

Ego's Justification Loop

Leadership's Most Dangerous Illusion

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Abstract

You Are Right. That Is Exactly Why You Are at Risk. — A leadership essay on ego and the justification loop. Gökhan Gülatik. At a certain point in your career, very few people push back. This is not a sign of growth — it is the beginning of the most dangerous phase of leadership.

There comes a point in your career when almost no one challenges you anymore.

Your decisions tend to be right. Your experience looks like truth. Those around you confirm this with their silence, their approval, their “you know best.”

“This point is not progress. It is where the danger begins.”

The Brain and Power

Unquestioned success quietly prepares the ground for ego. Do not read “ego” here as the hollow arrogance of self-help books. I am speaking about what psychologists call *rightness bias* — the condition in which the belief “I know what is right” becomes neurologically hardwired.

Research is clear: as status rises, the brain’s error-detection mechanisms weaken. Power partially disables the prefrontal cortex’s critical judgment function. In other words: the higher the position, the lower the awareness of fallibility.

Leadership experience makes you wiser. But it simultaneously makes you less questioning.

The Loop

The justification loop operates as follows: early successes reinforce confidence. Confidence reduces the frequency of challenge — from both the leader and those around them. Fewer challenges mean fewer corrections. And because the feedback loop is

broken, errors go undetected until they are costly.

The most dangerous moment is this: even when you are wrong, your brain attributes the failure to circumstances — not to your judgment. This is the worst feature of the justification loop: *it is self-protecting*.

The Real Cost

The highest price of this loop is not wrong decisions. Decisions can be corrected.

The real cost is the team.

A team that is constantly approving eventually stops thinking — it starts filtering. They don't do this deliberately. They learn: challenging the leader's view wastes energy. Staying silent is safe.

The organisation's genuine voice is slowly cut off. Yet the leader continues to believe that real conversations are happening.

"The loneliest leader is not the one no one visits. It is the one everyone says yes to."

The Breaking Point

This is not a character flaw. It is what happens biologically under the sustained influence of power.

But the difference lies here: some leaders know this mechanism and actively disrupt it. They do not wait for the truth — they search for it. They deliberately place people around them who will challenge them. They stop asking "Am I right?" and start asking "Where might I be wrong?"

This looks like a simple mindset shift. It is not.

As status and experience accumulate, asking this question becomes neurobiologically harder. It requires an act of will — it is not automatic.

The leader who breaks the justification loop is not weaker. They are stronger. Because the capacity to see clearly is the foundation of decision quality.

Both diamonds and coal take shape under pressure. The difference is in the internal structure.

Ego makes that structure invisible. Self-awareness is the only thing that protects it.

— Gökhan Gülatik

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This essay is inspired by the second book of the Breaking Point Leadership Series.

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