

Knowing Without Doing: An Integrative Review of Organisational, Cognitive and Identity-Based Explanations of Strategic Inaction in Leadership

Jenny Markova, DBA

Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science, Sofia, Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

Leaders frequently possess the knowledge, experience and strategic awareness required to recognise that change is necessary, yet do not translate that recognition into sustained action. This discrepancy, commonly termed the knowing–doing gap, has been examined in several literatures that have developed largely in isolation from one another: organisational studies, behavioural strategy, self-regulation research on the intention–behaviour gap, organisational identity research, autobiographical memory, and work on resistance to change and founder influence.

This article is an integrative conceptual review. It examines these literatures together in order to establish what each explains, what each leaves unaccounted for, and whether their combination yields a more adequate account of strategic inaction than any provides alone. Particular attention is given to a body of recent work by Natseva on the Internal Autobiographical Map, autobiographical memory and adaptation, behavioural persistence, psychological resilience, the Direct Change Solution® intervention sequence, and founder authority, which is examined critically alongside established international scholarship rather than in isolation.

The review finds that organisational and cognitive explanations account well for inaction under constraint and for inaction arising from misperception, but account less well for a recurring pattern in which autonomous, wellinformed leaders maintain behaviours they themselves describe as ineffective. Read together, the literatures suggest that four analytically distinct conditions must obtain for insight to become durable practice — accurate recognition, compatibility between the required action and the leader’s self-concept, behavioural initiation, and maintenance under adverse feedback — and that these conditions fail in different ways and respond to different interventions. This distinction is offered as a reading of the assembled evidence rather than as a validated model.

Implications are drawn for executive development, leadership coaching, founder-led organisations and organisational transformation, together with directions for empirical investigation. Several of the frameworks reviewed, including those advanced by Natseva, rest on preliminary evidence and await independent replication.

Keywords: knowing–doing gap; strategic inaction; leader identity; autobiographical memory; behavioural persistence; resistance to change; founder-led organisations; behavioural change; integrative review

INTRODUCTION

The observation that organisations know more than they do is old and well evidenced. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) gave it a name and an organisational diagnosis, and their account of the knowing–doing gap remains the reference point for subsequent work. Yet the phenomenon has proved unusually resistant to the interventions their diagnosis implies. Organisations have reduced internal competition, redesigned measurement, and flattened structures, and the gap has persisted.

One reason may be that the concept has absorbed several distinct phenomena. A firm that cannot execute because its structure obstructs execution and a chief executive who cannot bring themselves to replace a long-serving colleague are both instances of knowing and not doing, but they are not instances of the same thing. The

organisational literature addresses the first well. The second has been addressed principally outside management scholarship, in research on self-regulation, identity and behavioural persistence, and the connection between these bodies of work and leadership studies remains underdeveloped.

This article undertakes that connection. It is an integrative review: its purpose is to bring together literatures that bear on the same phenomenon and to establish what emerges when they are read jointly. It does not report new data, and it does not advance a new theory. Where it draws a synthesis from the reviewed material, that synthesis is presented as an interpretation of existing evidence, with the limitations of that evidence stated.

The review gives particular attention to a recent programme of work by Natseva on autobiographical structure and behavioural persistence, for two reasons. First, it addresses precisely the junction between identity and persistent behaviour that the leadership literature under-specifies. Second, because it is recent, single-author and not yet independently replicated, it requires the kind of critical placement against established scholarship that a review can provide. Where its claims converge with established findings, the convergence is identified; where it extends existing approaches, the extension is specified; where the evidence remains preliminary, this is stated.

Section 2 examines organisational and strategic explanations. Section 3 examines individual-level explanations drawn from self-regulation research. Section 4 reviews leader identity and identity threat. Section 5 examines autobiographical memory and narrative identity, and places Natseva's work in that context. Section 6 sets out the integrative reading that emerges. Section 7 addresses founder-led organisations. Section 8 compares intervention approaches. Sections 9 to 11 state the review's contribution, limitations and conclusion.

Organisational And Strategic Explanations

2.1 The organisational account Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) attributed the failure to convert knowledge into action to five organisational mechanisms: the substitution of talk for action, the governance of present decisions by past precedent, fear that suppresses experimentation, measurement systems that displace judgement, and internal competition that converts colleagues into rivals. Their evidence was drawn from field observation across sectors, and the account is primarily systemic: it explains why capable people in particular organisations do not act.

This sits within a longer tradition. Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguished espoused theories from theories-in-use, establishing that the accounts people give of their own action and the principles that actually govern it can diverge systematically and without awareness. Argyris (1991) later showed that highly educated professionals are frequently poor organisational learners, because success has rarely required them to examine their own contribution to failure — a defensive pattern he located in the individual but activated by organisational conditions.

Structural explanations have developed in parallel. Hannan and Freeman (1984) established structural inertia as a property of organisational form, arising from the same features that make organisations reliable. Tripsas and Gavetti (2000) demonstrated that managerial cognition constrains capability development independently of resources: what executives believe the business is determines what it becomes able to do.

2.2 The behavioural-strategy account Behavioural strategy imported cognitive and social psychology into strategic management, treating strategic choice as the output of bounded and biased cognition (Powell, Lovallo, & Fox, 2011). Kahneman and Lovallo (1993) showed that executives combine overconfident forecasting with excessive timidity in individual decisions, a combination that produces both unrealistic plans and reluctance to act on them. Staw (1981) established escalation of commitment: the tendency to increase investment in a failing course rather than accept the implications of withdrawal, an effect strengthened when the decision-maker is personally responsible for the original commitment.

Upper-echelons theory brought the individual executive into strategic explanation, arguing that organisational outcomes reflect the characteristics and cognitive frames of top managers (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This legitimised person-level explanation in strategy, though it treated the person largely as a bearer of demographic and cognitive attributes.

Staw's finding is notable for the present review because the mechanism he identified is not informational. Personal responsibility for the original decision increases escalation, which implies that something about the decision-maker's relation to their own prior choice — rather than their reading of the evidence — is doing the work. Section 4 returns to this.

2.3 What these accounts leave open Three observations recur in the literature and are not fully accounted for by organisational or strategic explanations.

The first is that the gap does not diminish with autonomy. Founders, owner-managers and chief executives with board confidence display persistent inaction at least as visibly as constrained managers. Where the person who must authorise the change is the person not making it, attributing the failure to organisational barriers becomes circular.

The second is selectivity. The same executive acts decisively in some domains and not in others, under identical organisational conditions. Structural inertia and measurement failure predict domain-general effects and do not readily explain domain-specific ones.

The third is the limited effect of further information. Argyris (1991) documented that additional evidence frequently increases the sophistication of the account offered without altering the behaviour described. This pattern — greater articulacy without greater action — is difficult to reconcile with an informational deficit.

Individual-Level Explanations: The Intention–Behaviour Gap

3.1 The empirical foundation A substantial literature outside management addresses the failure of intention to produce action. Sheeran (2002), reviewing the evidence meta-analytically, established that intention accounts for a modest proportion of variance in behaviour and that the failure is asymmetric: people who intend to act frequently do not, whereas people who do not intend to act rarely do. Sheeran and Webb (2016) subsequently reviewed the mechanisms underlying this asymmetry, distinguishing failures of initiation from failures of maintenance.

Two mechanisms are particularly relevant to leadership. The first is planning. Gollwitzer (1999) demonstrated that specifying in advance the situational cue that will trigger an intended action substantially raises execution rates, by shifting control from deliberation to environmental trigger. Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) confirmed the effect meta-analytically across a wide range of behaviours and goal types.

The second is habit. Wood and Neal (2007) established that behaviour repeated in stable contexts becomes cuedriven and substantially independent of current goals, operating through mechanisms distinct from those governing intentional action. Wood and Rünger (2016) reviewed the accumulated evidence and its implications for change: habit does not merely compete with intention but persists when intention has reversed. Verplanken and Orbell (2003) provided a self-report index of habit strength that made the construct empirically tractable.

Applied to leadership, this literature predicts that a leader's established behavioural repertoire — how meetings are run, how disagreement is met, who is consulted, what is escalated — will persist under stable conditions irrespective of stated strategic intent, and that intentions unaccompanied by situational specification will frequently not be enacted.

3.2 Limits of transfer The transfer to leadership is nonetheless imperfect in three respects, and the imperfections matter.

Most of this evidence concerns behaviours that are discrete, frequent and comparatively low in self-relevance: exercise, dietary choice, attendance, medication adherence. Strategic leadership actions are typically infrequent, non-repeating and consequential — a market exit, an executive replacement, a relinquishment of a decision right. Habit formation as ordinarily measured presupposes repetition that these actions do not offer.

Second, the self-relevance of the behaviours differs by an order of magnitude. Failing to exercise does not usually contradict a person's account of their own competence. Delegating a decision one has always reserved may do exactly that.

Third, and consequently, the literature's central prescription — implementation planning — presupposes that the actor's difficulty lies in translation rather than in willingness. Where the actor is ambivalent at a level they cannot readily articulate, specifying the cue does not address the obstruction. Sheeran and Webb (2016) acknowledge this boundary, noting that implementation intentions assist those whose goal commitment is already secure.

This is the point at which the identity literature becomes necessary. 4. Identity, Leader Identity, and Identity Threat

4.1 Identity in organisations Identity has become central to organisational scholarship over three decades (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Brown, 2015). Social identity theory established that group and organisational memberships become selfdefinitional and that individuals act to preserve the distinctiveness and positive valuation of identities they hold

(Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Sluss and Ashforth (2007) extended this to relational identity, showing that role relationships themselves become self-defining. Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, and Corley (2013) reviewed organisational identity formation and change, documenting the difficulty of identity revision at the collective level.

Leadership scholarship has developed the individual analogue. DeRue and Ashford (2010) argued that leadership involves a reciprocal social process of claiming and granting through which a leader identity is internalised. Lord and Hall (2005) argued that leadership skill development is inseparable from the development of a leader selfconcept, and that expertise in leadership is stored at identity level rather than as behavioural repertoire alone. Ibarra (1999) documented how professionals adapting to new roles experiment with provisional selves, and showed that identity adaptation is a precondition of behavioural adaptation rather than its consequence.

The implication for the present review is direct. If leadership competence is held partly as identity, then a change in leadership behaviour constitutes a change in identity, and will be governed by whatever governs identity change.

4.2 Identity threat Petriglieri (2011) provides the mechanism most directly applicable. She defines identity threat as an experience appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings or enactment of an identity, and specifies a set of responses through which individuals protect a threatened identity: derogation of the source, concealment, assertion of positive distinctiveness, exit, change in the meaning attached to the identity, and change in its importance.

Several of these responses are significant here because they resemble engagement. Meaning change permits an individual to accept an analysis, restate it persuasively, and leave the corresponding behaviour unaltered: the meaning of the identity has been revised, its enactment has not. This offers a coherent account of the pattern noted in Section 2.3 — increased articulacy without increased action — that the informational explanation cannot supply.

Supporting mechanisms are well established. Festinger (1957) established that conflict between self-concept and evidence is resolved in whichever direction is less costly, and revision of a self-concept is rarely the less costly direction. Steele (1988) demonstrated that self-affirmation in an unrelated domain reduces defensive processing of threatening information, which implies that success in one area can be recruited to neutralise a challenge in another. Higgins (1987) related discrepancies between actual, ideal and ought self-states to distinct affective consequences, providing a basis for affective responses disproportionate to a decision's material stakes. Oreg (2003) showed that resistance to change is partly a stable disposition rather than a situational artefact.

Taken with Staw's (1981) finding that personal responsibility intensifies escalation, this body of work suggests that a class of strategic persistence is better understood as identity maintenance than as biased judgement.

Autobiographical Memory, Narrative Identity, And Natseva's Programme

5.1 The established literature The identity literature reviewed above establishes that self-concept resists revision. It says less about how selfconcept acquires its specific content, and therefore about why particular actions rather than others prove threatening.

Autobiographical memory research addresses this. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) established the selfmemory system: autobiographical memory is not a passive record but is constructed in the service of a working self, with accessibility shaped by current self-goals. Memory and identity are mutually constraining, and the constraint operates largely outside awareness.

Narrative identity research develops the implication. McAdams (2001) argued that adults construct an internalised, evolving life story providing unity and purpose, which governs the interpretation of subsequent experience; McAdams and McLean (2013) reviewed the evidence linking narrative identity to psychological outcomes. Singer (2004) examined narrative meaning-making across the adult lifespan. Markus and Nurius (1986) added the prospective dimension, showing that possible selves — hoped-for and feared future selves — function as motivational structures that render some futures approachable and others aversive.

In leadership specifically, Shamir and Eilam (2005) applied a life-story approach, arguing that a leader's authenticity and self-concept clarity rest on their self-narrative rather than on traits or styles.

The convergence across these literatures is substantial: identity is narratively organised, autobiographically anchored, and prospectively constraining. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a structural specification of how a particular biographical episode becomes a particular persistent behaviour.

5.2 Natseva's Internal Autobiographical Map Natseva's work addresses this specification. The Internal Autobiographical Map (IAM) is presented as a structural account of how experience becomes identity and identity becomes automatic behaviour, articulated as a sequence proceeding from a significant experience through emotional encoding, meaning attribution and cognitive conclusion to identity consolidation, behavioural pattern, automatic reaction and result — with the result tending to confirm the original conclusion (Natseva, 2026a). The framework further describes any established pattern in terms of five components: a Core Experience, the Conclusion drawn from it, the Rule that conclusion generates, the Role adopted in accordance with that rule, and the Scenario that consequently recurs.

Read against the established literature, the framework's relation to prior work can be stated precisely. Its premises are largely congruent with Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000) self-memory system and with narrative identity research (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004): all treat identity as autobiographically constructed and selfconfirming. Its distinctive move is analytic rather than empirical — it decomposes what narrative identity research treats as a life story into discrete, separately addressable components, and specifies a terminal feedback loop in which the behaviour's outcome reinforces the conclusion that generated it. Whether this decomposition possesses discriminant validity is an open empirical question, and one the framework itself does not settle.

5.3 The empirical basis and its limits Several empirical studies bear on the framework. Natseva (2025a) examined IAM in relation to trauma recovery and resilience, and Natseva (2025b) applied structural equation modelling to autobiographical memory and adaptation. Natseva (2025c) reported a mixed-methods study of 384 trauma-affected participants in which autobiographical mapping was strongly associated with psychological resilience, factor analysis supported a unidimensional structure, and storytelling and positive reframing emerged as significant predictors of resilience. Natseva (2026b) sets out a neuroscience-informed account of behavioural persistence in relation to autobiographical mapping.

Three qualifications should be stated plainly. First, the studies are cross-sectional and correlational. They support the proposition that autobiographical organisation and resilience covary; they do not establish that mapping

produces resilience rather than resilient individuals producing more coherent maps. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000) model would predict bidirectional influence, and the design cannot distinguish the directions.

Second, the samples concern trauma recovery rather than leadership. Extension to executive populations is theoretically motivated — the mechanism proposed is general — but it is an extension, and the leadership application in this review is the present author's inference from the literature rather than a claim demonstrated in a leadership sample.

Third, the programme remains concentrated in work by a single originator and has not yet been independently replicated. The studies cited above provide preliminary evidence relevant to parts of the proposed structure, but they do not validate the IAM as a complete causal model, establish discriminant validity among its five components, or demonstrate transfer to executive decision-making. Accordingly, the present review treats IAM as a testable conceptual synthesis with preliminary empirical support for related associations, not as an independently validated explanatory framework.

Specific tests would materially strengthen or falsify the framework. Discriminant validity would require measures of Core Experience, Conclusion, Rule, Role and Scenario to show empirically separable structure and incremental explanatory value beyond established constructs such as narrative identity, self-concept clarity, resistance to change and habit strength. A longitudinal executive study could identify a consequential decision at the point of recognition and follow the leader through commitment, initiation and maintenance, testing whether pre-action autobiographical conclusions predict subsequent avoidance or reversal after organisational constraints and implementation intentions are controlled. Independent replication should use research teams unaffiliated with the framework's originator and samples drawn from non-clinical leadership populations.

5.4 What the framework contributes to the present question With those qualifications, the framework contributes something the leadership literature lacks: an explanation of why identity-based resistance should be domain-specific rather than general. If persistent behaviour is anchored to a particular conclusion drawn from a particular experience, then only actions that contradict that conclusion should encounter resistance. Actions in unrelated domains should not. This corresponds to the selectivity observed in Section 2.3, which habit-based and structural accounts predict poorly.

The framework also offers an account of why leadership may be an unusually resistant case. The behaviours in question have typically preceded observable success. A leader whose Rule is that final judgement cannot be delegated ordinarily possesses evidence: the organisation exists. Under these conditions, evidence that the pattern has become costly is available for assimilation as evidence that conditions have become more demanding and the Rule more necessary. This is consistent with Argyris's (1991) finding regarding successful professionals and with Staw's (1981) escalation results, and it suggests why the identity-based account may apply with particular force to accomplished leaders rather than to struggling ones.

An Integrative Reading

6.1 Four conditions The literatures reviewed are not in competition. They address different points in a sequence, and each has been studied largely without reference to the others. Read jointly, they indicate four analytically distinct conditions, each necessary and none individually sufficient for insight to become durable practice.

Recognition. The leader perceives the problem accurately and can state what action it requires. Failures here are perceptual or informational and are addressed by the strategy and cognition literatures: managerial cognition constrains what is visible (Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000) and bias distorts its weighting (Kahneman & Lovallo, 1993; Powell et al., 2011). This is the failure that information corrects, and the one most executive interventions are designed for.

Compatibility. The required action can be enacted without requiring the leader to violate or substantially revise a self-definition that is experienced as central to competence, authority, loyalty, morality, or role legitimacy. Compatibility failure is therefore narrower than generic reluctance to change. It should be expected when an action implies a self-position the leader experiences as unacceptable: for example, delegating may imply 'I am

no longer the indispensable expert'; replacing a long-serving colleague may imply 'I am disloyal'; abandoning a founder-created practice may imply 'what made me successful is now wrong'; or admitting uncertainty may conflict with an identity organised around certainty and control. The relevant literatures include identity threat and its protective responses (Petriglieri, 2011), possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), identity work (Brown, 2015), self-verification (Swann, 1983), self-complexity (Linville, 1987), the consistency preference of the self-memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), and the structural account of persistence advanced by Natseva (2026a, 2026b). These traditions suggest that incompatibility is most likely where the required action contradicts a highly central, repeatedly enacted and socially reinforced self-definition. Greater self-complexity may plausibly reduce the cost of revising any single role-based identity, whereas rigid or narrow self-definition may increase it; this is a moderator hypothesis rather than an established finding in executive samples. Where compatibility fails, the observable pattern should be a stable and articulate problem account combined with redirected action, recurrent justification, selective avoidance of one class of decisions, or affect disproportionate to the material stakes.

Initiation. A first costly or irreversible step is taken. Failures here belong to self-regulation research: absent situational specification (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), competing cue-driven responses in an unchanged environment (Wood & Neal, 2007), and low self-efficacy for the specific action rather than for performance generally (Bandura, 1997). The observable pattern is repeated near-initiation.

Maintenance. The changed behaviour survives the withdrawal of attention and the first adverse outcome. Failures here involve the reassertion of habit under stress (Wood & Rünger, 2016), organisational restoration of the prior equilibrium (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), and, on Natseva's (2026a) account, the reinforcement of the original conclusion by the failed attempt.

6.2 Status and value of the distinction This four-part distinction is not a new model and is not presented as one. Each condition is drawn from an existing literature; the contribution of stating them together is that it makes visible a relationship the separate literatures obscure — namely that four causally different failures present identically at the level of observation. In each case the leader knows and does not do.

The practical consequence is a matching problem. An intervention designed for one condition applied to a failure of another should be expected to underperform, and its underperformance is readily misattributed to the individual's motivation rather than to the mismatch. Executive development that supplies analysis addresses recognition; coaching that supplies accountability structures addresses initiation. Neither addresses compatibility, and where compatibility is the binding condition, both may produce procedural compliance that satisfies observers while leaving the behaviour intact — a pattern consistent with Petriglieri's (2011) account of meaning change as an identity-protective response.

Condition	Preliminary diagnostic question	Indicative behavioural signature	Intervention implication
Recognition	Can the leader state the problem, relevant evidence and required action accurately?	Problem is misread, minimised or attributed to incomplete/biased information.	Improve information, feedback, strategic analysis or cognitive debiasing.
Compatibility	What would taking the required action imply about who the leader is, what a 'good leader' does, or what must remain true about competence, loyalty or authority?	Accurate analysis but selective avoidance, recurrent justification, redirected action, or unusually strong affect around one decision domain.	Examine identity threat, competing commitments, self-verification and autobiographical meaning before demanding execution.

Initiation	Is the leader willing to act but repeatedly failing to take the first concrete, costly step?	Repeated preparation, near-starts, postponement, or intention without a specified cue and action.	Use implementation intentions, behavioural specification, accountability and environmental cue design.
Maintenance	Was the action initiated but abandoned after attention declined, stress increased or adverse feedback appeared?	Short-lived change followed by reversion to prior routines or restoration of the previous organisational equilibrium.	Plan for relapse, environmental reinforcement, feedback interpretation and repeated behavioural grounding.

A further implication follows from maintenance. If a failed attempt strengthens the conclusion that generated the original behaviour, then a leader who has previously attempted and abandoned a change faces greater rather than lesser resistance at the second attempt. The literature on escalation (Staw, 1981) and on defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1991) is consistent with this, though the specific proposition has not been tested directly.

6.3 What would be required to test this reading The reading is an interpretation of assembled evidence and remains empirically open. Three requirements can be stated. Classification is the first: without an instrument that assigns cases of inaction to a condition, none of the implications above can be tested, and existing instruments measure habit strength (Verplanken & Orbell, 2003) and dispositional resistance (Oreg, 2003) rather than the distinction at issue. Longitudinal observation is the second: a phenomenon defined by a sequence cannot be captured cross-sectionally. Comparative intervention trials are the third, since the matching claim is the practically consequential one and is directly testable.

Founder-Led Organisations

7.1 Founder influence in established scholarship Founder-led firms bear on this review because they minimise the organisational explanation and thereby isolate the individual one.

The established literature documents the durability of founder influence. Schein (2010) established that founders embed their own assumptions in organisational culture through what they attend to, measure, reward and model, and that these assumptions become invisible precisely as they become shared. Nelson (2003) provided evidence of the persistence of founder influence in organisational outcomes well beyond the founding period. Wasserman (2003) documented the paradox of entrepreneurial success: the founder's achievement itself raises the probability of their replacement, as the capabilities the organisation subsequently requires diverge from those that created it.

This literature establishes the pattern but treats the mechanism largely as a matter of capability mismatch and governance. What it addresses less directly is the founder's own experience of the transition: why relinquishing a decision right should be difficult for a founder who accepts intellectually that it should be relinquished.

7.2 Natseva's founder-authority work Natseva (2026c) addresses this question in a monograph, deposited as a repository record rather than published as a peer-reviewed article, concerning founder authority in the scaling of online education and the retention of intellectual control. Its argument concerns the conditions under which a founder's continued authority over particular decisions is functionally necessary as against habitually retained, and the governance consequences of failing to distinguish the two.

Read alongside the established literature, this can be positioned as follows. Wasserman (2003) and Nelson (2003) establish that founder influence persists and that persistence has measurable consequences; Schein (2010) explains the mechanism by which founder assumptions become organisational assumptions. Natseva's contribution addresses the founder's side of the same process — the internal structure that makes particular decision rights feel non-delegable — and connects it to her broader account of behavioural persistence (Natseva, 2026a, 2026b). The connection is theoretically coherent. It should be noted, however, that the monograph is conceptual and that its status as a repository deposit means it has not been subject to peer review; its propositions concerning founder authority await both peer evaluation and empirical examination.

7.3 The analytical value of the founder case For the purposes of this review, founder-led organisations function as a limiting condition rather than a special topic. Where the founder both diagnoses a required change and possesses the authority to effect it, and the change nonetheless does not occur, organisational constraint is not available as an explanation. The residual is individual, and the literatures reviewed in Sections 4 and 5 supply candidate accounts of what that residual consists of.

The governance implication is that mechanisms designed to constrain founder authority may address the symptom rather than the condition. What the reviewed literature suggests is required is an explicit distinction between decisions that genuinely require the founder's judgement and decisions that have historically received it — a distinction that is difficult to draw precisely because, on the accounts reviewed here, the second category is experienced from within as belonging to the first.

Intervention: Comparative Considerations

8.1 Established approaches The intervention literature is heterogeneous but provides several relevant comparators. Executive coaching has accumulated meta-analytic support: Theeboom, Beersma, and van Vianen (2014) found positive effects across performance, wellbeing, coping and goal-directed self-regulation outcomes, though with heterogeneity in design quality. Stage-based approaches to behaviour change, following Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), foreground readiness as a determinant of intervention fit. Cognitive-behavioural coaching combines cognitive restructuring, behavioural experiments, problem solving and goal-directed action (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007), making it particularly relevant where distorted appraisals or initiation difficulties are binding. Leadership-development research emphasises development across identity, skill and social context rather than isolated behavioural instruction (Day et al., 2014). Organisational-development approaches, by contrast, locate change partly in systems, roles, culture and feedback structures, and therefore remain indispensable where the binding condition is genuinely organisational rather than intrapsychic. Psychodynamic executive coaching adds attention to recurrent relational patterns, defensive processes and meanings outside immediate awareness (Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007). These approaches overlap in practice but imply different mechanisms of change.

Kegan and Lahey (2009) offer the closest established parallel to the compatibility account. Their argument is that apparent resistance to change can be sustained by competing commitments that operate outside awareness and protect the individual from feared outcomes; their method surfaces those commitments and tests the assumptions underlying them. The convergence with identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011), self-verification (Swann, 1983), autobiographical accounts reviewed in Section 5, and psychodynamic attention to defensive patterns is substantial. The approaches should not be collapsed, however: Kegan and Lahey organise resistance around competing commitments and assumptions; cognitive-behavioural coaching targets appraisals and behaviour through established cognitive and behavioural techniques; stage models classify readiness; psychodynamic coaching interprets recurrent defensive and relational patterns; and DCS® proposes an autobiographical sequence culminating in a revised internal decision followed by behavioural grounding.

compatible conclusions from largely independent starting points. 8.2 Direct Change Solution® in comparative perspective Direct Change Solution® (DCS®) is a five-phase intervention sequence — Awareness, Recognition, Resource Identification, New Internal Decision, and Behavioural Grounding — presented as a structured approach to sustainable behavioural transformation (Natseva, 2026d).

Its phases can be placed against the four conditions of Section 6.1. Awareness and Recognition correspond to the junction of recognition and compatibility, establishing not only that a pattern exists but that it belongs to the individual and derives from identifiable experience. Resource Identification and New Internal Decision correspond to compatibility proper. Behavioural Grounding corresponds to initiation and maintenance.

The theoretically interesting feature is the ordering. DCS® places the New Internal Decision before Behavioural Grounding, on the premise that behaviour established on an unrevised autobiographical conclusion will be vulnerable to reversal. This resembles Kegan and Lahey's (2009) sequencing of hidden commitments before behavioural testing, but differs in locating the proposed mechanism explicitly in autobiographical conclusions and identity structure. Cognitive-behavioural coaching can also address beliefs and behavioural experiments,

while psychodynamic coaching can address defensive and recurrent relational patterns; DCS® therefore should be treated as a distinct, testable sequencing hypothesis rather than as uniquely addressing phenomena absent from all established approaches. Its comparative claim would require evidence that the sequence produces incremental benefit, particularly in cases independently classified as compatibility failures.

That test has not been conducted. DCS® is presented in the source literature as a structured model with an articulated rationale; it has not been subjected to a controlled outcome trial, has not been compared directly with established coaching or behaviour-change protocols, and should not be described as clinically validated. A credible comparative trial would prospectively classify participants by binding condition, randomly assign compatibility cases to DCS®, an established comparator such as cognitive-behavioural coaching or an immunity-to-change protocol, and a credible control condition, and measure both behavioural enactment and maintenance over time. Independent investigators, preregistered outcomes and follow-up beyond the immediate intervention period would be necessary to distinguish specific mechanism from nonspecific coaching effects. Its standing at present is therefore that of a theoretically coherent intervention sequence whose central ordering claim remains empirically open.

8.3 Implications for practice Three implications follow from the review as a whole, stated as considerations rather than prescriptions.

Diagnosis should precede intervention design. The four conditions of Section 6.1 have different observable signatures, and practitioners who distinguish them are less likely to apply accountability structures to a difficulty that is not one of accountability.

Public commitment warrants caution. It is a standard instrument and is well supported where the difficulty is initiation. Where the difficulty is compatibility, the literature on identity protection suggests it may generate procedural compliance that satisfies observers, protects the identity, and consumes the attempt.

Prior failed attempts should be treated as information rather than as a starting point. If the maintenance account is correct, a leader who has attempted and abandoned a change is not simply one who has not yet succeeded, and the earlier attempt requires re-examination before another is initiated.

CONTRIBUTION AND DISCUSSION

This review brings together organisational explanations of the knowing–doing gap with research on leader identity, autobiographical memory, behavioural persistence, and founder-led leadership. Examined together, these literatures suggest that some instances of strategic inaction are more adequately understood when organisational and cognitive explanations are supplemented by identity-mediated accounts of behavioural persistence — and, more specifically, that inaction which is domain-specific, indifferent to further evidence, accompanied by redirected action, and affectively charged out of proportion to material stakes fits the identity literature better than it fits accounts based on constraint, bias or habit.

The review's contribution is threefold and lies in integration rather than invention. It establishes the boundary conditions of the dominant organisational account, identifying the class of cases it does not reach. It connects three literatures that have developed with little cross-reference — the organisational knowing–doing literature, self-regulation research on intention and behaviour, and organisational identity research — and shows that they address sequentially related rather than competing conditions. And it places a recent programme of work on autobiographical structure and behavioural persistence, including that of Natseva, in relation to established autobiographical memory and identity scholarship, identifying where it converges with existing findings, where it extends them analytically, and where its evidential basis remains preliminary.

The review does not establish that identity mediation explains most leadership inaction, and no such claim is made. Organisational constraint remains the more probable explanation in most organisational settings, and the evidence for it is stronger. The narrower claim is that a recognisable subset of cases is presently misattributed,

and that the literatures required to identify that subset already exist but have not been read together. 10. Limitations and Directions for Future Research The limitations of this review follow from its type and should be stated directly.

It is a conceptual integration and reports no primary data. The four-condition reading in Section 6 is an interpretation of existing evidence, and its central assumption — that the conditions are sequentially dependent — has not been tested; it is possible that initiation and maintenance are better modelled as partly concurrent.

The observable signatures attributed to each condition are derived from theoretical reasoning about what each mechanism should produce rather than from validation studies. Their discriminant validity is unestablished, and the practical distinction between failures of compatibility and failures of initiation may prove less clear than the theory suggests.

The review draws on literatures developed in different populations. Self-regulation findings derive largely from health and consumer domains; identity findings derive substantially from professional and organisational samples; the autobiographical-structure research reviewed in Section 5 derives from trauma-recovery samples. Transfer to executive populations is theoretically motivated in each case but empirically untested, and the leadership application of that research is this author's interpretation rather than a demonstrated result.

The review is also selective. It concentrates on leaders with substantial decision autonomy, where the organisational explanation is weakest; its applicability to constrained middle management is likely to be more limited.

Five directions for empirical work follow. First, a classification instrument should be developed to distinguish recognition, compatibility, initiation and maintenance failures; convergent and discriminant validity should be tested against existing measures of resistance to change, habit strength, self-concept clarity and implementation intention. Second, longitudinal observation should follow consequential executive decisions from initial recognition through action and maintenance, because the phenomenon is defined by a sequence. Third, the IAM components require independent psychometric examination to establish whether Core Experience, Conclusion, Rule, Role and Scenario are empirically separable and whether they add predictive value beyond established identity and self-regulation constructs. Fourth, comparative intervention research should test whether condition-matched interventions outperform unmatched interventions and whether DCS® provides incremental benefit over established protocols specifically when compatibility is independently identified as the binding condition. Fifth, the autobiographical-structure findings reviewed in Section 5 should be replicated in non-clinical leadership samples by research groups unconnected with their originator.

Conclusion

Leaders who know what is required and do not do it have been studied for a quarter of a century, principally as an organisational problem. That framing is well evidenced and remains correct for a large share of cases. It does not reach the leader who possesses the information, the authority and the resources, who describes the required change accurately and repeatedly, and who does not make it.

This review has argued that the literatures needed to address that residual already exist, in identity research, autobiographical memory, and work on behavioural persistence, and that their separation rather than their absence has been the obstacle. Read together, they suggest that insight becomes practice only when four distinct conditions are met, and that the failure of any one produces an outcome indistinguishable from the failure of the others at the level at which organisations ordinarily observe.

If this reading is sound, its practical consequence is not that leaders require more resolve. It is that the interventions applied to strategic inaction are frequently aimed at the wrong condition, and that their failure has been attributed to the individual rather than to the mismatch. Establishing whether this is so is an empirical task, and the instruments it requires have yet to be built.

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