

Why Successful People Get Stuck

5 Patterns I See Repeatedly in Coaching



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The habits, behaviours and ways of thinking that created success can stop being useful for what comes next.

One of the more interesting things I've learnt from coaching is that feeling of 'stuckness' has very little respect for success.

Some of the people who struggle most with direction are doing remarkably well on paper. They've often built the business, earned the position, raised the family and spent years solving difficult problems. They are capable people, often accustomed to being the person others turn to when problems need to be resolved.

Then, one day, something changes. The things that used to motivate them lose their lustre. Decisions take more energy. The next goal feels less compelling than the last one. They become intuitively aware that something needs to shift but struggle to identify the what.

From the outside, there may be nothing obviously wrong. In fact, life can look remarkably successful. That contradiction is part of what makes feeling stuck so confusing.

Over the years, I've noticed five patterns that appear repeatedly when successful people reach this point.

1. The strategy that created success becomes difficult to question



Success is a very effective teacher. When a particular behaviour produces a good result repeatedly, we learn to trust it.

Someone who built a career through sheer hard work may instinctively respond to every new challenge by working harder. An entrepreneur who succeeded because they maintained control over every detail may struggle to hand responsibility to other people as the business grows. A leader whose decisiveness was once a strength may become uncomfortable when a situation genuinely requires uncertainty and exploration.

None of these behaviours is inherently a problem. In fact, they may be exactly what created the success in the first place. The difficulty comes when the environment changes and the strategy doesn't.

Experience makes patterns easier to recognise, but it can also make alternative possibilities harder to see. We become understandably attached to approaches that have proved themselves. A useful question at this stage is: What am I still doing because it used to work?

That can be surprisingly difficult to answer.

2. Competence can become a trap



Successful people tend to become extremely capable. Unfortunately, capability has a habit of attracting responsibility.

You solve the problem because you can. You make the decision because it's quicker than explaining it to somebody else. You step in when something isn't being done to your standard. Gradually, your working life fills with things you're perfectly capable of doing, but probably shouldn't still be doing.

I've seen this particularly often with business owners and senior leaders.

The skills that made them indispensable early in their careers can eventually prevent the people around them from becoming more capable themselves.

There is also a personal cost. Being needed can feel rewarding, especially when competence has become an important part of how you see yourself. Letting go then becomes more complicated than simply delegating a task.

Eventually, the question may need to change from "Can I do this?" to "Should I still be the person doing this?"

Those are very different questions.

3. Achievement stops answering the question it once answered

Early in a career, the markers of progress are relatively easy to recognise. Build the business. Earn the promotion. Increase the salary. Buy the house. Create financial security. Gain recognition for being good at what you do.

Those goals can provide enormous motivation because achievement gives us both direction and evidence that we're moving forward.



Later in life or career, something interesting can happen. Another promotion, another record year or another financial milestone doesn't necessarily produce the feeling it once did.

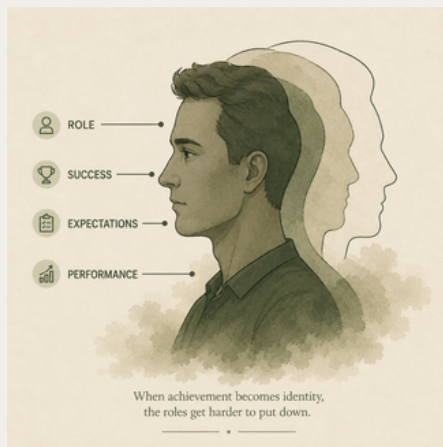
People sometimes interpret this as a loss of ambition. I'm not convinced that's always the case. Sometimes the person has simply outgrown the scoreboard they have been using.

The goals may still be perfectly respectable, but they no longer answer the deeper question of what makes the next decade meaningful.

Continuing to pursue them more aggressively doesn't necessarily solve that problem.

At this point, getting unstuck may have less to do with setting a bigger goal and more to do with deciding what you actually want the goal to be measuring.

4. Identity gets tangled up with performance



This is one of the more uncomfortable patterns because it often hides inside something that looks positive.

Being capable, successful, dependable and ambitious are qualities most of us would be pleased to have associated with us. Over many years, however, those descriptions can gradually move from describing what we do to defining who we believe we are.

That distinction matters.

If your identity is strongly connected to being the person who copes, admitting that you're struggling becomes difficult. If you've always been the provider, stepping away from work can feel irresponsible. If you're known as the person with the answers, saying "I don't know" can feel surprisingly threatening.

The result is that changing direction may begin to feel like losing part of yourself.

This is one reason apparently sensible changes can create so much internal resistance. The decision isn't only about a job, a business or a role. Somewhere underneath it sits a quieter question: Who am I if I'm no longer this person?

That deserves more attention than it usually gets.

5. Intelligent people can become very good at thinking inside their own assumptions



Most successful people are skilled problem solvers. They analyse situations, weigh alternatives and find solutions. Those abilities have usually served them extremely well.

The difficulty comes when the person solving the problem is also part of the problem.

We all accumulate assumptions about ourselves, other people and the way the world works. Over time, those assumptions become so familiar that they stop feeling like assumptions at all. They simply feel true.

This is where more thinking doesn't necessarily produce a better answer. You can spend months analysing a problem while unknowingly protecting the very belief that keeps recreating it.

Sometimes progress comes from another person noticing the pattern, challenging the premise of the question, or asking something you would never have thought to ask yourself.

That, for me, is one of the most useful functions of coaching. It isn't having somebody else tell you what to do. Most experienced people don't need another person making their decisions for them. The value often lies in having someone who can see the thinking you have become too close to see yourself.

Getting unstuck doesn't always require a dramatic change

When people realise something isn't working anymore, there can be a temptation to assume that the solution must be equally significant. Change careers. Sell the company. Restructure everything. Reinvent yourself.

Occasionally, a major change is exactly what's required. More often, the first shift is much quieter.

It might be a change in perspective, such as recognising an unquestioned belief that has gone unexamined for years, changing a boundary, handing over a responsibility, having a conversation that has been avoided, or reconsidering a definition of success that no longer fits.

The external consequences can eventually be significant, but the breakthrough usually starts with seeing the situation differently.

This is why I don't think feeling stuck should automatically be interpreted as flaw, but rather an invitation to transcend and grow. Sometimes it's simply evidence that a strategy, role or definition of success that served you extremely well has reached the end of its useful life.

After years of working with people at different stages of their careers and lives, I've become less interested in immediately asking, **"What should you do next?"**

There's usually a more useful question to explore first:

"What are you ready to see differently?"