

Innovation. Diversity. Exponential change. We live in a fast-changing, increasingly complex and interconnected world. The impacts can be felt in nearly every industry in every country and are placing new demands on leaders. How can you cultivate the capacities required to adapt and thrive as a leader today?

This essay will explore the benefits and impact of focusing on your Development (ie Vertical Growth).

Adult Development Theory

The normal course of human development is marked by stages of increasing mental capacity (from Stage 1 in early childhood to Stage 5, which can be reached in late adulthood). [1] While many people are familiar with child development (and the very visible physical changes that accompany the cognitive shifts), once people are physically 'grown up', many do not realize that cognitive development has the potential to continue throughout adulthood as well.

Not only *can* cognitive development continue throughout adulthood, research has shown that leaders with greater mental capacity are actually *more effective* at leading through change and complexity. [2] The reason for this is that leaders at more advanced stages of development are able to think in more complex ways. [3] One could say that the inner complexity (of their mind) is a match for the outer complexity (of their environment).

The difference between Learning and Development

The terms Learning and Development are so frequently used together that they are often mistaken for synonyms. But the distinction is an important one, especially in the context of developing leaders to thrive in organizations experiencing increasing Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA).

Take the example of a newly promoted leader who isn't providing (much needed) feedback to her team members. You might think to send this person to a management course where she'll **learn** all about the benefits and importance of providing feedback to her team, as well as different ways to deliver feedback (the sandwich technique, the coaching approach, etc). If the leader simply had a gap in knowledge and the training course filled it, then it's likely she will now be able to engage in the practice of providing feedback to her team.

If, however, the leader already knows all about the importance of feedback yet still avoids delivering it to her team - say because she's worried about ruining the relationship she has with her team members or feels shaky and on the verge of tears whenever she attempts to have a feedback discussion - then it's likely this person needs support to **develop** the capacity to deliver feedback in a calm, confident and constructive way.

The key takeaway here is that just because someone knows what to do or who she/he wants to be doesn't mean that this person can automatically do or be it. Knowledge does not automatically translate into capability.

The importance of Vertical Growth for leaders today

The difference between knowing and being able to embody and execute on what you know is a critical one for leaders today to understand. Consider the metaphor of your mind as a cup. Pouring more knowledge, skills, and experiences into the cup can be thought of as Learning or Horizontal Growth. Expanding the size of the cup so that you have greater capacity to do more with whatever's in the cup can be thought of as Development or Vertical Growth.

While Horizontal Growth is important for expanding the information you have available to you, it's Vertical Growth that enables you to take a more diverse range of perspectives on difficult challenges, transforms how you 'show up' and how you are able to *be*.

The table below outlines further distinctions between Horizontal and Vertical Growth. [4, 5]

Type of growth	Horizontal / Learning	Vertical / Development
Type of change	Technical change	Adaptive change
What	Knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies (eg using a tool, following a process)	Mental capacity, cognitive stage of development, behavior, who you're being (eg being more strategic, calm, confident)
When	Useful when a problem is clearly defined and there are known techniques for solving it	Useful in environments that are more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)
How	Transmitted from expert sources (event)	Must be earned for oneself (process)
Metaphors	Installing new software programs Pouring more information into the mental "cup"	Upgrading to a newer computer/operating system (OS) Expanding the size/capacity of the cup
Supportive interventions	Training, mentoring	Coaching, leadership programs with the right mix of stretch and support
Measurement	Technical/skill assessments 360-degree feedback	Subject-Object Interview/Growth Edge Interview Sentence Completion Test/Leadership Maturity Framework

Case study

Let's look at an example of how focusing on a leader's Vertical Growth has been impactful.

Sue (name has been changed) is a high-achieving woman, an executive in her growing family business, a wife and mother to three young children, a volunteer on a local board, and active in many community activities.

Sue sought coaching to support her in reducing her stress and increasing her self-confidence, especially when making decisions. She wanted to take the business down a new path but was struggling to provide feedback to members of her team and to set a clear direction for her staff to follow. She was also aware that her tendencies to listen rather than speak at board meetings and to automatically put her hand up any time anyone asked for a volunteer were not helping her reach her goals.

Sue had grown up with powerful female models in her mother and grandmother from whom she'd subconsciously picked up the lesson that a strong woman is one who looks after others first; prioritizing herself would be selfish.

Sue's personal standard of striving to be all things to all people, to never let anyone down was weighing on her and she had begun to notice that some of the many balls she was trying to juggle were starting to drop, which worried her terribly.

In this case, Sue knew how she wanted to be different, she just wasn't yet able to be that way. In the coaching, we focused on the following developmental ideas [6] to support her Vertical Growth:

Question authorities

By shifting from being unaware to being aware of how the lessons her female role models had imbued her with were influencing her behavior, Sue was able to reflect, challenge and loosen the hold they had on her, leaving room for new possibilities.

Write definitions

The practice of rewriting her definition of a strong woman from someone who never lets anyone else down, to being someone who is realistic about her limited time, and eventually to being someone who has the courage to go to places that are uncomfortable, gave her a new, more empowering and sustainable standard by which to measure herself.

Focus on authorship

With no role models of what it might look like to have an adventurous life without being selfish (something she longed for), Sue explored her ability to forge her own path and serve as a role model for her children by considering, 'what would it look like to live life as a caring adventure?'

Perspective taking

Initially Sue struggled to voice her opinions, say 'no' to others' requests, and share feedback with her team members because she was trapped in thinking that she had to choose between either being in relationship with others or

speaking up (which she had concluded would mean hurting others' feelings). By shifting from an either/or perspective to both/and, she opened up a new range of possibilities for herself.

As a result of her development, Sue was able to tap into her increased capacity to:

- say 'no' to initiatives that were outside her priorities
- write her own definition of success
- discover her ability to get strength from inside (what she can control) rather than outside (what she can't control)
- prioritize looking after herself as a way to be better equipped to support others (ie putting her own air mask on first before assisting others)
- speak up at company board meetings
- steer the company in a new direction
- provide team members with feedback
- celebrate her efforts more often and spend less time beating herself up.

The fact that Sue's developmental transformation extended well beyond the realm of work became clear when her husband expressed his surprise to her one evening saying, "I'd hoped you'd grow to be able to say 'no' to things but I didn't realize you'd be saying 'no' to me, too!"

It's true that some people seem to plateau, becoming stuck in their ways because they falsely believe that whatever stage of development they've achieved at that point is "just the way I am." What the science of adult development and Vertical Growth show us, however, is that with the right support, change is always possible. In today's challenging times, that's a very hopeful thought indeed.

Sources:

[1] Kegan, R. (1994). In *Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Harvard University Press.

[2] Kegan, R. Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity To Change: How To Overcome It And Unlock The Potential In Yourself And Your Organization*. Harvard Business Review Press.

[3] Petrie, N. (2014). *Future Trends in Leadership Development*. Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from URL <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/futureTrends.pdf>

[4] Petrie, N. (2014). *Vertical Leadership Development Part 1*. Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from URL <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/VerticalLeadersPart1.pdf>

[5] Garvey Berger, J. (2011). *Diagnosing the Change You Want to Make*. Cultivating Leadership. Retrieved from URL <https://www.cultivatingleadership.co.nz/change/2011/04/diagnosing-the-change-you-want-to-make>

[6] Garvey Berger, J. (2012). *Changing On The Job: Developing Leaders For A Complex World*. Stanford University Press.