

Coaching Vertically



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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As coaches, how we bring ourselves to the work is our most important instrument. Our own experiences and perspectives can't help but shape how we see, understand, and approach our clients and their situations. For this reason, awareness of and ability to work with our own sense-making informs our coaching assessments, lines of inquiry, and capacity for empathy. I became fiercely aware of this several years ago when I worked with a coach myself.

Seeking support with a career transition, I shared with my coach how I found parenting to be one of the most profoundly significant experiences in my adult life. My coach responded by asking questions about how I might explore work in the child care field given my enthusiasm for child-rearing. This line of inquiry took me aback. Parenting was so much more to me than kid care. How could my coach not have seen that? What did he hear in what I said that provided a view of my experience so different from what was true for me? I felt unseen and misjudged by his response as I had a deep, not fully recognized, desire to contribute to something much bigger than myself that channeled the passion and commitment that came through in my parenting and yet, went far beyond the mechanics of child rearing. The coach, operating from a Skill-Centric mindset had focused on the skills and tasks needed to succeed as a parent. (For more on the Skill-Centric stage, see article #2 in this series, The Map and the Territory.) He was encouraging me, as with strengths based coaching, to build on what I am good at. Nothing wrong with that - except that it missed what was really going on for me.

Coaches also risk “over-coaching” with their clients. It is not uncommon to assume a client is at a later stage of development and sense-making than fits with their actual stage. A coach at the Self-Questioning stage, for example, may easily embrace failure and their own vulnerabilities and see that both are integral to success. (For more on the Self-Questioning stage, see article #2 in this series.) A client at an earlier stage such as Group or Skill-Centric may find it not only unnerving, but downright dangerous to do as the Self-Questioning coach suggests and share examples of their own failures and fears with their team in order to learn from the past.

The coach needs to meet the client where they are, with acceptance for their unique pace and place in the development process. This level of acceptance works best when it comes from, not only an intellectual, but also a visceral understanding of what experience is like

at their respective stage along the vertical development path.

When we talked with our clients about what contributed to transformative experiences, **four elements stand out as significant:**

1. Challenge of different perspectives that introduce new ways of thinking.



2. Catalytic experiences that require letting go of what is familiar and taking risks to explore the new.



3. Conditions that support and enable new ways of being and doing that allow for new practice and with that practice, develop, over time,

**new neural and relational patterns,
that eventually become habit.**



**4. Courage that comes from clarity of
what matters most.**



What do these four elements mean for coaching vertically?

- Coaches need to have a well-grounded assessment of their own sense making. If not specific to a stage model like Cook-Greuter's Leadership Maturity Framework or Bob Kegan's Frames of Mind, they should at least have an awareness of their own limitations and barriers to understanding how their client's make sense of the world.
- Bring in somatic, narrative, or shadow coaching methods that introduce ways of thinking and

experiencing oneself and the environment that are new or outside the client's current frame of thinking.

- Create safe-to-fail or other types of real time experiments and practices that create just the right level of discomfort and energy to drive new attitudes, behaviors, and neural connections.
- Offer one of the Vertical Development assessments described below along with a debrief with a coach trained in that assessment.
- Use a stage development framework such as the Leadership Maturity Framework-Mature Adult Profile or Frames of Mind to ground and guide developmental edges, paths, and practices. Sharing resources with the client to get them thinking in terms of their own structures of sense making is a good place to start. Bill Joiner's and Stephen Joseph's Leadership Agility, Bill Torbert's and David Rooke's Harvard Business Review article, Seven Transformations of a Leader, Jennifer Garvey-Berger's Changing on the Job, and this article series are accessible and applicable resources to share with clients.
- Start with and continue to anchor the coaching work in the big questions of "for the sake of what?", and "what matters most?" to keep clarity of purpose front and center, fueling the courage needed for clients to allow themselves to be changed by their experiences and changing perspectives.

A growing body of assessments for Vertical Development is finding its way into organizational and leadership development practice. These are powerful tools that can go quite deep into a client's sense of identity. Because of the depth and complexity of these frameworks coaches should either become trained in or worked in tandem with a professional certified with these tools when administering to their clients.

The Maturity Assessment Profile

One of several assessments that measure Adult Stage or where someone is on the Vertical Development path, the

MAP is a sentence stem completion instrument, based on the long established, well-validated Washington University Sentence Stem Completion test (WUSSCT). Susanne Cook-Greuter adapted the MAP for use with the Leadership Maturity Framework and leverages a global team of certified scorers and coaches to deliver the assessment. The rigorous training of those who score the assessment and customize the reports to speak directly to a client's development edge makes this assessment distinct and impact full.

The Subject-Object Interview

The Subject Object Interview is a method developed by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey. It is also the basis of the Growth Edge Interview developed by Jennifer Garvey-Berger and her Cultivating Leadership colleagues. It requires a face-to-face interview of about 90 minutes that is transcribed, scored, and synthesized into a report. The interview process itself can be a transformative experience. For more information, contact the experts at [Cultivating Leadership](http://www.cultivatingleadership.co.nz/) (<http://www.cultivatingleadership.co.nz/>)

360 Assessments

At this time, two 360 assessments exist that use a vertical lens. Informed by several Vertical Development or Adult Stage frameworks and the theory behind them, [The Leadership Circle](https://leadershipcircle.com/) (<https://leadershipcircle.com/>), this 360 considers capacity building from many angles. It is easy to administer and should be debriefed by a coach certified in the instrument.

The Leadership Circle also offers a Leadership Culture Assessment that considers how behaviors and the underlying attitudes, emotions, and dynamics create culture.

The [Leadership Agility 360](http://www.changewise.biz/?page_id=310) (http://www.changewise.biz/?page_id=310), based on Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs' book Leadership Agility, is directly and explicitly connected with the Adult Stage model, using the adult

stage names coined by Bill Torbert. What makes this tool unique is the way it uses specific behavioral anchors to identify stage, providing the client with a clear map of behaviors they exhibit.

Vertical Development is going through its own maturation process. As more leaders and organizations become familiar with the frameworks and experience how sense making shapes and infuses growth and change, more tools and approaches will likely make their way into our tool kits.

Vertical Development adds a vital dimension to leadership cultivation. Unlike development that focuses on skill and expertise, it requires practice, reflection, patience, and the willingness to be changed by experience. It also can't be taught easily in a typical training session, which is why coaches and mentors play a significant role in supporting Vertical Development. The vertical growth process is iterative and organic... meaning it can be easy to get lost, lose heart, or forget what it was all about in the first place. All good reasons to have a coach near by who really gets it! ■

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