

The Map and the Territory: Stages of Vertical Development

Vertical Development is about expanding and deepening our capacity to see, understand, empathize, and respond in a diversity of situations. As we grow and evolve in this way, our experience of self, others, and the world shifts, leading to new ways of doing and being, that in turn lead to other changes that we cannot always foresee.

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Ok, let's recap. Three points you should have taken from the first article in this series on Vertical Development:

- Vertical Development refers to a path of increasing capacity to see, understand, empathize, and respond to ourselves, others, and the world. Increasing capacity comes from changing how we make sense of ourselves and what happens, and how we act in relation to that way of sense making.
- Complexity demands an increased capacity. With complexity comes varied and sometimes competing ideas, emotions, dynamics, and options operating within multiple systems. As we develop new dimensions of sense making, we can access

increased degrees of freedom in how we respond and lead.

- Horizontal and Vertical Development paths work together. Skill and knowledge from Horizontal Development leads to practice. Practice with reflection and feedback leads to increased awareness. Combining this with a willingness to be changed by awareness and experience (critical to Vertical Development) can transform how we come to know ourselves and influence our world.

Did you get it? If you did, then you will likely have many more questions. This next article will attempt to answer the BIG question ... what is the map for the Vertical Development path? Put simply, how do I mature as a

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What is the map for the Vertical Development path?

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leader? Just as the structure of a window both frames and limits our view of the outside, our frame of mind both clarifies and limits what we can imagine, consider, and interact with. [Susanne Cook-Greuter](#), [Bill Torbert](#), [Bob Kegan](#), and others, through their significant empirical research and practical applications, have identified several stages that map out how our frames of mind evolve in adulthood.

These stage models provide powerful and cutting edge clarity for how leaders can mature to the next level. They are however merely maps that guide development. To be useful, they need to be integrated with real life

experience, motivation, and support. In fact, we have found that maturing vertically as a leader comes with exploration, experience, and effort in four specific forms:

- Challenge from different and sometimes conflicting perspectives, emotions, and dynamics.
- Catalytic experiences that involve risk, loss, or require significant shifts in your way of approaching life.
- Conditions that provide scaffolding or support for approaching things in new ways.
- Courage to let your self be changed. This courage often comes from the clarity about what matters most.

We will go into these 4 forms in a later article. For now, let's look more at how the models for Vertical Development illustrate what each stage might look like in a leader and what that means for their development path.

Though the stage names vary within each model, they all share the following:

- A stage is based on one's "center of gravity" or how one tends to make sense.
- Each stage includes and transcends the sense making and behaviors of earlier stages. You have to go through earlier stages to get to later stages- there are no short cuts.
- Higher or "later" is not better; there are pluses and minuses with each stage. Though later stages provide greater access to sense making at different stages.
- As stages advance so does the capacity for handling complexity, nuance, and difference in thought, emotions, and relationships.
- We are all limited by what we can see and experience from our own stage-defined worldview.

Think of what happens when you move to a new town. With the onset of relocation, you collect information about the neighbors, referrals for doctors, handymen

and lawn care, car pools, grocery stores, different routes to work, and of course—most essential—the nearest Starbucks.

This input leads to patterns of behavior and interaction with the environment, resulting in specific and most likely new connections and focus, shaping your day-to-day choices and actions, and eventually making your new town start to feel like home.

The process of transformational growth progresses in much the same way. It involves differentiation, or the gathering of new and diverse input and information, and integration of the information with experience and one’s sense of self. Understanding of the differentiation and integration process allows for support with the iterative and not always quick Vertical Development path. Just as adjusting to a new environment requires patience, time to re-orient, and opportunities to learn from error and experience- maturing vertically takes time, support, and the understanding that growth is a process that cannot be forced, but rather unfolds through opening to the

new and novel, and incorporating that input into new ways of experiencing oneself and the world.

The following describes the 7 stages that make up the Vertical Development framework. The stage names used here come from Susanne Cook-Greuter’s model, The Leadership Maturity Framework. The table below shows the different stage categorizations for three of the common Vertical Development frameworks.

Group-Centric (Stage 3) Characteristics:



- Pleasant
- Identify with the group
- Not a clear independent self
- Prefer not to stand out as different

Form of thinking:

- Easily understand the tangible, concrete, obvious, external presentation, and cliché
- Judge things as good if accepted by the group or convention

Stage Number	Kegan <i>Form of Mind</i>	Cook-Greuter <i>Sense Making</i>	Rooke & Torbert <i>Action Logic</i>	Percentage of Adult Population*
2/3	Socialized (3)	Opportunist	Opportunist	4%
3		Group Centric	Diplomat	11%
3/4	Self-Authoring (4)	Skill Centric	Expert	37%
4		Self-Determining	Achiever	30%
4/5		Self-Questioning	Re-Defining/Catalyst	11%
5	Self-Transforming	Self-Actualizing	Strategist	5%
5/6		Construct Aware	Alchemist	2%
6		Unitive	Ironist	<1%

What they can't see:

- Internal experience, feelings, and shadow
- Cannot easily put self in the place of others
- Dependent on others for self-definition
- Unaware of an authentic self that is separate from the group

Coaching Opportunity:

Support those at the Group-Centric stage to become more aware of their own emotions, ideas, and contribution.

Skill-Centric (Stage 3 / 4) Characteristics:



- Can see self as separate from rather than subjected to group's perception of them
- Increased focus on individual differences, specialties and contribution
- Desire and motivated to stand out as competent in their own way

Forms of Thinking:

- Tend toward the pragmatic and clear, concrete distinctions created by words such as 'should,' 'ought to,' 'yes, but,' 'right and wrong'
- Strive towards the right answer and, in that sense, tend to assign either blame or victory to one individual

What They Can't See:

- Shades of gray and interdependencies that contribute to success or system failure
- Inner experience and shadow
- Validity of others' points of view and feelings
- Human dimension of work and importance of relationships to effectiveness
- Connections between the big picture and details

Coaching Opportunity:

Build confidence in their particular expertise and

areas of specialization. Support them to elicit, receive, and implement feedback. Encourage reflection on their impact and effectiveness in addition to accuracy and correctness. Support them to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others; emotional intelligence models and competencies are a good focus here, especially listening.

Self-Determining (Stage 4) Characteristics:



- Busy and often overwhelmed with all they want to accomplish
- Balance is a common concern
- Can be highly self-critical and driven
- "Goals," "values" and "purpose" are commonly used words

Form of Thinking:

- Highly value self-efficacy and agency
- Structure of interpretation is often shaped by scientific thinking, truth seeking, and self- defined pictures of success

What They Can't See:

- That not everything can be controlled or self-determined
- The constructed nature of goals, values, and reality
- There is more to life than achievement

The Coaching Opportunity:

Support them to explore the distinction between achievement and fulfillment. Explore the impact of their actions on others and the dynamics between tasks, goals, and relationships. Support them in cultivating balance in their work and lives by clarifying and centering on what is most important.

Self-Questioning (Stage 4 / 5) Characteristics:



- Can seem lost, adrift, and not directed despite achievement and goal attainment
- Increased focus on questioning of

the “why” underneath their choices and actions

- Contemplative and questioning

Form of Thinking:

- Less interest and dependence on scientific certainty and judgment
- Curiosity about the inner experience as well as subjective and alternative perspectives
- Becoming aware of impact, and implications, including shadow and own contribution to situations
- Relativistic worldview becomes predominant, as in “it depends...”

What They Can’t See:

- How a relativistic view is also just another perspective and comes with its own set of elements, impact, and implications
- Can be adverse to choice

The Coaching Opportunity:

Support them in exploring and being in the present. Help them to identify and challenge long-held assumptions about themselves, others, and the world. And, as the hold on those assumptions loosens, create new narratives that better fit with who they are becoming. Help them establish support in their life for their evolving sense of being and new choices. Encourage contemplative practices that build in opportunities to connect with both their inner purpose and the larger context or spiritual awareness.

Self-Actualizing (Stage 5) Characteristics:



- Able to own and integrate disparate elements of own awareness and actions, including shadow
- Not easily “grabbed” by their own emotions or conflict with others
- Able to not only see but work with

different perspectives

- Come across as competent, reasonable, and sometimes cold or distant

- Can be in ambiguity and hold paradox

Form of Thinking:

- Recognize that story and narrative are continuously changeable and that they have the power to shift the narrative when needed
- Think in systems and in terms of how one thing affects another
- Can consider both the big picture and the pragmatic elements

What They Can’t See:

- How ego is also a construct
- Limitations of striving for self- actualization and understanding others
- There is an inherent aloneness at the Self-Actualizing stage that can come through in a subtle, barely acknowledged need for self-affirmation

The Coaching Opportunity:

Support them in clarifying and defining interdependencies and how that awareness contributes to the greater good. Help them find language to describe what they see from the balcony and how that translates into pragmatic action and relationships. Encourage them to find others they can relate to. Support contemplative practices and maintenance of space to be, appreciate what is, and attune to intuition and subtle experience. Work with them to build capacity to observe their own meaning making/ narratives in real time.

Construct Aware (5/6) Characteristics:



- Can see how ego focus can also limit development
- Development seen as a construct
- Feel alone often

- Hold experience lightly while also deeply in it
- Have capacity to live with paradox and uncertainty and see them as the way things are
- Authenticity that comes through in easy presence

Forms of Thinking:

- Think beyond the here and now to beyond own lifetime to include global, historic, and future perspectives
- Aware of limitations of language
- Aware of non-duality of nature and their own separation from it

What They Can't See:

- Attachment to the idea of nonattachment
- How desire to be released of their own ego is a trap in and of itself
- Staying grounded in reality (or the constructed reality of the moment) can be an effort

The Coaching Opportunity:

Support them in accepting the aloneness they feel and in finding ways to connect with others that are satisfying. Explore means of creative expression that connect with inner and bigger picture experiences and to be with their own waves of thought, emotion, and experiences. Support them to build structure that keeps them grounded in reality.

Unitive (Stage 6) Characteristics:



- Accepting and unassuming presence
- There is a sense of interconnectedness and oneness with all beings that is at once calming to be around and inspirationally affirming
- Able to witness and be in flow of experience
- Can also seem chaotic and not able to fit in easily in the day-today

Forms of Thinking:

- Time is expansive and cannot be contained in action and words
- Everything is a construct and constructs are disposable and replaceable
- Have little need to make sense of things as they see how everything is made up anyway

What They Can't See:

- Subtle bias towards bliss, beauty, and out-of-mind/body states
- Slight attachment to spiritual perspectives, belief that spiritual or a particular school of thought is better or “the way”

The Coaching Opportunity:

Unitives usually will not seek coaching. Also, it is rare to have a coach who is at this level of sense making necessary to coach someone at this stage. Coaching at this stage might look more like a spiritual partnering or simply joining them in a collective practice of witnessing and deepening contact with the non-dual in day-to-day life. For more insights and examples of what these stages look like in real life and leadership practice, check out Susanne Cook-Greuter in her paper [Nine Levels of Increasing Embrace](#), David Rooke and Bill Torbert in their article [Seven Transformations of Leadership](#), and Barrett Brown in his white paper on [Conscious Capitalism](#).

And, lastly,... some words from our old friend Carl Jung: “Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your creative individuality alone must decide.”

This is a model and all models are constructs...to be used responsibly. Tune in for our next article in this series on Vertical Development to learn about how Vertical Development and the path to leadership maturity involves much more than our heads alone. ■

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