groups thereafter, where sharing is always voluntary (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, pp. 65-67). This has been part of their program, quite literally, from the beginning of their first ITC publication:

Ground Rule for you as Speaker: How much or how little you want to let your partner (or partners) in on during these reflections is continuously *up to you and you alone*. This includes, should you need to elect it, the perfectly acceptable and respectable choice to remain completely silent throughout, keeping all your thoughts to yourself. (Kegan & Lahey, 2000, p. 14, emphasis in original)

Kjellström not only made the ITC process a required assignment, she also required sharing (on campus) and built “sharing” into the fabric of the online course (their experiences were written for all to see). Several students were understandably against this, and refused to share. There are other “ground rules” as well, such as avoiding any *positional power difference* between partners, and the crucial element of leaders doing the ITC work right alongside their employees/students (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, pp. 80-81). Kjellström is asking of her students that they share with her despite her power differential, and it is at best unclear if she did or did not engage in the process alongside her students. These are additional methodological issues that must be taken into consideration when looking at her results.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, Kjellström had students creating their own tests for the big assumptions that they hold. This is something that is to be done in conjunction with a coach or, in the case of a course assignment, their professor. It was only *after* the students’ test results began to reveal how little the tests engaged their assumptions or fears that Kjellström questioned the validity of the process. Yet, changing the “column two” *behaviors*, the “test” that many of her students ended up doing, is not a valid test in ITC. The tests must be designed to increase the participants’ awareness and attention of their big assumption – to begin to take it as object, that the person can no longer “be had” by it (Kegan, 1994, p. 32).

It seems to me that Kjellström is criticizing her own version of *Immunity to Change*, and not the total offering of Kegan & Lahey.

## On Generalizing the Value of Immunity to Change

Kjellström laments the fact that she could find no outcome studies on ITC. This is inaccurate, as there have been three books, and several articles and book chapters, all of which have (or are) thorough case studies on the outcomes of ITC (Kegan & Lahey, 2000; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Bowe, et. al., 2003; Wagner, et. al., 2005; Helsing, et. al., 2008; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Kjellström cites the very references I have just listed before mentioning the lack of outcome studies. Yet Kegan & Lahey have always maintained that a successful outcome is when individuals (or organizations) are *better able to meet their own stated goals*. That is the benchmark by which success is determined, not factors of developmental complexity, though the two are often related (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, pp. 80-84, 87-124). The reason that the successful

---

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Deb Helsing for these helpful perspectives on power and process.

attainment of goals and developmental complexity are so often related is because of the “balance” between public and private life. Most people living in a country that has the infrastructure and economy to support a middle-class must contend with leaders that will often place them *in over their heads* (Kegan, 1994).

Forcing change is not the goal of ITC; nor is alleviating the anxiety and depression that results from the arrested development that can happen when consistently being *in over one’s head*. The goal of ITC is to *meet people and organizations where they are right now*, developmentally or otherwise. This idea of meeting people where they are in terms of their development, while providing the supports and challenges necessary for continued growth, is best captured in Kegan’s notion of bridge-building (1994, pp. 42-45; 278-279). There, Kegan teases apart the nuanced orientation that is required of parents, educators, and leaders interested in development. According to decades of research, many of us are being asked to construct the world in a way that is beyond our capacity. There exists a large gap between the claims being placed on us, and our capacity to meet those claims; ITC effectively addresses the suffering that occurs when we are in over our heads. (Kegan, 1994, pp. 42-45; 278-279)

A key issue in Kjellström’s critique has to do with the question of responsibility for those in power, be they senior executives or professors. How much responsibility is on the shoulders of the individual, and how much is on the organization, with respect to the communication of trust and safety in the disclosure of information (particularly information that might jeopardize their employment or their grade)? This is indeed an important issue. Kjellström asks a question that is imperative for all coaches and facilitators: “...do teachers [or coaches and consultants] have sufficient psychological training to support the students [or clients] adequately?” (2009, p. 123).

Steven Berglas asks the same question in his article, *The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching*. He surmises that the single worst thing that coaches and consultants do is to *see outward behavior as reflective of inward change*. As I have already shown, when used correctly ITC is a hedge against this danger. This stems from its foundations in Subject/Object Theory. The ITC process is exquisitely designed to help people look at the assumptions that they once unknowingly used to look at the world. In other words, the big-assumptions that are revealed during the process are a small part of an overall system of mind. We live in and through these systems of mind, and they inform our meaning-making. Each level of mind represents a more complex and nuanced capacity to distinguish ourselves from the world around us. In the ITC process, an excellent testing phase would see the coach skillfully assisting someone as they *safely distinguished themselves from their assumptions*.

**Table 1. Levels of Development in *Immunity to Change***  
(adapted from Kegan & Lahey, 2009)

Stage	System of Mind
Stage 5	Self-Transforming Mind
Stage 4	Self-Authoring Mind

---

Stage 3	Socialized Mind
---------	-----------------

---

Stage 2	Instrumental Mind
---------	-------------------

---

Which brings me back to how ITC, when done properly, is a hedge against the danger of confusing behavior alone for interior transformation. This is particularly important when considering the shift from *Socialized-Mind* to *Self-Authoring-Mind*. Kegan has always maintained that individuals who construct their world through the lens of social-norms, who locate principles and values outside of themselves as the measure of meaning, are prone to alter behavior when in the presence of a leader. Furthermore, in the absence of such leadership, they can have a difficult time maintaining the meanings behind those behaviors. Berglas' argument is that any coaching program that focuses on exogenous sources of meaning will be neither optimal nor sustainable. (2002, p. 90)

ITC, by grounding the process in someone's professional or personal goals, denies attempts to construct meaning outside of oneself without neglecting the support that the person needs. In other words, ITC avoids the two main pitfalls that Kjellström and Berglas raise of working with people who construct reality according to the *Socialized-Mind*. It *meets* clients where they are, and it *engenders* the construction of meanings at the person's "leading edge of development" (Wilber, 2000a, p. 52, 158). This is also one of the reasons why Kegan & Lahey always recommend that every person in a group engage in their own ITC process before engaging it as a group. It is clear that coaches and consultants who use psychologically structured processes like ITC should fare better than those who do not. What I mean by this is that coaches who do not attend to or otherwise circumvent the actions of those who might manipulate them (or simply not fully engage them) will be spending energy without achieving desired results. This is another area where I am in general agreement with Kjellström. Berglas also comes to this conclusion, and furthermore recommends that executives be psychologically screened for proper preparation; unfortunately, he does not provide any idea of what this might look like. (Berglas, 2002, p. 89-92)

Finally, there is a larger question that Kjellström puts to the ITC community that no coaching or consulting process should be asked to shoulder by themselves: to what extent should individuals in a business context be encouraged to share ("coercion," as Kjellström puts it; 2009, p. 123)? I have already summarized Kegan & Lahey's position on this matter. However, I would like to add some reflections on the issue. There are certain realities of working for an organization that must be reckoned with.

Most people that are employed by an organization are employed "at will." In other words, they have the freedom to choose their employer. But their paycheck is contingent upon the successful completion of their organizations' goals. Every stakeholder in an organization is under pressure to complete goals, and the specter that another person can both do my job *and share during a professional development training* can be a powerful *endogenous* motivator. Kjellström claims that this is a form of organizational coercion. Yet I wonder if the motivation is solely *exogenous*, which would indeed be coercion. If I know that there are other people willing to do my job, including the sharing that I do not wish to do, then I may feel a motivation to share

that is all my own. Is this coercion, or the healthy expression of at-will employment and individual freedom? I am not as willing as Kjellström to make any quick decisions on an issue that clearly belongs in a larger dialogue on social values and employment.

ITC should not be singled out for what is in fact a systemic issue: where is “privacy” in the postmodern world? Privacy is increasingly becoming an issue in our ever-connected world, where every cell phone has a camera, and our collective appetite for voyeurism seems to be growing. Even with such a charged issue, ITC may offer us some wisdom. Rather than shy away from the implications of this future, Kegan & Lahey take it head on: “...anxiety is the most important...private emotion in public life” (p. 48). After all, “public work” has already infiltrated “private life,” as any visit to a restaurant or coffee shop will make clear! The constant interruption of our privacy with work has already happened. This is no one-way street – as Deb Helsing puts it, “...our hidden commitments, big assumptions, and difficult emotions are *already* in the professional world – showing up as dysfunctional work/leadership!” (personal communication, 2010). It seems only fair (or natural) that our public work begin to integrate the very real concerns of our private hopes, fears, and dreams. This possibility could take sterile notions like “morale” and “corporate culture,” and turn them into actual shared agreements.

A larger point is that leaders of organizations who themselves show developmental transformation from one level to the next tend to show more successful (and more ethical) leadership. The life work of Bill Torbert (2004, pp. 104 – 120) has shown that developmental transformation to what he calls the “Strategist” and “Magician” (the two stages in his model that correspond with Kegan’s *Self-Transforming-Mind*) can be of great benefit to all employees in a learning organization. He is worth quoting at length here on this issue of later stage development and leadership ethics:

...leadership is a process that is *noncoercive*, multidirectional, influence-oriented, real, and mutual... [This] is very close to the concept of transformational leadership practiced by late stage managers... Later stage leaders are apt to lead organizations, direct projects and take on issues which reverberate across many horizons. Therefore, when they err, their negative impact may be far greater than whatever temporary, local waves an earlier stage leader's actions have. Late-stage leaders are working with major archetypes of awareness and thus with the 'symbolic resonance' of actions, not just with the details or outcomes of specific behaviors. Since the resulting effects are symbolic, meanings and interpretations are made by individuals surrounding the leader. However, such interpretations are likely to be limited, for two reasons. First, if developmental theory is right, the complex and subtle judgments and actions of very late stage leaders are undecodable by earlier stage participants. (my emphasis; Lichtenstein, Smith, & Torbert, 1995, pp. 103-105)

As Ken Wilber has pointed out, every level has both *dignities and disasters* (1995), a theme that also runs through Torbert’s work. What Kegan & Lahey add to these considerations is the fact that when all members of an organization work with their *eyes wide open*, the private anxieties that are often painful can assist with the public lives that we must lead. There is always individual risk when embarking upon a group effort, but we cannot deny that this larger issue of privacy in public life is one with which we must reckon. ITC provides a safe, measurable, ethically grounded way to do so. The possibility that ITC might actually be ethically beneficial

for all involved is never suggested in Kjellström's critique, but seems plausible given the preliminary evidence in the ITC case studies that have been published, and the studies by Torbert on leadership and organizational transformation (Rooke & Torbert, 1998).

## The Developmental Dynamics of Coaching

The central issue that Kjellström takes, developmentally speaking, is that the ITC program goes over the heads of most people who will be engaging the process. Kjellström cites two sources for this: the first is from the meta-analysis that Kegan & Lahey report in their book *Immunity to Change*, which shows that 58% of people will not be at the level of *Self-Authoring Mind* (p. 28). The second is from a study by John Manners, Kevin Durkin, and Andrew Nesdale (2004), which looked at the hypothesis that stage transformation can be promoted.

The first important distinction I will make is that Kjellström tends to fuse *conflict* with *disequilibrium*. While it is true that disequilibrium can involve conflict, from a developmental perspective disequilibrium also opens the possibility of beneficial change into wider perspectives. As Kegan is fond of saying, if you can help someone to understand a more complex perspective, they will prefer it (1982, pp. 56-57). Kjellström minimizes the potent effect of genuine leadership within such a dynamic: "With a supportive facilitator, some people will be helped [to] perform tasks at the systemic [i.e., formal] stage" (2009, p. 129). In fact, the effect is far greater than Kjellström acknowledges. Furthermore, the disequilibrium is "conflict" for the *old self that is being disidentified from*, but "repudiation" for the *new self that is performing the disidentification*. This is a developmental nuance of Subject-Object Theory that is not represented in Kjellström's analysis.

Kjellström also states that development can occur without disequilibrium: "...there are interventions that promote development without being designed to be structurally disequilibrating" (2009, p. 123). Here, she refers to the Manners, et. al., study on the promotion of stage development. The position that stage transformation can occur without disequilibrium represents a fundamental misunderstanding of developmental dynamics, and in fact, the study that Kjellström cites actually claims the opposite: "The effect of the program was greatest among those for whom the intervention was *most disequilibrating* in relation to their existing ego structures" (p. 25) and there were *minimal to no* changes for the control group "...because for them the program was *not* structured to be disequilibrating" (p. 21).

An interesting aspect of the Manners, et. al., study that bear upon ITC is that the researchers identified three key ingredients for promoting stage development, ingredients that the *Immunity to Change Program* contains:

1. Must be personally salient (e.g., investment through personal/organizational goals)
2. Must be emotionally engaging (e.g., the direct engagement of anxiety and hope for overcoming ones' anxiety)
3. Must include an interpersonal dynamic (e.g., working with an *Immunity to Change* certified coach)

(Manners, et. al., 2004, p. 25)

This brings me to the most disturbing charge that Kjellström weighs against the ITC process, that it is going over the heads of 58% of any group that uses it.<sup>6</sup> Were this true, it would represent, at best, a cruel irony for Kegan who wrote a book on avoiding this very dynamic. However, my analysis below of ITC and Subject-Object Theory shows us that this charge cannot be supported.

Firstly, 40% of a typical group is between *Socialized-Mind* and *Self-Authoring-Mind* (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 28). This means that even in the worst case scenario (58% - 40% = 18%), 18% of any group is the highest number that *might* miss the more nuanced aspects of ITC. However, there is every reason to believe that this is not the case. When used correctly, ITC “meets” individuals who are either at *Socialized-Mind* or in between *Socialized-Mind* and *Self-Authoring-Mind* extremely well (see below). The other 18% can be divided into the roughly 10% who are limited to *Socialized-Mind*, and the 8% who are pre-*Socialized-Mind* (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 28). Following Kegan & Lahey’s lead, I will call this prior level *Instrumental-Mind*, for it represents a level of development where people see the world through their own needs, and see others as *instruments* or tools to achieve the satisfaction of the need. They have great difficulty coordinating their needs with the needs of another (or a group), which is the hallmark of *Socialized-Mind*.

The question of whether people at this level are merely developmentally arrested, or are pathologically sociopathic, or if those are two sides of the same coin, is one that I do not have the room to address herein (see Kegan, 1994, pp. 38-44; see also Bubiak & Hare, 2007). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that regardless of etiology, there are individuals who are limited in their capacities to coordinate personal needs with group needs. It is worth noting here that not every adult who is exhibiting *Instrumental Mind* will be psychologically unhealthy or *pathologically manipulative*.<sup>7</sup> Berglas (2002) claims that executive coaching is at best *inert* when confronted with such people, and at worst, can actually assist the psychologically unhealthy people who are at this level with enacting their unsavory schemes.<sup>8</sup> ITC has built-in defenses against such manipulation, as it both identifies a personal *need* that someone has in the form of their own goals, and then calls the person into a group process where personal goals *and group goals are being coordinated* by a coach or consultant in conjunction with group members. In other words, ITC does not go “over the heads” of individuals at the *Socialized-Mind*. Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that even at *Instrumental-Mind*, individuals can be helped to look at needs rather than *be* them (in a way that is one-half step beyond what they can

---

<sup>6</sup> 58% is the figure that Kegan & Lahey give for the percentage of people who, according to developmental research, have yet to develop into the level of *Self-Authoring-Mind*. This figure is made up of 40% of people who are in between *Socialized-Mind* and *Self-Authoring-Mind*, and 10% of people who are at *Socialized-Mind*, and 8% of people who are below this, at *Instrumental-Mind*. (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 28)

<sup>7</sup> Rather, it might be better to say that “manipulative” is an unnecessarily pejorative term; from the perspective of *Instrumental Mind*, my manipulation of others is no different from manipulating clay to make ceramic objects. Like most psychological conditions, sociopathy lies on a continuum, with degrees of impact on others.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Babiak and Robert Hare (2007) have published a book on the havoc that these individuals can have in a business organization. Their 10% estimate on the number of people who reflect these characteristics of *Instrumental-Mind* is in general agreement with Kegan & Lahey’s meta-analysis, and with other developmental researchers (Cook-Greuter, 1999).

self-generate). Those are precisely the conditions for optimal development that Kegan and other developmentalists have outlined (see for example Loevinger, 1976).

As noted above, even with *Instrumental-Mind*, individuals are likely “held” by the ITC processes. So those individuals at *Instrumental-Mind* may only get from the process that their goals may or may not line up with the goals of their team or their organization. Individuals at the level of *Socialized-Mind*, however, will certainly possess the capacity for self-generating the constructions necessary for ITC processes. Kjellström’s criticism here is that

The exercise is built on the requirement that all participants are able to use, at minimum, formal stage thinking...because the persons need to see themselves responsible for the commitment [and] an adequate understanding of personal responsibility is a formal stage concept which requires formal stage reasoning. (2009, p. 127)

Again, I must disagree with Kjellström on the grounds that her argument does not rest on solid developmental theory. Full formal-operational cognition is the foundation for *Self-Authoring-Mind*; however, Kjellström is incorrect that full formal-operational cognition is required for engaging in ITC. In fact, individuals with *early* formal cognition, which is the foundation for *Socialized-Mind*, can readily self-generate the meaning-constructions that are called upon for ITC. Seeing oneself as responsible for one’s commitments, and holding up your own end of an agreement – these are *precisely* the sort of qualities that emerge with transformation to *Socialized-Mind*. As I have pointed out, even with *Instrumental-Mind*, a maxim of developmental psychology is that when someone can be helped to understand a perspective that is one-half step beyond that which they can self-generate, they will generally prefer it. This means that when it is used skillfully, ITC can avoid the potential pitfalls of dealing with *Instrumental-Mind*, and even holds the possibility of assisting those individuals with their continued development. Finally, individuals who are at or just beyond *Socialized-Mind* already have the necessary endogenous complexity of mind to benefit from ITC.

## Conclusions

Near the end of her article, Kjellström uses the ITC Map itself to evaluate ITC processes. In particular, her elucidation of columns three and four do not reflect a particularly good way of creating an ITC map. In her column two, Kjellström lists the designs and explanations of ITC as “inadequate,” and the column three competing commitment is listed as “to not admit weaknesses in ITC” (2009, p. 128). She was perhaps being a bit tongue-in-cheek; however, column three is properly a competing commitment that, through reverse-engineering, is revealed as the source of the column two behaviors. In other words, neither column two nor column three would satisfy the basic requirements for a good ITC map.<sup>9</sup> Column four, which she lists as an assumption that “...more mental complexity is always right and good” (2009, p. 128), is both an incorrect analysis of Kegan & Lahey’s intentions, and an incorrect use of the ITC process. The column

---

<sup>9</sup> A “good” ITC map is one where the column one goals are true for you; the column two behaviors are things you yourself are doing to get in your own way; the column three competing commitments feel like they have a lot of gravity and help explain the column two behaviors; and the column four big assumption is a source of catastrophic thinking – even the thought of it brings anxiety.

four big assumption is supposed to be something so feared, that to even consider it creates what cognitive-behaviorists call *catastrophic thinking*. It is this assumption that fuels the entire immunity map.

Kegan & Lahey do not believe that more complexity is always right and good, which should be clear from the fact that in their first book on ITC, *no developmental language is used*. It is also clear from the way that Kegan ends his book *In Over Our Heads* – with a reminder that whenever we *predetermine* how someone should grow, or the *point* of that growth, we lose something. We lose the passion of life that makes life worth living, the fragile passion that promises new life (and, in a business context, even new products and services). Passion is its own reward (1994, p. 354).<sup>10</sup>

They are equally clear that that healthy, supportive change is good, and that many people are in over their heads, whether they like it or not. This rift between what we can developmentally accomplish and what we are expected to accomplish is crying out for a system that can soothe the endogenous force of evolution, with the exogenous claims being placed upon people. The *Immunity to Change* process was born of the recognition that this rift exists, and its purpose is to assist those individuals who find a similar need in either their private or public lives.

I agree with Kjellström completely on the issue of ethics. ITC coaches can and should make the claim that although the *general* structures and processes of ITC are available to anyone interested in pursuing lifelong change, the help of skilled practitioners is crucial when considering questions of ethics and quality alike. Like the synthesizer that Roger Waters was using during his interview, the ITC program is a simple instrument, with complex possibilities. When used skillfully, it *meets people where they are* in terms of their level of development. When used skillfully it has been shown to be *highly beneficial for assisting people (and organizations) meet their own stated goals*. When used skillfully, it can be a *powerful tool for personal and organizational transformation*. Wilber claims that the single greatest achievement that humanity can make at this time – something that would move our species a long way towards solving the many global crises that our species currently faces – would be to assist the 40% of us who are poised to transform into *Self-Authoring-Mind* (2000b, p. 56, 88, 104, & 126; 2006, pp. 179-182). Following Heifetz, Kegan & Lahey call this the sort of *adaptive change* that

---

<sup>10</sup> Is the main purpose of ITC to help someone transform from one level to the next? My answer to this is a qualified “yes.” You see, Kegan & Lahey (and anyone who is skillfully using ITC) are first and foremost interested in those areas where someone feels stuck. From the beginning of Subject/Object Theory, the goal has been to assist people with their own ongoing evolution. A good analogy is that of the new field of *epigenetics*. Epigenetics is a field that sees not a static set of building blocks encased in a nucleus, but an ongoing process of exchange and incorporation between the environment and the organism. ITC coaching is not trying to get people to grow; ITC coaching is trying to assist people who are already embroiled in the process of their own becoming. Subject/Object Theory tells us that we are never “static” in our development, it is always happening. But we *can and will often* get stuck. In the lumber industry, log jams are broken up when divers plunge into a river and search for the one log that started it all – the “key-log.” By removing this key-log, the natural flow of the river can continue, and so can the logs. The logs and the river are granted their own distinctness, yet maintain their relationship with one another (i.e., the logs are not removed to solve the problem, nor is the river diverted). That is what ITC coaching is about – helping people find their key-logs, in the form of their big-assumptions, to free up the trapped energy that is causing them pain *and* stifling their development.

can meet the *adaptive challenges* that our species is facing (2009, p. 29). I believe that ITC coaching has an innovative design, with the unique characteristics to help us meet the adaptive challenges that our species is grappling with.

Life is messy. One of my favorite quotes from the eminent Jane Loevinger is that “Nature does not promise us an orthogonal universe, a world arranged in rows and columns, where every distinguishable trait is statistically independent of all others” (1976, p. 176). When properly used, the ITC process is not about an artificial arrangement of rows and columns, it is a Map that helps practitioners sift through the messiness of life, that we might understand the underlying patterns. Because life is nonlinear and messy, I understand why a system that is as elegant as *Immunity to Change*, with the layers of depth and scalability that it has, can be seen for its surface or deep features (hopefully, for both, as both are necessary). I hope that my response can be seen from the spirit of spirited dialogue; at the same time, I feel a responsibility to highlight what I see as the significant offering that ITC has for the world in this time of crisis.

The elegance of the *Immunity to Change* process makes it appear simple. In some ways this is true – creating an initial ITC Map can take as little as one hour. The full ITC process, however, is a much richer endeavor. When David Bowie was interviewed for a documentary on the evolution of rock music during the 1970’s, he chuckled at the relationship between engineers and musicians. Engineers, in Bowie’s estimation, were trying their best to recreate the sound of individual instruments through synthesizers; musicians, on the other hand, cared little for the engineer’s vision, and wanted to create *new* sounds with the synthesizers. If they wanted a horn, they would play a horn, not an electronic representation of one. But if they wanted a future-sound, the sound of waveforms mingling together, they needed a synthesizer. Being an *Immunity to Change* coach is like being a musician in this sense – the beautiful music comes not from the repetition of scales, but from the iterative flow of harmonic resonance.

## Reference List

- Berglas, S. (2002). The very real dangers of executive coaching. *Harvard Business Review*, June, pp. 87-92.
- Bowe, C. M., Lahey, L., Kegan, R., & Armstrong, E. (2003). Questioning the ‘big assumptions’: Recognizing organizational contradictions that impede institutional change, *Medical Education*, 37(8), 715-733.
- Bubiak, P. & Hare, R. D. (2007). *Snakes in suits: When psychopaths go to work*. NY: HarperCollins.
- Cook-Greuter, S. (1999). Postautonomous ego development: A study of its nature and measurement. Doctoral dissertation. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education. UMI Dissertation Information Services UMI #9933122.
- Helsing, D., Howell, A., Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. (2008). Putting the ‘development’ in professional development: Understanding and overturning educational leaders’ immunity to change. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(3), 437-465.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2000). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2001). The real reason people won't change, *Harvard Business Review*, November, 2001, 85-92.
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and in your organization*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Kjellström, S. (2009). The ethics of promoting and assigning adult developmental exercises: A critical analysis of the Immunity to Change process. *Integral Review*, 5(2), 116-132.
- Lichtenstein, B. M., Smith, B. A., & Torbert, W. R. (1995). Leadership and ethical development: Balancing light and shadow. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 5, 97-116.
- Loevinger, J. (1976). *Ego development: Conceptions and theories*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Manners, J., Durkin, K., & Nesdaile, A. (2004). Promoting advanced ego development among adults. *Journal of Adult Development*, 1(1), 19-27.
- Noam, G. G. & Kegan, R. (1989). On boundaries and externalization: Clinical-developmental perspectives. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 9(3), 397-426.
- Rooke, D. & Torbert, W. R. (1998). Organizational transformation as a function of CEO's developmental stage. *Organizational Development Journal*, 16(1), 11-29.
- Torbert, B. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Wagner, T., Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Lemons, R. W., Garnier, J., Helsing, D., Howell, A., & Rasmussen, H. T. (2005). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Business Digest. (2009). When growing people helps change succeed: The UBS AG case. *Interview with Juerg Herren*. Business Digest, June, No. 197.
- Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wilber, K. (2000a). *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wilber, K. (200b). *A theory of everything: An integral vision for business, politics, science, and spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wilber, K. (2006). *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*. Boston: Integral Books.
- Wilber, K., Patten, T., Leonard, A., & Morelli, M. (2008). *Integral life practice: A 21<sup>st</sup> century blueprint for physical health, emotional balance, mental clarity, and spiritual awakening*. Boston: Integral Books.