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# NOVAQUEST NEWS

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## The Behavior Beneath the Behavior: How Self-Awareness Elevates Your Leadership

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**What if your greatest leadership constraint isn't your capacity or your skill — but the pattern you default to under pressure?**

High-performing leaders rarely struggle because they don't know what to do. They struggle when they keep relying on familiar habits and identities that no longer match the level of leadership they're being asked to grow into. The opportunity is not to change who you are, but to get radically honest about how you show up—especially under pressure and when the stakes are high.

### **When Good Intent Isn't Enough**

Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* reminds us that team breakdown rarely starts with a spectacular blow-up. It starts with vulnerability-based trust—or more accurately, the quiet erosion of it. Long before any visible conflict, trust fractures in small, repeated moments: cutting conversations short, rescuing others from discomfort, avoiding hard feedback, or tightening control when things feel uncertain. Over time, these micro-moments teach people what is and isn't safe, and what is and isn't worth bringing to you. Good intent turns into over-functioning and diminishes ownership.

In my work with executives and leadership teams, what stands out most is not a lack of effort, care, or intelligence, but a lack of awareness. Leaders underestimate how differently their behavior is experienced by others, especially under pressure. Good intent does not guarantee connection.

Most leaders communicate from what feels natural to them and assume others receive information the same way. But people don't all process information, urgency, tone, or direction in the same way—and that gap is where misalignment quietly forms. That gap is where leadership quietly begins to break down, not because leaders don't care, but because default communication patterns go unexamined.

### **Over-Functioning: The Silent Bottleneck**

Many high-capacity leaders are known for being dependable, responsive, and the ones who “step in and solve.” On the surface, this looks like care and commitment, and it often gets rewarded. But beneath that strength is a pattern I see repeatedly in leadership development work: over-functioning.

When leaders consistently do what others are capable of doing, they don't just absorb the work — they absorb their team's growth. Over time:

- Boundaries blur.
- Ownership diminishes.
- Dependence increases.
- Growth stalls.
- Leaders become depleted.

The leader, despite their best intentions, becomes the bottleneck. Over-functioning is rarely a conscious decision. It's usually driven by identity stories that once helped you succeed and now quietly keep you stuck:

- “It's faster if I just handle it.”
- “If I don't step in, it won't get done right.”
- “I need to be the one people rely on.”

Under pressure, these identity stories become automatic mindsets and behaviors. Without a different lens, they continue unchecked — and organizations misdiagnose the issue as a “capacity” or “performance” problem instead of a pattern problem.

For executives, leaders, CPOs, CHROs, and HR leaders, this is the pivotal question: **Where is quiet loyalty to an outdated way of leading costing your organization trust, ownership, and sustainable performance?**



## The Pattern Gap

Every leader carries what I call a “pattern gap”: the space between how they believe they’re leading and how their behavior is actually experienced by others. That gap widens under pressure.

A leader may see themselves as decisive and responsible; their team may experience them as dismissive or controlling. Another may see themselves as supportive; their team may experience them as conflict-avoidant. Neither leader is ill-intentioned. Both are underestimating the impact of their default pattern when it’s overdone.

This is where behavioral tools — used thoughtfully — become powerful, not as labels, but as lenses.

## DISC as a Lens, Not a Label

DISC is a behavioral model that highlights a person’s dominant tendencies in four areas of communication: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness. The DISC model and its assessments invite us to focus on observable patterns of behavior to better understand individuals’ preferred communication styles, including:

- How people assert themselves or hold back.
- How they respond to pressure and pace.
- How they interpret tone and directness.
- What they need to feel clear, safe, and engaged.

When used with leadership teams, DISC does three things:

1. **Increases self-awareness.** Leaders see their own default patterns under stress — to drive harder, smooth over, take over and fix, overexplain, or retreat into analysis.
2. **Normalizes differences.** Instead of labeling or judging how others show up, leaders gain a shared language for “this is my pattern” and “this is yours,” which reduces blame and accelerates collaboration and connection.
3. **Creates choice.** The goal isn’t to stay inside your quadrant; it’s to know your starting point so you can intentionally flex based on what the team and the moment require.

Without that lens, leaders under pressure may double down on what has worked for them in the past, and those strengths become overused:

- A speed and outcome-oriented leader may unintentionally shut down dialogue when clarity and questions are what’s needed.
- A harmony-focused leader may sidestep hard truths and constructive conflict, leaving systemic issues unaddressed.



- A detail-focused leader may slow progress in the name of getting it “right,” eroding agility in an environment that requires responsiveness.

The challenge is not the style itself. The challenge is unexamined, unflexed patterns at the very moment your organization most needs psychological safety, clear decision-making, alignment, and shared ownership.

## From Autopilot to Conscious Leadership

Self-awareness is the starting point. Conscious leadership is what you do with that awareness in the moment.

In practice, the shift looks like a simple but powerful progression I use with leaders and teams:

Pause → Reflection → Self-Awareness → Conscious Choice → Behavioral Integrity → Conscious Leadership

- **Pause:** In a high-stakes conversation, you notice your first impulse — to speed up, take over, smooth over, or drill into details. That micro-pause interrupts autopilot.
- **Reflection:** You ask, “What pattern am I about to repeat?” You name it: “I’m about to jump in and fix this,” or “I’m about to soften this too much.”
- **Self-Awareness:** You connect that pattern to impact: “When I do this, people stop pushing back,” or “We keep revisiting the same issue because I avoid naming it.”
- **Conscious Choice:** You shift from autopilot and over-functioning to leading with intentionality and awareness of your impact, aligning your behavior with your values and role so your team experiences you as grounded, consistent, and growth-enabling.
- **Behavioral Integrity:** Over time, your actions align more consistently with the culture you say you want to create together: shared accountability, vulnerability-based trust, psychological safety, healthy conflict, sustainable performance, and shared ownership.
- **Conscious Leadership:** You choose responses that fit your role now — asking one more question instead of giving the answer, or naming the tension you’d usually avoid — so your team experiences you as present, intentional, and responsive (not reactive), embodying a self-aware, transformative approach rooted in radical responsibility (shifting from victimhood “life happens to me” to a growth & creator mindset “I create my experiences”), emotional intelligence, and a “we over me” culture that chooses curiosity, openness, and candor over fear-based behavior to create sustainable value for all stakeholders.



This is the work of moving from over-functioning “fixer” and emotional “first responder” to a coach-like, conscious, and curious leader who clarifies what is truly theirs to own and creates space for others to grow.

## **What Progressive People Leaders Are Doing Now**

The question is no longer whether leadership behavior matters. It’s whether you’re willing to move from insight to intervention.

Here are four focused moves progressive leaders are making:

### **1. Diagnose the behavior beneath the metrics.**

Instead of treating low engagement, stalled initiatives, or attrition as isolated problems, look for behavioral patterns in your leadership population: over-functioning, overused strengths, conflict avoidance, chronic firefighting, or “hero/fixer” cultures that mask weak systems or leadership maturity gaps.

### **2. Invest in team-based behavior work, not just individual skill training.**

Workshops on feedback or communication often fall flat when the underlying trust, psychological safety, conflict, and ownership patterns go unaddressed. Pair leadership coaching with team sessions grounded in models like *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and DISC so leaders can see how individual patterns aggregate at the team level and either support or impede cohesion and collective results.

### **3. Make “how we lead under pressure” an explicit conversation.**

Build structured reflection into offsites, performance reviews, and project debriefs:

- “When things got hard, what did we each default to?”
- “Which of our strengths did we overuse?”
- “Where did we absorb work instead of transferring ownership?”

### **4. Measure and reward culture and behavioral integrity, not just outcomes.**

Include indicators (KPIs) of conscious leadership and culture—trust signals, psychological safety, quality of cross-functional collaboration, and collective results—alongside business metrics. Make it clear that how results are achieved is part of performance, not a side note.

## **Reflection for the Next Quarter**

For you as a leader—and for your leadership bench—the most catalytic question might be this: **What is the strength you lean on most when you’re under pressure, and where might it be unintentionally limiting your team’s ownership, growth, or cohesion right now?**



Your honest answer is the beginning of awareness and real change. The leaders who will build resilient, cohesive, high-performing, human-centered organizations in the years ahead will not be the ones who simply know the right frameworks. They will be the ones willing to examine the behavior beneath their behavior – and then practice choosing differently, on purpose, in front of their teams.

## Your Next Move

For the next quarter, choose one concrete practice and treat it as a weekly learning experiment—deliberately putting in the reps to notice your patterns, pause before reacting, and respond from a more reflective, intentional space so you can actually shift your behavior, build discipline, and lead with greater consciousness.

- In one recurring meeting each week, notice the moment you feel the pull to jump in and fix, rescue, or overexplain.
- Pause, name the pattern silently (“I’m about to take this over”), and instead ask one ownership-transferring question, such as, “What do you think our best next step is?”
- Capture what you notice over 4–6 weeks: Where did you create more space, ownership, and growth? Where did your team step up? Where did your old identity stories fight back?

If, as you experiment, you recognize that over-functioning, unexamined patterns, or quiet erosion of trust are shaping your leadership culture, this is your signal to move from awareness to intervention.

“Leadership isn’t about adding more to your plate; it’s about ending your quiet loyalty to an outdated version of yourself so a more conscious leader can emerge.” — Original quote by Laila Keith

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