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When it comes to organizational change, failure continues to be more common than success. In a survey of nearly 3,000 executives about the success of their enterprise transformation efforts, [McKinsey](#) discovered the failure rate to be higher than 60%, while [Harvard Business Review](#) conducted a study that suggested more than 70% of transformation efforts fail.

The pattern is clear, and diligent leaders often devote countless resources to planning out the perfect change management initiative. To raise the odds of success, however, my experience suggests the place that leaders need to begin their transformation efforts is not their organizations: It's themselves.

Few leaders would disagree that personal transformation is an important building block of any successful change effort. Unfortunately, too many leaders want transformation to happen at unrealistic speeds, with minimal effort, and everywhere but within themselves. As Manfred Kets de Vries says in *The Leader on the Couch*, "Organizations the world over are full of people who are unable to recognize repetitive behavior patterns that have become dysfunctional." This reflects an endemic lack of self-awareness in leadership, and the costs are significant. One [study](#) found that when it comes to decision making, coordination, and conflict management, teams that have a low degree of self-awareness are less than half as effective as teams that are highly self-aware.

During times of disruptive change, all sorts of feelings are heightened — loss of control, the interruption of power, fear of failure. In response, leaders often unconsciously respond with behaviors that reveal their struggle to adapt to the very change they are championing.

One newly appointed CEO I worked with was leading a massive overhaul of his company while he personally struggled deeply with indecisiveness. Historically, the organization's culture had been slow and unresponsive because decision making resided largely at the top. He redesigned the organization to create a culture where decision rights were more appropriately distributed to those lower in the organization who were better equipped to solve problems and direct resources. That left the most-strategic decisions with him and his team. Yet he struggled to get closure on critical decisions with his team, decisions the rest of the organization depended on to execute the subsequent decisions they were now empowered to make. The CEO was perpetuating the very problem he sought to fix.

When we dig into the roots of a leader's unproductive behavior, we look for what we call the "[operative narrative](#)," the "tape" playing at an unconscious level that's driving unwanted behavior. Not surprisingly, beneath this very accomplished CEO's behavior was a tape of perfectionism, declaring, "If you're wrong about this, it's all on you." His fear of being wrong and bearing disproportionate levels of accountability for failure prevented him from using his brilliant mind to weigh available options and data, include the perspectives of his capable leaders, and make the call.

For executives to succeed in leading [organizational transformations](#), they must begin with their personal transformation. And that starts with identifying and "re-scripting" those operative narratives that might provoke unproductive behavior. Here are two important first steps to begin that re-scripting work.

Know Who and What Triggers You

One behavior that keeps us locked in this cycle is “[transference](#),” which happens when we transfer our feelings onto someone else. In moments of transference, a leader’s behavior is shaped and motivated more by their past experience than what is happening in the present.

One client of ours realized early in the process of leading the turnaround of a flailing division that her impatience was making performance worse and weakening confidence in the future. We later discovered that her impatience was symptomatic of deeper issues. When people asked questions for clarification about the change, she interpreted them as resistance to her vision or passive-aggressive doubt about her ability. They were neither, but her angry responses created the very resistance and passive-aggression she feared.

This leader needed to embrace people’s questions as an opportunity to further secure their commitment, not view them as personal attacks on her vision and leadership. A look back at her career path revealed a long history of unjustly having to prove herself, receiving unfair critique, and feeling second-guessed by those whose approval she desperately wanted. Each question from her team triggered past transference, compounded by the natural anxieties of leading high-risk change.

Breaking the cycle of triggers that transfer past experiences onto current situations begins in deep self-reflection. Be ruthlessly honest about who and what those trigger points are.

Write Out the Narrative

Simply identifying situations or people most likely to trigger you isn’t sufficient to realize change. Many leaders flippantly declare trigger points like, “Boy, he really pushes my buttons every time I’m with him” or “I’m fine presenting to anyone in the company, but when it comes to her, I lose a week of sleep.” But they stop short of uncovering the narrative beneath those triggers that leads to unwanted behavior.

Lasting personal transformation demands facing the tapes playing in your head that lead you to exasperating confessions that sound like, “*Why on earth do I keep doing that?*” Declaring that you do things you shouldn’t isn’t self-awareness; it’s simply acknowledging that you’ve been told a certain behavior is troubling to others and that you wish you didn’t do it. Genuine self-awareness demands that you dig deeper to uncover the real answer to why you keep doing it and then actually work to stop doing it.

The great benefit of facing the challenges of leading change is that it will force these narratives to surface, making them more accessible than usual. A leader must listen closely for how the pressures of change are being expressed. For example, leaders prone to being triggered by having constraints imposed on them may express in exasperation, “Why did they ask me to lead this if all they’re going to do is throw roadblocks in my way at every turn?” But the persistent resentment of reasonable constraints may have a narrative underneath, saying, “People who ask me to do things for them

really want me to fail” or “My judgment is always being questioned.” (These are actual narratives we uncovered working with executives struggling to execute changes they were charged with leading.)

Writing them out on paper provides the sobering acceptance of a deeper force shaping behavior. This requires courage, humility, and the ability to detect patterns of behavior recurring in times of change. When a leader accepts their narrative in black and white that reveals the answer to “Why do I keep doing that?” they have taken the powerful next step at re-scripting it.

A leader’s ability to affect change across the organization depends on their ability to affect change within themselves. Accepting this will fundamentally shift how one leads. Such introspection is an active process. Leaders should take notes, spot trends, correct course. They should solicit feedback from others, tracking the impact their behavior has on others and how closely their actions match intentions.

Leaders should start a transformational journey accepting that the organization will have to transform them as much as they will have to transform it. The more a leader knows how they will react during change, the better equipped they’ll be to foster real change in themselves, others, and the organization.

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at [Navalent](#), working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change for their organizations, leaders, and industries. He is the best-selling author of eight books, including the recent Amazon #1 [Rising to Power](#). Connect with him on Twitter at [@RonCarucci](#); download his free e-book on [Leading Transformation](#).
