

**Evolved Leadership:  
A Key Advantage for the Twenty-First Century Organisation?**

**Even for stable organisations with experienced leaders and managers, most of today's change efforts are characterised by a sense of urgency and complexity that calls for new, more agile and adaptable forms of leadership.**

Increasingly, change efforts are cross-functional requiring the commitment of people across organisations, spheres of authority and among differing commitments and priorities. In addition, to bringing about desired results, today's leaders are often expected to understand and "solve" complex, adaptive challenges that are difficult to define as problems and highly resistant to ready-made solutions.

***"Leaders are made, not born,  
and how they develop is critical  
for organizational change."***

David. Rooke & William. Torbert

To grow and expand beyond current ways of leading, managing and organising is a significant and constant challenge. For the most part current leadership capability often struggles to lead transformational change, to develop others to their full potential, to build collaborative teams, and to be innovative. Yet, more than ever, there is a need to build leadership capability in order to support organizational success in confronting adaptive challenges of increasing magnitude.

Over the past fifty years a number of researchers have been exploring the relationship between the ongoing development of the adult mind and leadership effectiveness. One result of this research has been the development of an emerging body of knowledge and experience about the potential for the "vertical" development of leaders.

**Vertical Leadership Development**

Leadership development can be described as both horizontal and vertical. Most current approaches to helping leaders grow in effectiveness are focused on horizontal or lateral development: adding new skills and competencies, increasing knowledge and know how. There is, however, at certain points and in certain circumstances, great value to be gained by focusing attention on vertical or transformational development.

Vertical development occurs much less frequently than horizontal development. Vertical development changes the way we make sense of our experience and transforms our view of reality. One of the major benefits of vertical development is that it is made possible by the expansion of what we are aware of and what we can pay attention to, and therefore what we can influence and make decisions about. This expanded awareness is a hallmark of many, if not most, successful leaders. It's significance is only likely to grow in importance as we face increasing complexity in the business and social landscape.

Most people who have observed and researched the vertical or transformational development of leaders refer to stages or phases, each unique in its world view and also progressively more open in its capacity for horizontal development. These stages/phases are discontinuous and concern the state of consciousness in thinking about yourself and your relationship to others and your habitual way of taking action in the world.

A developmental stage is simply an identifiable patterning of the way in which a person functions in the social world that forms and is formed by how that person makes meaning of, or explains, their experience. It is important to note that stages/phases are not well predicted by age or education. Nonetheless, age does seem to be a "boundary variable" in that it would be unusual for a 20 year old to be at a very late stage of development.

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While the “experts” vary to some degree, three main adult stages/phases have been distinguished:

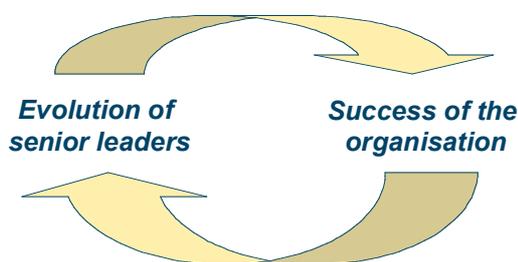
- An “**Other-dependent**” stage/phase in which individuals define themselves by the expectations of others.
- A “**Self-authoring**” stage/phase in which individuals act from a sense of their own inner system of values and beliefs which enables them to be self-guided, self-motivated and self-evaluative.
- A “**Self-aware**” stage/phase in which people have learned the limits of their inner system - and the limits of having an inner system at all and develop increasing levels of present-moment awareness and integration of thinking, feeling and acting.

As growth occurs throughout life we seem to move through this more or less logical sequence of stages/phases or expanding world views. The movement from earlier (less complex) to later (more complex) stages of development is an evolution from simple to complex, from static to dynamic and from ego-centric to socio-centric. Later stages are not replacements for earlier stages. Rather they are “expansions” allowing for more complex and dynamic view points. Thus the skills and capabilities most strongly associated with earlier stages (and often subject to powerful horizontal development processes) remain part of a leader’s repertoire of responses.

Leaders operating from later stages of development are better able to understand, empathise and lead those at earlier stages because they have traversed that landscape as a natural part of their own development. They do so with greater autonomy, freedom, flexibility, tolerance for difference and ambiguity as well as capacity for self-reflection and to engage in the everyday communicative interactions that determine where we will go and what we will do next. This expanded capability enables later stage leaders to:

- Achieve success for themselves and their organisations because of their capacity for integrated and complex thinking, feeling and doing.
- Cultivate relationships with many stakeholders, see promising connections and opportunities in novel places, and deal with problems in adaptive and proactive ways.
- Lead collaborative sense-making processes that enable engagement from multiple perspectives and in multiple contexts.
- Help people recognise and respect key transitions and stages of advancement by simultaneously supporting horizontal, novice to expert development in specific fields of expertise and vertical development of sense-making and meaning making capacities.

### Leadership Evolution and Organisational Success



It seems highly probable that there is a link between the developmental evolution of the leaders in an organisation and the depth and duration of organisational success. This is not to say that developmental evolution is the only factor that influences organisational outcomes – merely that organisations that have evolved leaders seem to have a greater chance of creating and maintaining sustainable success.

The diagram is drawn to suggest that a reinforcing loop can be created. The more “evolved” the leaders of an organisation are the more successful it is likely to be and the more successful (and therefore evolved) an organisation becomes the more likely it is that its leaders will continue to evolve and develop. The reality, though, is that organisations, when faced with changes at the top or at times of crisis, are most likely to revert to an earlier, less evolved state.

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### Later Stages/Phase of Development

Continuing research by Bill Torbert from the Boston College in the US and UK consultant David Rooke, along with a variety of collaborators, has applied this thinking specifically to the development of leaders. They have sought to describe the way people (specifically leaders and managers) make sense of how to take action and how others act in the world and use the idea of an “action logic” to describe each stage/phase or lens through which the world can be understood.

They have observed closely the various transitions adult leaders make and suggest that what might be considered true adult development, becoming an independent individual, begins with what they call the Expert action-logic. At this point people develop a strong problem-solving orientation. They want to differentiate themselves from others by developing their own opinions and areas of expertise. Many people begin to grow into this stage during their late teens or early twenties. A smaller but still sizable percentage of people then grow into a so-called Achiever action-logic. Adults at this stage develop a strong individual identity and work from a consciously developed and examined system of values, beliefs, and goals to live by.

By conventional standards, the Achiever action-logic represents full leadership development. Most top executives and administrators, state and national politicians, influential scientists, and other highly successful professionals have stabilized their development at this stage. Even in the world's most economically advanced societies few leaders grow beyond it.



Over the past thirty years, continuing research and ongoing profiling, has described potential further stages of development, which Torbert and Rooke refer to as post-conventional action-logics, reached by only a small percentage of people. This research is showing that people at these post-conventional stages are more deeply purposeful, more visual in their thinking, and more resilient in responding to change and uncertainty. They're more welcoming of diverse perspectives and have a greater capacity for resolving differences with other people. They are also more self-aware, more attuned to their experience, more interested in feedback from others, and better at working through inner conflicts.

Importantly, from both an individual and organisational point-of-view, the vertical development of leaders beyond the conventional Achiever action-logic carries both opportunities and risks. While the vertical development of leaders into these later stages can bring great benefits as noted earlier, there are also significant risks. Many people, especially in the Individualist action-logic, find it increasingly difficult to operate with integrity in a conventional organisation as they begin to become aware of the constructed and contextual nature of our views of the world and our ways of operating. People at this stage begin to lose their dependence on “theory based” approaches to leading and managing, including their own, and are much more inclined to see their work as “making things up as they go”. As they make this transition some become organisational mavericks while others develop the capacity to operate as “tempered radicals”. Still others move quickly to the Strategist action-logic.

At the Strategist action-logic and beyond, people seem to have developed the capacity to integrate and operate from the multiple past perspectives that have made up their developmental pathway, hence the term Strategist. Significantly people operating from this action-logic seem to be much more able to maintain a moment-by-moment awareness of the interplay among their intentions and anticipations, their sense of their own actions and “performance” and the

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responses/results generated in their interaction with others and the world around them. They also develop a stronger sense that meaning develops in the interaction with others and the world and is not “knowable” except through the whole process of action and response. Typically people at this stage have developed a heightened sense of their embodied knowledge and see thinking, feeling and doing not just as related but as inextricably and indistinguishably tangled.

### Implications

In order to “bring out” some sense of the implications of this way of thinking about the potential, ongoing, vertical development available to us it seems useful to think about how people might approach the everyday conversations through which we determine where to go and what to do next. At each of these action-logics we approach these conversations with a different kind of awareness and a different intent.

In the Expert action-logic our intention is to improve and accomplish things within the established rules or frameworks or according to the traditions of our particular “craft”. We do so, however, with only a modest capacity for reflection and lower levels of awareness about how these intentions are being responded to by others and the effectiveness with which they are being translated into action and results. Consequently much of our work-related conversation at this stage is focused on making assessment or giving direction/advice according to the rules or established procedure. People who operate largely through this action-logic are more inclined to give advice about the “right” way to do things and are often perceived to be micro-managing - focusing attention on the detail of how tasks are to be done.

In the Achiever action-logic we develop a robust capacity to be reflective after the fact. We develop ways of working that are based on thinking about our experience. In particular we are able to seek and digest single loop feedback about the relationships between actions and results and adjust our actions accordingly. Indeed, it is this expanding awareness, and willingness to respond to experience that “contradicts” the rules, that makes it possible for people at this stage to develop their own “self-authored” ways of taking action and understanding the actions of others. In our everyday work related conversations at this stage our intention, then, is to facilitate the achievement of desired outcomes in ways that are consistent with these self-authored values. People operating from this frame are much more likely to adopt or at least be testing facilitative and collaborative styles of relating through conversation. They are also much more likely to return to a conversation saying something like: “I’ve been thinking about what we said yesterday and I wonder if ...”.

At the point (the Individualist frame) at which we experience a transition to post-conventional ways of operating, we begin to develop the capacity to step back “in the moment” and attend directly, albeit briefly, to current assumptions, feelings or behaviour that might otherwise escape our attention. This enables us not just to adjust our actions on the run, with a view to achieving better outcomes, but also to direct attention to the way in which our conversation is proceeding. People at this stage/phase might well be the one’s who say: “Look what we are doing by speaking in this way!” or “How did we get ourselves to this point of disagreement?”. People at this stage are developing a capacity to think ABOUT things that have happened in the past and WITH things that are happening in the moment. Feedback is beginning to be an integral part of how these people operate. Reflection and learning are not just things they do from time to time but are increasingly “built in” to their way of being in the world. It is at this point that the capacity for double-loop learning really kicks in as one’s awareness expands to include the thinking or frameworks that lie behind particular ways of acting and perceiving. At this stage people have a keen sense of the contingency or constructed nature of all ways of acting and a growing desire to “test” or challenge established and taken-for-granted notions. Those who operate from the Individualist frame are often experienced as “difficult” in everyday work-related conversations, as their intention is to experience life (and work) as it is and not to allow people to be “deceived” by untested assumptions or mental models of which they are unaware.

In the transition from the Individualist to the Strategist action-logic two key things appear to have happened. Firstly, while Strategists are still keenly aware of the relativistic nature of things, this no

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longer stops them from taking a position in relation to key issues. Whatever opinions or positions they hold, however, are held lightly, with an openness to learning more and changing their view. Indeed, people at this action-logic know that further experience will lead to shifts in how they see things. As a result, their capacity for ongoing moment-by-moment reflection and inquiry continues to develop and mature. Secondly, at this action-logic people seem to have integrated their prior experience in ways that enable them to draw on it without being constrained by the limitations of earlier logics. Seemingly because of this, they have developed a deep desire and capacity for leading and working collaboratively and co-creating with others. Strategists will approach everyday work-related conversations with an evolving sense of purpose and a desire to actualise it through deep collaboration with others. Strategists retain and develop further the Individualists' capacity to reflect "in the moment" and to turn awareness to how they and any group they are involved with are "managing" themselves. In addition, though, they are increasingly aware of and pay more and more attention to questions of the purpose and possibly the morality of particular courses of action. They are the ones who are most likely to say: "Actually, I question why we are doing this at all." or "Whose interest is being served by doing this in this way?"

Let me conclude with a personal note. I have been exploring these ideas since late 2005 and have found them to be useful in two ways, in particular. Firstly, as a powerful way of understanding and "re-storying" my own developmental path. Secondly, as a new and fruitful lens on how I, my clients and colleagues and people generally make meaning about their actions and the actions of others. Seeing through this lens has expanded my repertoire of responses and I now have a keen interest in exploring just how we make our world through our everyday interactions. Nonetheless I retain some doubts. But not about whether these ideas "describe" in some way things that I and others can relate to and can relate to our experience. Rather my doubt is about the tendency for people, myself included, to write as if this were a "fixed-for-all-time" way of understanding the development and expansion of our experience. I am not so sure that this is so. I am more inclined to think that, as more people progress along these "vertical" pathways we will come to understand more clearly that it is our communicative interactions with others that constitute our world. If, as a consequence, we begin to regard the possibility that there is nothing out there except other people as a huge opportunity for re-discovering our humanity and we learn to re-value the power of our ordinary, everyday interactions in shaping our future it is possible, perhaps even likely, that the shape and trajectory of our vertical development will evolve as well.

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### **NOTE:**

Books and articles marked with an asterisk provide the most practical introduction to this material

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