

Transforming leadership development

Using Adult Development Theory as a guide

Ann's a responsible, hard-working engineer, a highly intelligent and motivated team player. She continually keeps herself updated on the latest developments in her field and has developed a reputation as a go-to person for reliable, quality delivery. Whenever a manager, team member or customer asks her to do something, she gets it done without a fuss.

Eager to grow her career, Ann proactively prepares herself by enrolling in a few management courses and subscribing to the leading management and business journals.

When Ann's boss announces his retirement, she seizes the opportunity to apply for the role. Based on her excellent track record of performance and in-depth knowledge of the company's product suite, she is promoted to lead the engineering division.

Originally excited about the opportunity she'd been presented with, Ann quickly begins to feel in over her head. As an individual contributor, she'd been able to turn to her boss and customers for direction and feedback to know what to do and whether she was doing a good job in her role. Now, she's inherited the responsibility for setting and driving

an agenda for the team in a highly competitive and rapidly changing market and feels overwhelmed trying to meet the needs of all the different stakeholders vying for her attention.

How is Ann supposed to choose a direction when the context is evolving so fast and everyone seems to want something different from her and her team? How can she possibly know if she's doing a good job when she no longer receives the praise she'd become so accustomed to using as her gauge for success? Nothing in her management training has provided her with the answers she's craving now.

“*Nothing in her management training has provided her with the answers she's craving now*”

Before long, Ann's team begins to complain of confusion as her decision about the team's direction and priorities seems to flip-flop each time she meets with a different stakeholder. As team members become disengaged and her division's performance begins to slip, the executive team informs Ann that she needs to step up and hold her team accountable. Well-meaning advice that

Ann just isn't yet sure how to execute on.

How did this happen? Ann's smart, motivated, and well-informed – why hasn't this appointment turned out the way everyone hoped? Does she need more information on how to manage a team? Or is she perhaps missing a key ingredient in the support she needs to turn into the thriving leader she has the potential to be?

The missing link in leadership development

In his book, *In Over Our Heads*, Harvard professor and developmental psychologist Robert Kegan describes the stages of increasingly complex cognitive development that humans have the potential to grow into over the course of their lives, what's known in the research literature as Adult Development Theory (ADT).

“*To transition from doing what others expect of her to becoming completely self-directed is an enormous increase in developmental demand*”

As opposed to the process of learning more information or adding to what someone knows, for example teaching

management principles through a book or training course (a process referred to as Horizontal Growth), ADT posits a process of transformation in one's meaning-making system, which involves a change in the way a person knows what she knows (a process referred to as Vertical Growth).

At each successive stage of development, a person gains access to greater mental complexity, an even broader world view, an ability to take a more diverse range of perspectives on difficult challenges, and is able to see more options in any situation.

If we return to the example of Ann, the primary way she was accustomed to knowing something like if she was doing a good job or making the right decision was based on the feedback she received from other people (in Kegan's model this stage of development is referred to as the Socialised Mind). If her boss asked her to do something, that was the right thing to do. If a customer praised her efforts, she knew she'd done a good job.

While a perfectly useful way of making sense in straightforward situations where clear directives simply need to be followed, as Ann stepped

into leadership, she quickly felt the limitations of this stage of development or way of knowing.

Suddenly Ann's context shifted to demanding that she be able to locate her own internal voice to navigate and decide between competing stakeholder interests; that she be able to access her own internal compass for making sense in complex, uncertain situations; that she be able to make a decision independent of others' feedback or guidance as to what the right thing to do in an unprecedented situation is (Kegan refers to having these capacities as the Self-authoring stage of development).

As straightforward as it may sound, it's crucial to recognise that expecting Ann to suddenly transition from doing what others expect of her (or what societal, cultural or organisational norms say she should do) to becoming completely self-directed – particularly in a complex, fast-changing environment – is actually an enormous increase in developmental demand.

The good news? With effective support (what Kegan refers to as creating a 'holding environment') Ann has every possibility to develop a more complex

meaning-making system that will help her meet the demands of leadership.

The trajectory of adult development

The figure over the page illustrates the three consecutive stages of increasing mental complexity (with periods of transition between each) that Kegan's model suggests we have the potential to grow through during adulthood if we invest in our Vertical Growth: the Socialised Mind, the Self-authoring Mind, and the Self-transforming Mind.

As we advance to each successive stage, we *include and transcend* the previous stages meaning we have access to the earlier meaning-making systems as well as to that of our current stage, leaving us with an increased range of capacities, options and perspectives than we had previously. For example, someone with a Self-authoring Mind can choose to operate in a self-directed fashion or follow the guidance of an authority figure, whereas someone with a Socialised Mind will only feel like they truly know what the right thing to do is if they have received direction or endorsement from a source outside themselves (an authority figure, a trusted expert, cultural norms, etc).

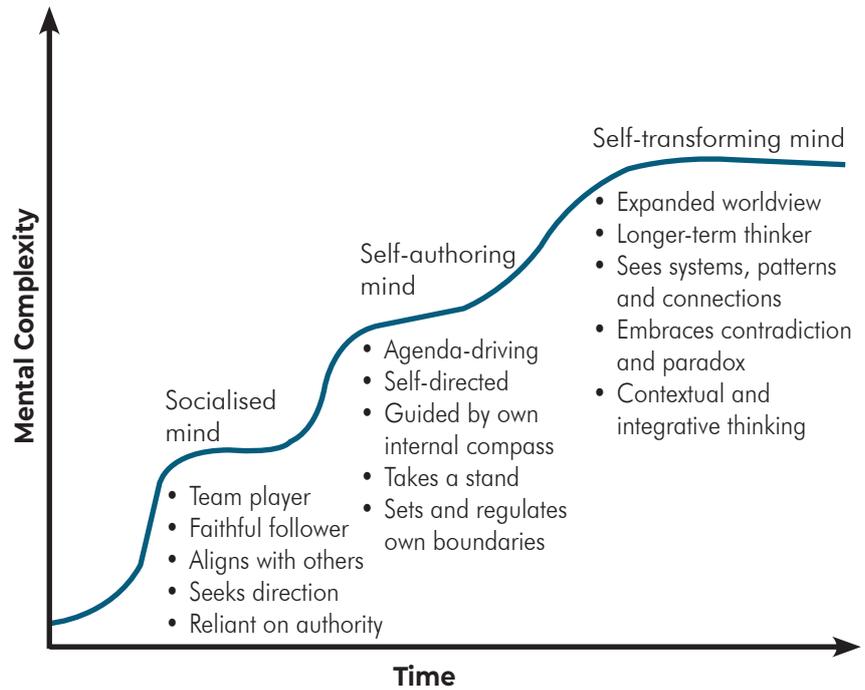


What does more complex meaning-making look like in practice?

To provide you with a sense of what it looks like to operate from different stages of mental complexity – and how the range of possibilities and choices a leader has access to expands at each stage – let’s dive into a specific example. The chart below, based on research from developmental expert Susanne Cook-Greuter, focuses in on how leaders at different stages of development perceive feedback.

As you can see, at earlier stages of development, feedback tends to be experienced as a personal attack. If one continues to develop, however, defensiveness eventually shifts to an openness to other perspectives and even a welcoming of feedback for self-improvement. At the latest stages of development, those with a Self-transforming Mind demonstrate an unparalleled ease and agility in handling feedback and conflict, experiencing it as not fundamentally different from praise.

THREE PLATEAUS IN ADULT MENTAL DEVELOPMENT



Source: Adapted from *Immunity to Change* by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey and *Verticle Leadership Development – Part 1* by Nick Petrie

Caveats in using ADT

ADT offers a powerful roadmap that can help us understand how we can better support leaders in their development, but it’s important to recognise that as with any model, there are limitations and ethical considerations to be aware of. While not exhaustive, here are three key ones for your reflection:

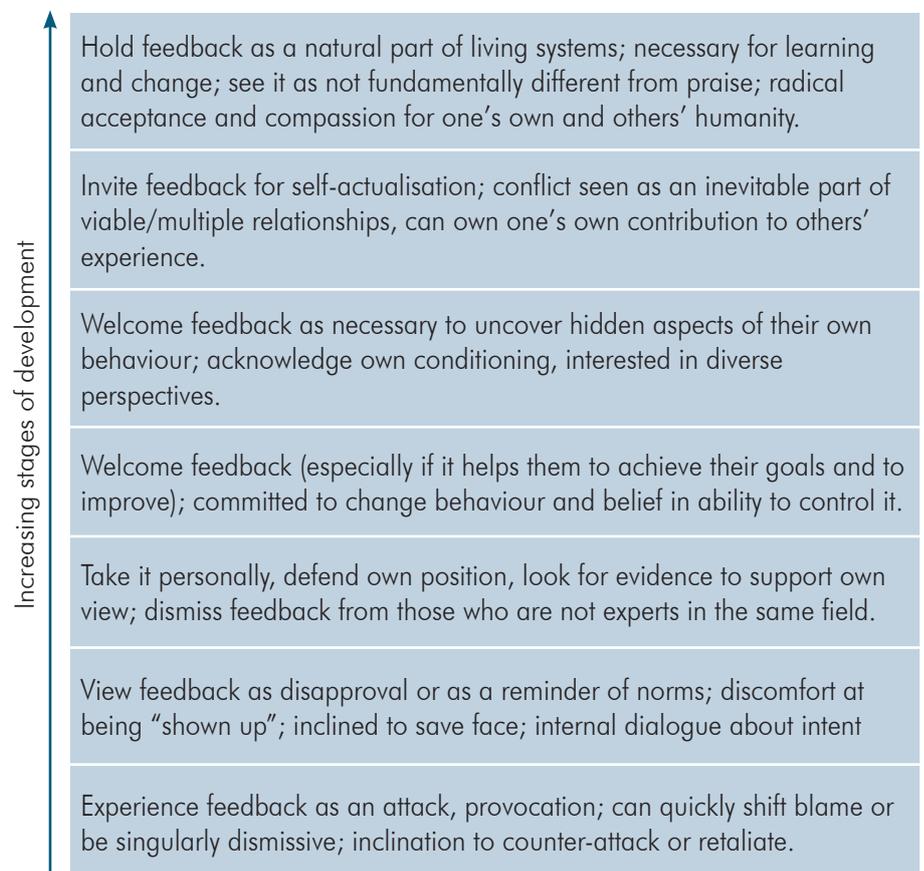
1. Development isn’t a fixed trait

ADT offers us a framework to understand our potential to grow increasingly sophisticated internal meaning-making systems that are a fit for the growing external complexity we’re facing in the world of work. As such, it would be inappropriate to use ADT as a tool for simply classifying people into static categories labeled ‘low potential’ and ‘high potential’. Development is a dynamic process, a journey that, with the right support, we can all embark on.

2. Avoid snap judgments

Tempting as it may be jump to

INCREASING STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT



Source: Dr Susanne Cook-Greuter, as presented on <https://integrallife.com/stages-leadership-maturity/>



conclusions about someone's stage of development, it's impossible to know what stage someone is capable of operating from simply from observing them.

If you want to support the Vertical Growth of leaders in your organisation, there are a variety of sophisticated, research-based measures designed for this purpose, which can be administered by qualified practitioners. Examples include the Subject-Object Interview, the Growth Edge Interview, the Global Leadership Profile, and the Leadership Maturity Assessment Profile.

3. Bigger isn't necessarily better

Vertical Growth is not a matter of bigger (ie more mental complexity) is absolutely better but rather about how fit-for-purpose our current stage of

development is for what our context is demanding of us.

To illustrate this point, consider the metaphor of driving a car.

Being able to operate a stick-shift does provide you with a certain advantage in that you have the capacity to drive both manual (more complex) and automatic (less complex) vehicles, a capacity that the automatic driver does not have. However, being able to drive a manual vehicle does not necessarily mean you're a better, more moral, kind or intelligent driver than someone who can only drive an automatic.

Remember, just as a more complex idea is not necessarily more valuable than a simple one, no stage of development is inherently better than any other.

A person's current stage of development is a kind of diversity that is so hidden, almost no one recognises it – but it nevertheless affects everything a person is able to think or do. With knowledge of Adult Development Theory, we can better design experiences that are both supportive of peoples' current meaning-making systems as well as of their growth.

Aenslee Tanner (ACC) is a certified leadership coach specialising in adult development and Growth Edge Interviewing. Her research-based coaching methodology draws on adult stage (vertical) development and complexity theory, neuroscience, positive psychology, and high-performance sport. Learn more at aensleetanner.com

