

Stages of Leadership Development

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Summary

Current global trends call for executive leaders who have reached later stages of development and demonstrate a high level of maturity in dealing creatively with increasing complexity, uncertainty, diversity, and numbers of paradoxes. These executives engage in generative collaboration with leaders from other sectors (public, private or civil society), thus enhancing organizational and societal learning. They accelerate their own development through personal and interpersonal practices, as well as by being open to learning and showing mutuality and vulnerability in their leadership role.

Why is leadership development important?

The most challenging problems that organizations and societies face now – economic instability, environmental degradation, increasing gap between rich and poor, lack of meaning – have been largely created by “conventional” leaders who are at earlier stages of development: they have been maximizing their own interest (ego-centric stage) or that of their organization (socio-centric stage), with little consideration of the larger and longer-term consequences on the environment and society. Globalization, increasing reliance on market forces, and unethical corporate practices have provoked responses – such as mobilization and protest of civil society organizations, development of international reporting standards, pressure for increased transparency and corporate social responsibility – which in turn bring another level of complexity for executive governance. A post-conventional or world-centric stage of development is now required for leaders to solve rather than aggravate this new set of global and local challenges.

What do we mean by development?

In the context of human development, we distinguish between *lateral* and *vertical* development. Both are important, but they occur at different rates. Lateral growth and expansion happens through many channels, such as schooling, training, self-directed and life-long learning as well as simply through exposure to life. Vertical development in adults is much more rare. It refers to how we change our interpretations of experience and how we transform our views of reality. It corresponds to an increase in awareness, of what we pay attention to and therefore influence. In general, transformations of human consciousness or changes in worldview are more powerful than any amount of horizontal growth and learning.

The metaphor of climbing a mountain can serve as an illustration of what it means to gain an increasingly higher vantage point. At each turn of the path up the mountain I can see more of the territory I have already traversed. I can see the multiple turns and reversals in the path. I can see further into and across the valley. Once at the summit, I can also see behind to the shadow side and uncover formerly hidden aspects of the territory. Finally, I can see beyond my particular mountain to other ranges and further horizons. The more I can see, the wiser, more timely, more systematic and informed my actions and decisions are likely to be because more of the relevant information, connections and interrelationships become visible.

Development in its deepest sense refers to transformations of consciousness. Because acquisition of knowledge is part of horizontal growth, learning about developmental theories is not sufficient to help people to transform. Only specific long-term practices, self-reflection, action inquiry, dialogue – and living in the company of others further along on the developmental path – has shown to be effective.

What happens in the context of vertical development?

- The unfolding of the human potential towards deeper understanding, wisdom and effectiveness in the world occurs in a logical sequence of stages or expanding worldviews from birth to adulthood. The movement is often likened to a spiral.
- Overall, worldviews evolve from simple to complex, from static to dynamic, and from ego-centric to socio-centric to world-centric.
- Later stages are reached only by journeying through the earlier stages. Once a stage has been fully explored, it remains a part of the individual's response repertoire, even when more complex, later stages are adopted
- Each later stage includes and transcends the previous ones. That is, the earlier perspectives remain part of our current experience and knowledge (just as when a child learns to run, it doesn't stop to be able to walk).
- Each later stage in the sequence is more differentiated, integrated, flexible and capable of optimally functioning in a rapidly changing and complex world.
- People's stage of development influences what they notice or can become aware of, and therefore, what they can describe, articulate, influence, and change.
- As development unfolds, autonomy, freedom, tolerance for difference and ambiguity, as well as flexibility, reflection, and skill in interacting with the environment increase.
- A person who has reached a later stage can understand earlier world-views, but a person at an earlier stage cannot understand the later ones. The latter is the source of many misunderstandings.
- Development occurs through the interplay between person and environment, not just by one or the other. It is a potential and can be encouraged and facilitated by appropriate support and challenge. The depth, complexity, and scope of what people notice can evolve throughout life, but our knowledge and insight is always partial and incomplete.

Most developmental theories divide the full-spectrum trajectory of human consciousness into four main tiers: pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional, transpersonal. Despite the vast space open for development, most people in modern society function at the conventional stages. Only about 10% to 20% of adults have reached post-conventional stages.

Transpersonal ways of meaning making are even rarer. This is to be expected because any society tends to rely for its smooth everyday running on a citizenry that works within its current institutional structures and values.

In general, post-conventional individuals are middle-aged, more educated and/or experienced, and they have reached higher levels of professional accomplishment. These people have achieved success for themselves and their organizations because of their capacity for more integrated and complex thinking. Research with leaders who are at these post-conventional stages shows that their companies do better over time than those run by conventional managers. Post-conventional leaders:

- Have a broader, more flexible and more imaginative perspective on the whole organization and its context.
- See promising connections and opportunities in novel places, and deal with complex problems in creative ways.
- Recognize multiple ways of framing reality and understand that personal and organizational change require mutual, voluntary initiatives, not just top-down hierarchical guidance.
- Take creative steps to encourage these initiatives and make corresponding changes in infrastructures.
- Realize that power exercised in such a way as to make oneself vulnerable to transformation can generate voluntary transformation in others, rather than compliance or resistance.
- Intentionally focus the company's attention on the discrepancy between intention to change and performance, and help team members recognize and correct incongruities among their visions, strategies, behaviors and outcomes.
- Practice systems thinking and inventive systems design, have a longer time horizon (up to several generations), involve a wide variety of stakeholders in dialogues, and seek reconciliation among their conflicting claims.
- Acknowledge their part in co-creating current reality, sense in the present moment the new reality that is emerging, and attract others' energies to bring it out and give it form.

The Leadership Development Framework

The Leadership Development Framework (LDF) is a full-range model of growth in adulthood that describes the stages of development from egocentric opportunism to wise, timely and world-centric action. Developed by Susanne Cook-Greuter and Bill Torbert, the LDF applies a belief in human potential for life-long transformation to the professional and business world. When applied to managers and leaders, the LDF provides a way of understanding how they tend to interpret events and, thus, how they are likely to act in a given situation or conflict. Although people may have access to several stages as part of their repertoire, they tend to respond spontaneously with the most complex one they have available. Under pressure and rapid change conditions, people often resort to behavior patterns from earlier stages. In contrast, moments of perceiving life in ways associated with stages much later than one's center of gravity are rare. These can be glimpsed during peak moments or temporarily manifested under ideal support conditions.

Practices to support vertical development

The shift from conventional to post-conventional leadership can be accelerated by engaging in both personal and interpersonal practices. Personal practices lead to conscious engagement in individual action inquiry, for example: keeping a journal about one's personal observations, reflections and learning, especially in times of stress and change; clarifying one's intentions and being aware of the discrepancies between one's outcomes, behavior, strategies and intentions; surfacing and challenging one's deepest assumptions and competing commitments; deepening one's intuition through consciousness-raising practices such as meditation or martial arts.

Interpersonal practices enable a leader and his/her team or network to engage in collective action inquiry, for example: using the ladder of inference to uncover the source of our assumptions and attributions about each other; practicing reflective listening as well as high-quality advocacy and inquiry in daily interactions; developing dialogue skills with groups of diverse people; addressing conflicts as opportunities to learn; applying systems thinking to complex issues; working creatively with dilemmas and paradoxes by exploring the pros and cons of each poles in a polarity map; building a shared vision by seeking the active involvement of a wide diversity of stakeholders; growing action-learning communities; collaborating actively with leaders from other sectors.

Benefits of a developmental perspective

A developmental perspective is useful in many ways. It aids the work in organizations on multiple levels. It often provides a more powerful explanation for misunderstandings and conflict among people than leadership type and style alone. Daniel Goleman offers an interesting hybrid between leadership style and developmental stage using different levels of emotional intelligence to describe various leadership styles. His research showed that leaders with the greatest emotional intelligence (most self-awareness, self-management and social skills) – that is those who would test high on a developmental test – had the most positive effect on working climate.

Post-conventional leaders will be particularly effective when a longer-term perspective is needed and the diverse claims of many stakeholders need to be reconciled through collaborative inquiry. Generally, they will be in a better position to guide their organization through development stages that will enable to adapt to a more turbulent and complex environment.

Executive teams represent one of the best practice fields for leadership development, as well as the cornerstone of a learning organization. Their effectiveness in triggering organizational transformation depends largely on the stage of development of key executives, particularly the CEO: their level of awareness, personal maturity, and commitment to vertical development of others will also benefit the internal and external networks that they are part of.

Finally, while lateral development and skill training have been the traditional domain of leadership training and development, developmental frameworks deliberately aim at both lateral enrichment and vertical transformation as a necessary component of life-long learning and adaptation to the ever more rapidly changing demands of a global society.

Bibliography/References

Note: This article builds on parts of an unpublished article by Susanne Cook-Greuter: Making the Case for a Developmental Perspective, 2004. Further information about developmental theory and the Leadership Development Framework are available on Susanne's website: www.harthillusa.com.

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