The Success Trap

Why Getting Good at One Stage of Life Can Leave You Unprepared for the Next

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A brilliant surgeon spends thirty years perfecting a technique. A software architect masters a stack that defined an entire era of computing. A manager builds a career on being the person who always has the answer. Each of them did everything right. Each of them succeeded completely, by every measure that mattered — until the measure changed.

This isn't a story about people who failed to keep up. It's stranger than that, and more common than most people realize: the very things that made them excellent are often what leave them least prepared for what comes next.

Across nearly every profession AI is touching — and the list of untouched ones keeps shrinking — people who spent decades building real expertise are finding that expertise made obsolete before any warning arrived. They didn't get lazy. They didn't stop caring. They got very, very good at something, right up until the thing they were good at stopped being the thing that mattered.

The deeper you master something, the harder it becomes to question it — and the questioning is exactly what you need when the ground shifts.

How mastery becomes a blind spot

Here's the part that catches people off guard: this isn't about effort, attitude, or talent. It's structural.

When you get good at something, your brain does something useful and, eventually, costly. Early on, you have to think hard about what you're doing — you're weighing options, testing assumptions, staying open to being wrong. That's *generative* thinking: the capacity to question your own approach and generate real alternatives.

But mastery works by converting that generative thinking into something faster and more automatic — call it execution. The assumptions that once felt like choices start to feel like facts. You stop asking *is this still the right approach* and start simply *doing* the approach, fluently, without friction. That's not a flaw. That's what mastery *is*. It's why experts are fast and novices are slow.

The problem shows up later. The same process that builds real capability also quietly narrows your ability to notice when that capability stops working. You get better and better at running the old playbook, and worse and worse at recognizing the moment the playbook itself needs to change. The point at which you are best at something is often the point at which you are least able to see past it.

You've probably felt an early version of this. A nagging sense that something's off, even while the results still look fine. A piece of feedback you wave away because it doesn't fit what you know to be true. A younger colleague raising a possibility you find yourself dismissing a little too quickly. That's not stubbornness. That's expertise working as designed — protecting the approach that made you good, including from your own doubts.

Why AI makes this urgent now

This pattern has always existed. What's different now is the clock.

In earlier decades, the gap between one major life or career shift and the next was often long enough to reconstruct — you had years, sometimes a full career, before the ground moved again. AI is compressing that interval, across nearly every field at once. It's not that the underlying human pattern is new. It's that far more people are being asked to face it, far more often, with far less warning than before.

This is why the old advice — work harder, specialize deeper, become even more excellent at what you already do — increasingly backfires. It's the same move that created the vulnerability in the first place.

The six ways people meet this moment

Not everyone responds to this the same way, and the differences aren't about willpower. They come down to two things: whether you've kept the capacity to *question* your own approach (rather than just execute it), and whether your energy for change is still available to redirect, or locked into defending what you've already built.

Put those together, and six patterns emerge. These aren't fixed personality types — most people show features of more than one, and people move between them as circumstances change.

The Architect. Holds their own approach loosely, even while succeeding at it — asking not just "am I doing this well" but "is this still the right thing to be doing." When the ground shifts, restlessness gets read as useful information rather than a threat. This is the person who reinvents before they're forced to.

The Striver. The one most easily mistaken for the Architect — and often mistaken for it by themselves. High drive, real achievement, everything that looks like mastery from the outside. What's different is the relationship to the approach itself: it's not held as a choice, it's become identity. When that approach stops working, the striver's instinct is to push *harder* at exactly the thing that's failing — not because they're in denial, but because questioning the approach would mean questioning themselves. This is, ironically, often the most successful person in the room right up until the moment everything breaks. It doesn't have to end there. A striver who recovers the capacity to question tends to reconstruct with unusual intensity — the same drive that built the old approach gets redirected into building the next one.

I've watched this play out with a client, a division head who had spent eighteen years becoming the person everyone called when a deal was falling apart. He was excellent at it

— the fastest, most decisive closer in the company. When the business shifted toward a slower, relationship-led model, his response wasn't to notice the shift. It was to close harder, faster, on worse terms, because closing hard was the only mode he had. By the time the board stepped in, "excellent at the old game" and "unable to see there was a new one" had become the same fact.

The Floater. Adapts to whatever comes next without ever really authoring their own direction — moving from job to job, role to role, competently but reactively. This looks like flexibility, and in a stable world it functions well enough: floaters rarely get blindsided the way strivers do, because they were never that attached to any one approach in the first place. The cost shows up differently. Without ever deliberately shaping a direction, a floater never builds the deeper capacity that comes from having tested an approach against real resistance and revised it on purpose. When change starts arriving faster than one adaptation can settle before the next is needed, drifting stops being a safe strategy and starts being a losing one.

The Seeker. Has already let go of what isn't working and still has the capacity to think clearly — but hasn't yet found the next thing to organize around. This is an underrated, often uncomfortable place to be, and it's frequently misread by others (and by seekers themselves) as indecision or drift. It isn't. Everything required for reinvention is present except the destination: the old approach has been released, the willingness to question is intact, but nothing has yet supplied the alternative to redirect toward. People in this position are often searching hard — reading, exploring, talking to mentors, testing ideas that don't quite fit — and what they need isn't more analysis of what went wrong. It's exposure to the one missing piece that lets everything else they've already done click into place.

The last two patterns describe a structural condition, not a verdict on anyone's character or resilience.

The Victim. Has reached the point where the old approach clearly isn't working, but hasn't kept the capacity to imagine an alternative and can't redirect their energy toward one. The instinct is to intensify effort on the very thing that's failing — competing harder for returns that keep shrinking — while the situation increasingly feels like something being done *to* them rather than terrain they can still act within. This is often where a striver lands when the conditions for reconstruction never arrive.

Breakdown. The far edge: coherence has come apart, and reconstruction hasn't yet occurred. It isn't destiny — it marks a boundary condition, not a permanent state.

The most consequential implication of this framework may be the least intuitive: **the person who looks the most successful right now — the Striver — is often the one most at risk when the ground shifts**, precisely because their success has been built on not questioning the thing that's about to stop working.

Where this actually comes from

If two people hit the exact same career disruption, why does one reinvent and the other collapse?

Part of the answer goes back further than most people expect — often to childhood. Not because of any single dramatic event, but because of something quieter and more pervasive: whether the environment you grew up in allowed you to question things out loud, or required you to simply accept them.

Think about the difference between two households. In one, a kid's "but why do we do it that way?" gets treated as a reasonable question, even when the answer is "I'm not sure, let's think about it." In the other, that same question reads as a challenge — to authority, to the family's stability, to how things are supposed to be — and gets shut down, gently or not so gently, often enough that the kid stops asking. Neither household necessarily looks dysfunctional from the outside. Both can produce a perfectly successful adult. What they don't produce equally is the same relationship to one's own assumptions later on.

A child raised in the first kind of environment tends to carry forward a basic, almost invisible sense that *my assumptions are things I can examine* — not just facts about the world, but positions I hold and could, in principle, revise. A child raised in the second kind of environment often carries forward the opposite: a set of foundational beliefs that were never built to be questioned, because questioning them was never safe to practice. Neither person chose this. Both are simply working with the toolkit they were handed before they were old enough to know they'd been handed one at all.

This matters because those early patterns don't stay in childhood. They quietly shape how much capacity a person has, decades later, to question a career, a relationship, or an identity that's stopped working — long before any crisis makes that questioning necessary. The striver who closes harder instead of noticing the deal is different now, the floater who drifts from job to job without ever really choosing one — both are often, underneath, still running on the toolkit they got early.

None of this is destiny. People move out of these patterns all the time. What makes that possible is what I call a *breakthrough moment* — and it reliably requires three things together: enough safety to loosen your grip on an old belief without feeling attacked, enough distance to actually see that belief as a belief rather than simply "how things are," and something real to move toward, not just something to leave behind. All three have to be present together. Safety without that distance just produces comfort. Insight without safety is destabilizing. And safety and insight with nowhere to go leave you suspended — the Seeker's position. This is why the right therapist, mentor, or coach can unlock something years of white-knuckled effort couldn't — they're not supplying more willpower, they're supplying the specific combination of conditions the old pattern was built to resist.

What you can do

You can't out-hustle this pattern. But you can work with it, deliberately, before the moment of maximum pressure arrives.

1. **Notice restlessness before it becomes crisis.** That nagging sense that something's off, even while results look fine, is often the earliest and most useful signal you'll get. Don't wait for a forced ending to take it seriously.

2. **Practice holding your own approach as a choice, not a fact.** Periodically ask, of the thing you're best at: is this still true, or is it just familiar? The goal isn't chronic self-doubt — it's keeping the muscle of questioning alive, even while you're succeeding.

3. **Watch for the striver's trap in yourself.** If your instinct under pressure is always to push harder at what you already know, ask whether you're defending an approach or defending your own sense of who you are. Those are different problems with different solutions.

4. **If you're in the Seeker position, stop looking for a total overhaul.** You likely don't need to rebuild everything — you need the missing piece. Look for people, ideas, or experiences that could supply a real next direction, not just more analysis of what isn't working.

5. **Build your own version of the breakthrough conditions.** Find or create relationships where you can loosen a belief without feeling judged, get outside perspective on what you can't yet see about your own thinking, and stay in contact with real alternatives — not just critiques of where you are now.

6. **If you're in a position to shape others' early conditions — as a parent, mentor, manager, or teacher — err toward curiosity over compliance.** The capacity to question one's own assumptions later in life is, in real part, built or foreclosed early. This is one of the highest-leverage things you can hand someone.

Before the ground moves

The hardest part of this pattern is that it doesn't announce itself. It doesn't feel like failure while it's happening — it feels like competence, like things working exactly as they should. That's what makes it dangerous, and that's also what makes it different from an ordinary setback: there's no single moment that tells you it's time to act, only a quiet accumulation you can choose to notice or choose to explain away.

If you're reading this and something in your own life feels a little too settled, a little too automatic, a little too much like the thing you're best at is starting to strain against something you can't quite name — that's worth taking seriously, now, while you still have room to act on it voluntarily.

The alternative isn't more effort. It's the willingness, every so often, to ask whether the thing you've gotten so good at is still the right thing to be doing at all.

If this pattern resonates and you want the full theoretical treatment — the underlying mechanism, the research propositions, and how it connects to the broader ISLE framework — you'll find it in the ISLE Research section.