

Expanding Personal and Organisational Efficacy by Increasing Cognitive Complexity

According to Heifetz and Linsky, as leaders ascend the corporate ranks and grow in their careers, they must increasingly embrace a strategic mindset, where they are able to take a “helicopter” or “balcony” view of what is happening. I, too, have witnessed that leaders unable to take such an elevated stance failed to be considered high potential and high performing at performance review time. Moreover, lack of a balcony view undermines leaders’ ability to navigate the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions most business currently operate within.

Although various explanations may be offered for why particular individuals fail to exercise strategic mindsets, what the leader needs in such cases is advancement to a further developmental stage marked heightened self-complexity. That is, rather than simply acquiring knowledge and skills (referred to as horizontal development), the traditional fare of training and leadership development, leaders need to expand their awareness of *how* they are thinking, feeling, and being in the world (referred to as vertical development). While leaders need both horizontal and vertical development, opportunities for vertical development are woefully lacking in most organisations. Moreover, the human (and organisational) tendency is to reach for the quick fix, which tends to be simple and reductionistic, taking us further away from developing our ability to deal with the complex. For example, rather than stepping back to deeply examine a situation to identify and address the root causes, we simply correct or suppress the symptom.

This article discusses adult development, explains how Growth Edge Coaching helps advance our development throughout adulthood and the outcomes we may anticipate from such development. A brief case is then presented.

Adult Development

Although we typically think of development in terms of children, American developmental psychologist Robert Kegan explains that the adult mind also continues to grow. This ongoing development prompts us to see the world in new, different, and often more complex ways throughout the lifecycle. Neuroscientists refer to this as *neuroplasticity*, meaning the brain’s ability to make new connections and reshape itself as we learn and gain new experiences.

Leadership development expert Jennifer Garvey Berger described five stages of development: magical childhood, self-sovereign, socialised, self-authored, and self-transforming. As we move through these stages, we gain a larger perspective, a richer view of what is happening, and a deeper sense of the interconnections of the elements within a given situation. Depending on our stage of growth, we vary in how we perceive and make sense of the world, take responsibility and make decisions, and deal with complexity and ambiguity. Each stage makes the next one possible, and successive stages build upon each other, like the rings of a tree.

At the same time, no stage is better than another. Instead, each stage offers its own gifts, and each is appropriate for certain situations. Ideally, the impetus for growth comes from our context and its demands, and we respond by advancing through one or more stages. When we feel “over our heads,” it means that the complexity of our situation exceeds the complexity of our minds. Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey advise that in such cases, we either need to “reduce the world’s complexity or increase our own.” A way to increase our complexity of mind is through Growth Edge Coaching.

Growth Edge Coaching

Growth Edge Coaching blends the concepts of adult development with coaching. One tool used in this approach is a focused 90-minute interview called the Growth Edge Interview, which invites the client to tell several stories from his or her life. The coach's focus is to get curious and understand the client's meaning-making system in an effort to determine the client's current stage of complexity. For example, a client who tells stories about protecting their turf and defeating the competition may consider safety paramount, potentially indicating a socialised mindset.

Once the stage is understood, more exploration can happen, and the client is supported through dialogue and experimentation in developing compassion for others' perspectives and exploring alternate approaches. In some cases, the result experimenting with different types of action and creating new awareness.

Central to all of Growth Edge Coaching is the belief that mind development works from the inside out: The more we understand ourselves, the better and more we relate to others. Pema Chodron describes this as *working with* rather than *struggling against* our environments, situations, and individuals within them. Accordingly, during Growth Edge Coaching sessions, we work with what is present with loving-kindness, stay curious about what it means, and harvest the gifts to create a path forward.

Outcomes

Growth Edge Coaching is associated with three important outcomes:

1. Enhanced flexibility and capacity for co-creation. It is not uncommon for leaders to discard ideas and feedback—even when they asked for them—if what they hear clashes with their preconceived thoughts. As these leaders increase their cognitive complexity through Growth Edge Coaching, they begin to understand and hold other people's point of view (albeit depending on the stage with a lingering yet intense attachment to their own ideas). As they move further through the stages, leaders gain more awareness of others (and how tightly they are attaching to their own ideas). Even further through the stages, compassionate response and genuine consideration of other ideas becomes possible, eventually leading to true collaboration and co-creation.
2. Enhanced compassion for self and others. Compassion emerges when we genuinely open ourselves to understand others and relate to them, without rushing to judge or fix them. With less judgment and more dialogue and understanding, servant leadership or conscious leadership also become possible. At a personal level, we end up leading a life where there is less labelling, more genuine and authentic interactions and conversations with others. It also allows thinking more broadly about how to create a context for individuals to grow.
3. Improved ability to handle complexity. Research has shown that those leaders who are in transition and are moving towards the later stages of development are better equipped to manage the complexity of today's world and have substantial higher scores in business effectiveness. Beyond the self-authored stage, leaders experience a more nuanced world, appreciate multiple perspectives, understand how they shape and other's shape their views, and hold less tightly to their own beliefs.

Case

I used Growth Edge Coaching with "Dale," a call centre employee who believed his boss disliked him. As proof, he noted that his boss ignored him as he passed by him in the hallway many times and did

not stop to say hi or acknowledge the quality of his work. It would be very common to label Dale as needy or insecure who requires to toughen-up. By applying developmental theory, the leader can hypothesise that this person may be at the socialised stage, where it is important to gain external validation that you are doing the right things. The leader can then become aware of how acknowledging people even in small ways can alleviate some of this discomfort. The employee can also develop the capacity over time to find ways to validate his/her performance that go beyond encounters on the hall or start understanding his/her leader's context e.g. the leader was lost in thought as s/he had a crisis to manage.

Conclusion

Learning about adult development theory has nudged me on a journey of self-discovery, learning and growth that has changed the way I practice organisational development (OD), and the way I show up in the world. This theory has helped me better understand myself, remaining curious and open about others. I am hopeful you may experience the same.

It's not about accelerating growth but creating and nurturing a context that invites people to grow, where people use their day to day experiences to learn more about themselves and how they relate to their environment and make sense of it. Imagine what your organisation would feel and look like if you could unshackle the energy and growth trapped at all levels.