

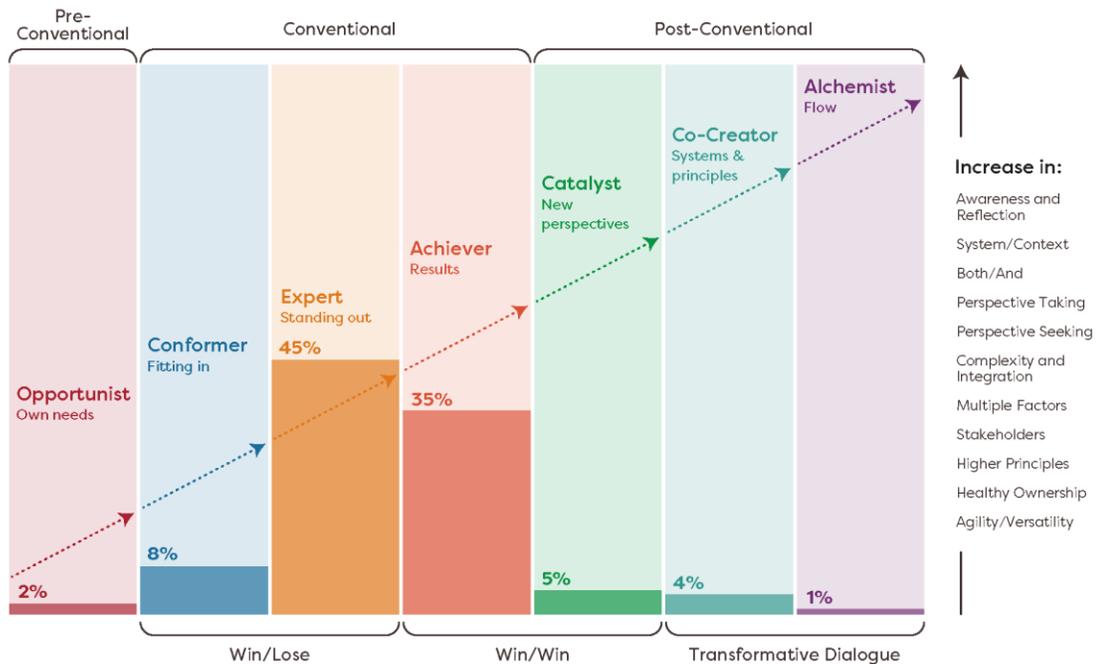


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Introduction to Levels of Development-in-Action

Levels of Development



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Background

Many people are familiar with the field of child development. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) is known for his pioneering work in mapping out the brain changes that children go through on their way to adulthood. It's now commonly accepted that children are not just "little adults." They think and see the world differently at different stages. At every stage there are problems they are able to successfully handle, and problems for which they do not yet have the required cognitive complexity. For example, a four-year-old

sees a glass of water being poured into a taller and narrower glass and thinks there is more water in the new container. An eight-year-old, having entered what Piaget calls “concrete operations” understands that the amount of water is unchanged, but does not yet have the perspective-taking capabilities nor the abstract thinking skills that a teenager will have at what Piaget calls “formal operations.” At this stage they can use logic and deductive reasoning to solve more difficult problems, and can entertain hypothetical or “what-if” scenarios like, “What would it be like if I had my friend’s parents?” They are also able to compare themselves in new ways to their peers, which adds to social anxiety.

Piaget and other assumed that once young adults have entered formal operations they now have “adult brains.” That is, while they of course can continue to learn more and more concepts, the process of brain development has reached its maturation point.

Others began challenging this assumption. They said that the process of development can continue well past formal operations, and that each of these new stages of development is able to think more effectively about a great many things, including complex problems. This position wasn’t popular in the age of relativism, where the belief was, “There are many ways to look at problems, all of them are equally good, and we shouldn’t judge or rank any as being better than others.”

The reality, however, is that there are better and worse ways to address complex problems. There are higher and lower ways of thinking. And the seminal researchers in this area, including Robert Kegan, Ken Wilber, and William Torbert have been vindicated.

Each of these Levels of Development-in-Action are what Torbert calls “action logics.” They’re complex, interconnected ways of seeing the world that then determine how we think and how we act. They can also be seen as “worldviews,” including how we see leadership, and what we think good leaders do. Most importantly, each level is successively more effective for leading in times of increased complexity, ambiguity, volatility, uncertainty and rapid change.

These worldviews, while they drive how we think and act, are generally out of conscious awareness. Ken Wilber uses the analogy of grammar. When we communicate with each other we are using a complex, interconnected system of rules that allow us to understand each other, but most of us would not be able to list those rules and assumptions. Exploring Levels of Development-in-Action allow leaders to step back, understand the different underlying rules and assumptions for each level,

identify where they currently function and see what development is needed to become an even more effective leader.

Some Important Points

1. This is not about IQ. People at higher levels do not necessarily have higher IQs than those at lower levels. In fact, a colleague has found that people in Mensa, with IQs in the top 2% of all adults, have the same distribution as found in an average adult population.
2. This is not about putting people into boxes. It's about identifying different ways of thinking about complex problems. We all have a center of gravity. We are all capable of thinking at higher levels at times, and we all tend to drop to lower levels under stress or in contexts that do not support higher level thinking.
3. Do not try to compare this model to other models you have been exposed to, unless you have explicitly studied levels of adult development. This model does not correlate with models of personality type, nor styles of influence, nor leadership styles.
4. It's important to understand the precise meaning of the words in this model. For example, "Expert" is about a lens of seeing the world where there is one right answer and vulnerability is avoided. It's not about having expertise. People can have expertise at any level. But if you want the best open-heart surgery, you don't want an "Expert" as defined in this model because that surgeon will avoid admitting to others that s/he is feeling uncertain and will be limited in the willingness to integrate the perspectives of others.
5. If IQ is seen like the hardware on a computer, these levels are like the operating system. You can have a fast computer that has an old operating system, and this operating system can only run limited programs. Each sequential level is like shifting operating systems, Windows 95 to XP to 7 to 10, or Mac OS Cheetah to Jaguar to Leopard to Yosemite to Sierra.
6. Developmental stage models, like this one, describe an invariant sequence. That is, we all go through these stages, one level at a time, until at some point we plateau and stop developing. It is not possible to skip stages. We need to stabilize one before being ready to move on to the next. One important principle in developmental models is "transcend and include." It means that we retain the positive aspects of the levels below our current one, therefore a Catalyst-level leader is able to embody the positive qualities of Experts and Achievers, for example.
7. At each successive level, I'm interested in and able to take more perspectives and take more factors into consideration, as well as being more reflective.

A brief description to the Levels of Development-in-Action

There are levels below the ones we list on our chart, all the way down to the first day of life, and levels above this chart as well. In our work with leaders we initially focus on five of these levels. Remember the analogy about grammar. We operate from the complex rules that govern our grammar, but very few of us are consciously aware of those rules. Similarly, the assumptions underlying each of these Levels are largely outside the awareness of those who operate at that level.

1. **Opportunist.** Here I take largely a first-person perspective, so **My Needs** are what are most important. I see others largely as objects who meet or do not meet my needs. Power and dominance are primary ways of getting my needs met, or attaching myself to people who I see as powerful. I operate outside general societal norms. Might makes right. I avoid taking personal responsibility and am quick to blame others for any problems or issues. I often create huge problems in organizations because I am willing to manipulate, be dishonest, whatever it takes to secure my position. My “circle of compassion” is centered around me. Approximately 2% of leaders operate at this level or lower.
2. **Conformer.** Here I take largely a second-person perspective. I’m aware of the “we” of groups (family, religion, peer groups, work groups) and I am strongly motivated to **Fit In** and conform to the norms of those groups. My “circle of compassion” is centered around the groups I identify with. You’re OK and of worth if you’re in that group, but if you’re not I reject you and don’t afford the same standards of care or concern. In organizations I “duck and cover,” keep my head down, do what I’m told, and stay out of trouble. I want to please the person I report to, but don’t want to rock the boat. I like doing things the way we’ve always done them (“if it’s not broken, don’t try to fix it.”) While only 8% of leaders have this as their true center of gravity, the majority of leaders in many organizations act this way because of the impact of the organizational culture in which they work.
3. **Expert.** After “fitting in” for long periods of time, I now want to **Stand Out.** I want to find some area in which I can excel, and then I identify myself with that expertise. Many of the 45% of leaders at this Level were promoted because of their technical expertise rather than because of their ability to drive results and motivate people. At this Level my right to be a leader is determined by my positional power and my technical competence. I believe that I know the right way to do things, and so my “coaching” is designed to have you think and act like me, and I strongly resist anything that could question my competence. This is the home of Heroic Leadership, the belief that I should have all the answers and avoid vulnerability at all costs. I tend to see issues as having one right answer, and that when there are problems we need to identify who is at fault in order to

fix things. My ability to collaborate is limited, and I tend to suppress perspectives that are different from my own. I tend to have trouble prioritizing, and deal with things as they arise. I'm much more operational than strategic and tend to focus on tasks at the expense of people. My "circle of compassion" tends to be towards others who share my expertise.

4. **Achiever.** At this level I am focused on **Results**. I can take a third-person perspective, stepping back and seeing rules and processes to follow. This is the home of a rational, scientific approach. I see my right to be a leader as **my ability to drive results through people**. On the positive end I am much more focused on outcomes, and take a more engaged and collaborative approach, so long as it doesn't get in the way of the results I'm trying to achieve. On the other hand, I rarely question the results I've been given, and tend to drive myself and others too hard. I am still a Heroic Leader and have a hard time saying "I don't know" or in other ways showing vulnerability. Most leadership training courses are designed to turn Experts into Achievers, who comprise approximately 35% of the overall leadership population. My "circle of compassion" is much larger now, which leads to a genuine valuing of principles like fairness and equity.
5. **Catalyst and above.** This is the first post-conventional phase where I can step out of societal and organizational norms and question them. I'm now able to take what is called a fourth-person perspective, where I can step back, examine, and question my own operating system and that of the organizations in which I work. Part of this fourth-person perspective is a fascination with what actually drives me. Out of all the things I believe, which ones are authentically mine, and which ones are artifacts of the family or society in which I grew up, the schools I went to, my mentors, etc.? This leads me to also have a genuine interest in what drives and motivates others. This heightened curiosity allows me to respond differently to each individual. People can tell I care about them as human beings, not just as objects to get the work done. At this level I come from the position that I don't know all the answers, and I need the input of others (peers, team members, etc.) in order to be successful, because that is required to address complex issues. I am no longer driven by a need to be "right," so I easily show the attitudes and vulnerability that creates a context of safety, trust, and deep collaboration. While 5% of leaders are assessed at the Catalyst level, only half of these "show up" that way because their organizational cultures do not value their approach. Another 5% of leaders are at still higher levels. Co-Creators incorporate the deep understanding that culture-creation is the most important single role of leaders, because cultures drive most organizational behavior.