“Why do I do that? I hated that meeting. Like so many times before, we get right up to the decisive moment where everyone looks at me to make the call, and I find a reason to defer. I request more data, take it offline, or say I want to sleep on it. Whatever my reason, I avoid declaring a direction I know my team is hungry to hear. ‘Indecisive,’ ‘lacks managerial courage,’ ‘struggles with confidence,’ ‘avoids tough calls,’ and ‘delays choices’ – are labels prevalent in my performance evaluations. I have practiced saying difficult things in the mirror, gone to assertiveness training, written out my messages prior to meeting, and honed my risk assessment skills. Although things are incrementally better, my job is more complex, thus I continue to struggle. No matter what I’ve tried, I can’t seem to shake this, but know I need to. So now what?”
It’s cliché, but things happen for a reason. Although it’s easy to blame external factors for a less than desirable professional situation, the truth is that you are more central to the story than you may like to believe. Although factors outside your control may contribute to your leadership successes or challenges, you are the common denominator.

Failure to recognize the pivotal role a leader plays in their own leadership journey is why many leaders experience persistent challenges in their leadership, or negligible progress on desired changes. Despite the best of intentions, many leaders lack sufficient self-awareness about their own behavior and fail to recognize the negative consequences for how they are perceived and the organizations they lead.

Below are some of the more common themes we hear during leadership development conversations that are focused on shoring-up a leader’s capability. We follow these with our thoughts about how leaders’ thinking and behaving hinder them from realizing critical development.

The impact of my behavior isn’t that bad.

All too often, this is an easy explanation for a recurring difficulty, especially in cases where leaders exhibit great results in other areas. It’s a thought process of comparison and justification; compared to other leaders, it’s not that bad. Or, one’s bright spots provide a license (and in difficult cases, entitlement) for problematic behavior. The expression, “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em;” holds true for the leader who espouses this approach; if an executive can’t overcome their unwanted behavior, they’d better get used to it, and change others’ perceptions about it. Then, after many attempts to compare or justify their behavior, this leader reflects on their experiences, and interprets colleagues’ lack of pushback to confirm their newfound bias. Before you know it, the behavior really isn’t that bad. We see this in organizations that repeatedly overlook leaders who belie company values’ behaviors in the name of results. “I didn’t feel it necessary to address this with her because she gets so much accomplished. To be honest, we put her in those roles to get results, but maybe now we need to take responsibility for encouraging her bull in a china shop behavior.” Left unaddressed, a minor behavior that begins as “not that bad” can quickly escalate or become something an organization rewards and praises, which then perpetuates future problems in subsequent leaders.

In the moment, I am genuinely frustrated with myself, but it passes quickly and I am on to the next thing.

In short, “I am too busy to care.” Of course, no emotionally intelligent leader ever publicly admits this, but their actions speak volumes about their development. The problem is the underlying belief, “If I had more time, I’d change my behavior.” However, time and development are not mutually exclusive. A leader is either dying or growing, and their development depends on their pursuit of growth, not the amount of time they have. Transformation is more a matter of desire, intention and will, rather than time. Moreover, it’s not enough for the leader to merely be aware of their shortcomings; they have to translate their awareness into actionable change. We often hear people say, “We learn from our experiences.” In reality, we do not learn from our experiences, otherwise we would not continue doing irrational things. We learn from the analysis of our experiences. In effect, this leader is saying, “I don’t have enough time to pursue the change I know I need.” Ironically, if busy executives spent focused time on their development, they would actually gain time in the long run.
It is a matter of will power and self-control. I believe real time behavior modifying techniques are adequate.

Physiological research indicates once a person’s heart rate reaches 120 beats per minute (bpm), and the fight-or-flight response begins, they can’t accurately understand what others are saying, formulate or articulate effective thoughts, or make rational decisions. Some executives have relied on behavior modification techniques to cope with these situations, including stopping, counting to 10, and focusing on deep breathing. These strategies decrease heart rate and blood pressure, and help get people back to baseline. The problem is that these techniques do not produce lasting change, and sometimes aren’t even possible in the moment. It’s not exactly convenient to request a breathing break every time conflict arises.

Maybe I don’t deserve to be a leader since I can’t get this.

In some extreme instances, a leader’s behaviors are so outlandish and incongruent with company or legal standards that it might be time for them to go. But for the majority of leaders who struggle with feeling out of control, there’s a solution to their difficulties, and the main problem is a vicious cycle of self-doubt and isolation. For these leaders, certain unproductive behaviors become so engrained and reinforced over time, that they have an ostracizing effect. The problems become so pronounced that they’re all the leader sees, and it detracts their focus from actual other requirements. Rather than connecting more tenaciously with the requirements of a role, leaders distance themselves, which leads to a feeling of isolation and even sometimes embarrassment. In time, isolation leads to other deep-seated doubts about their abilities. “How is it possible that someone in my position can’t kick this? I run a multi-billion dollar business unit; people in my position shouldn’t struggle with this sort of thing.” Ironically, if a leader doesn’t believe they deserve to be in a leadership role, they ultimately align their behaviors to reinforce those beliefs. The vicious mental cycle fulfills the feared prophecy of failure.

I know this will never change.

Another variation on the theme “inevitable failure.” This leader believes the adage “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” They commit to keeping their leadership the way it is because after years of trial and error, they have concluded there’s nothing left to try. “If I haven’t been able to surface a solution, one must not exist.” Many of these leaders have read every book published on the topic, attended all the classes, and have tried everything suggested, but still nothing works. Typically, their attitude is one of exasperation rather than lack of desire to change. “I’ve tried everything I know to try. I’m tired of trying, especially when it doesn’t work. Look, I’ve figured out how to make things work in life and at work. No, it’s not optimal, but I am getting by. I know how this story goes, and it’s not worth the fight.” Not only does this leader believe something different is impossible, but they choose not to see a potential solution, even when it may be right in front of them. Some leaders cannot see solutions because they have given up hope.
What may feel like isolated challenges, actually represent broader patterns in leadership behavior. This collection of stories illustrates how values, beliefs and internal dialogue motivates the thoughts and behaviors of leaders and organizations. Their origins are deeply rooted. To shore up a leader’s flat sides, we must dig deeper to understand and reshape these root issues. Be forewarned, sustained change requires significant effort over time and does not come easily.

For example, a leader might struggle to control a short temper, which could be endemic of impatience, high standards, or a results orientation. A closer look reveals an underlying pattern of anger emerging in many areas of their leadership and life, not only when performing under pressure.

Do you have an Achilles Heel? When trying to understand the root causes motivating needed changes, step back and take a broader look at your life. Is there a pattern of when, why, and how it shows up? What circumstances, or triggers (people/situations/places) provoke you? Or, does provocation come from an internal message? What’s the message and what feelings and actions does it trigger? How do you prevent, modify, or redirect such unwanted behavior? Answers to these questions will likely reveal a pattern, or Operative Narrative, learned and reinforced over time. Reinforcement typically resists simple techniques that only briefly control behavior. This might be why you say to yourself, “Why does it work sometimes, but not others?” We see a general correlation between the length of time such narratives are reinforced, and the degree of effort required to permanently change them.

**Dig Deeper & Connect the Dots**

**Align**
- Make meaning of the thematic elements present during diagnosis.
- Identify the implications on the effectiveness of your leadership.
- Group into higher order buckets and force rank them based on the return they afford and your opportunity to pursue them.

**Diagnose**
- Take an in-depth look at the requirements and effects of your leadership role and broader company strategy.
- Solicit detailed feedback from a comprehensive set of stakeholders.
- Investigate thematic examples, across all aspects of your leadership, where specific behaviors inhibit effectiveness. Objectively look at the impacts of your leadership across the entire enterprise.

**Prioritize**
- Make meaning of the thematic elements present during diagnosis.
- Identify the implications on the effectiveness of your leadership.
- Group into higher order buckets and force rank them based on the return they afford and your opportunity to pursue them.

**Plan**
- Generate a limited set of actions to address top issues.
- Identify specific contexts and situations where ineffective leadership behaviors are triggered as the environment to transform you (e.g. board meeting, performance appraisal, conflict, resource allocation conversations, certain personalities).

**Develop**
- Don’t go it alone, find a partner. Leverage the support and commitment of critical stakeholders.
- Seek an external partner’s counsel to provide personalized, dedicated support and guidance as you implement your plans.
- Focus on underlying problems versus symptoms and create a plan to re-script your Operative Narratives.

**So Now What?**

When working with leaders to dig deeper and uncover the material necessary to enable effective transformation, we typically approach the journey like this:
Do you find yourself...

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<td>In situations and/or relationships where you’re unable to adapt your communication to facilitate more effective outcomes?</td>
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<td>Missing critical opportunities because you prematurely remove yourself from interactions due to your own internal dialogue?</td>
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<td>Responding unproductively in certain situations, even though you know it’s not in your colleagues’ best interest?</td>
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<td>Hearing colleagues point out that your responses don’t always match specific situations (e.g., more aggressive than warranted, unable to assert a point of view of importance to you)?</td>
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<td>Responding in ways that undermine your integrity or image in your organization?</td>
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If you answered yes to any of these questions, there is work you can do to improve your leadership responses and develop action plans to address future situations and elicit desired behaviors and responses.

At Navalent, we work with organizations and leaders to accelerate their talent aspirations, growth and capability. Our approach is deeply connected to the organization’s strategy and business needs. We thoroughly assess the individual, their business context, requirements for in-role success, and their inherent strengths and growth opportunities. We tailor our approach to suit the organization’s talent strategy and the individual’s needs and learning style. We ensure that the development is targeted on activities that will have a tangible impact on performance.

You might also find our additional resources helpful, which are on our website here: [www.navalent.com/resources](http://www.navalent.com/resources) If you would like to learn more, email us [www.navalent.com/about/contact](http://www.navalent.com/about/contact), or call 800-818-0297. Let’s make the change.