



Four stages of leadership development

In our last two articles, we talked about a new kind of 'post-conventional' leadership for the VUCA world and then went on to describe how these later stage leaders have come to make sense of the world in new ways, building their mental capacities as they go. This expansion of a leader's meaning making capacity has become popularly known as vertical development - is not about skills, knowledge or career experience of leaders but rather about the way in which they make sense of the world around them. The field of constructivist development tells us that a person's meaning making can develop over time in a predictable, coherent way – a series of stages, punctuated by (sometimes discombobulating) transitions.

One of the most popular vertical models, the Leadership Development Framework, calls these ways of making meaning "action logics" - people at different stages of development tend to operate differently in similar situations because the logic that underpins their actions is different.

A look at the four key "action logics" which show up in most organisational settings illustrates this (bear in mind that each of these descriptions represents a potential stage in an individual's development, not a fixed personality type or leadership 'style'). In this map of the world, our development is always on the move and we all have the possibility of moving to a more complex and choiceful meaning making stage.

EXPERT

Expert stage leaders focus on logic, linear cause and effect and on the step-by-step analysis and solving of problems, based on tried-and-tested methods and processes. They are often people who have studied deeply in their own discipline and attained a high level of knowledge and expertise. As leaders, they will therefore focus on those professional disciplines and the logic and rules of their own arena.

People at the Expert stage (12% of the managerial population)¹ enjoy working with people from the same

discipline and gravitate to leadership roles in their own profession. They can be uncomfortable in general management roles because they find it more difficult to apply the norms their own profession to their leadership of people from other disciplines. Equally, they find it difficult to be managed by general managers. Although they can respect other professionals as leaders, they dislike being managed by them as they cannot see how their manager can give them any useful feedback or support if they do not know their subject as well as they do.

As managers, people at this stage tend to compartmentalise professional life and personal life and sometimes find it hard to show an interest in their colleagues as people beyond their roles. They believe strongly in skills training but often struggle to give behavioural feedback and or develop their people in a broader way. Conversely, some managers at this stage can be overly parental, wanting all of their people to learn the ropes in exactly the way they did – they can fall into micro-managing the details as a way of teaching their staff how to do their jobs.

When making decisions, someone at the Expert stage will focus on the things they know or can gather from pre-existing evidence to set a direction informed by their own professional viewpoint. Guided by best practice, they will be unnerved by being asked to do innovative things and they will prosper in steady state environments. It is very easy for people at this stage to get stuck in specialist roles as they are often seen as having insufficient breadth or flexibility to progress to more senior roles. If this happens, they can become rigid and opinionated, expecting others to live up to their standards and 'putting them straight' if they do not see the world in the same way.

ACHIEVER

Leaders at the Achiever stage often fit the standard model of good management (and are more widespread at 51% of management)¹. They are good at setting objectives within a clearly defined framework or strategy, as long as the environment is not too complex, and also at negotiating

with others and pulling teams together to deliver programmes in a structured and effective way. While they tend to like the idea of a clear vision or strategy, leaders at this stage can struggle to set a direction away from the industry norm or a 'me-too' variation on an existing theme.

And although they rarely lack decisiveness, this can be as a result of an overly simplistic analysis or a premature jumping to conclusions to try to reduce uncertainty.

The Achiever stage leader tends not to disrupt existing organisational norms or to create significant innovation. This is because they operate very much within the framework of the organisation or industry they work within, and their focus on achievement is within the parameters that organisation sets for itself – they will struggle with ideas or changes in the context that bring the whole framework into question.

Managerially, as people start to move into the Achiever stage and away from Expert, they start to take a much broader view of their people's abilities – they observe how they perform in practice on a wide range of criteria rather than just measuring them up against formal professional yardsticks. They focus on the achievement of goals rather than the application of rules in getting things done. They like people to bring them solutions rather than problems and this "can-do" attitude makes them forgiving of minor mistakes - as long as the goal is reached.

Managers at this stage can therefore lead a much wider range of people than Experts. They accept that everyone has a contribution to make even if they are not exactly like them, as long as they do not stray too far from the path set down by the team's KPIs. The feedback they will give will focus much more on overall performance. They will offer behavioural feedback, but struggle with inquiring into broader personal issues and, sometimes, with colleagues who have a radically different frame of reference from their own.

INDIVIDUALIST

Individualist stage leaders (27% of the managerial population) have managed to develop the capacity to raise their head above the fray and take a broader

perspective especially in complex or fast-moving situations. They see how things are connected together: ideas, people, different parts of the organisation and they love finding new ways of looking at long-standing issues. People at this stage often spot previously unrecognised opportunities to join things up, to create collaboration and to exploit new niches in the market. They may not always have the political savvy that ensures their great ideas get enacted but if they are fortunate enough to have some good sponsorship, they can often generate huge value for the organisation.

As managers and colleagues, they are becoming much more interested in how their reports, peers and stakeholders experience their world rather than seeing them just as deliverers of expertise or deliverers of targets. They want to understand others as unique individuals, support them to succeed and help with their professional development – and in return, they want to be understood for themselves. Staff working for a leader at this stage will often express their gratitude for their manager's focus on them and their development, feeling supported and listened to deeply sometimes for the first time in their careers.

Moving into this stage of development opens the individual's eyes to a hitherto unacknowledged level of complexity – the world has suddenly become much more interesting and joined up again. This can be confusing, exhilarating and, at times, overwhelming – their mind is going off in too many directions at once, and their communication can become somewhat impenetrable as they struggle to articulate all the connections they see. Their emphasis on finding a broader, more encompassing vision may come across as overly idealistic or disconnected from day-to-day organisational goals. As a result of their awareness of the multi-faceted nature of organisational life, Individualist stage leaders can also, sometimes, get a reputation for being indecisive. The awareness of a far wider range of options and possibilities has opened up and, at the same time, their desire to be inclusive, collaborative and consensual can make decision-making overly cumbersome.

Because of their connective, creative and inclusive tendencies, people at this stage will flourish, for example,

in partnership, venturing or strategy roles, working across boundaries and trying to reconcile different agendas and outlooks.

STRATEGIST

The shift from the Individualist to the Strategist stage (which is still very uncommon in most organisations) represents a return to order but at a higher level of complexity than the earlier Achiever stage. The time spent in inquiring into and experiencing all that complexity is now put to good use – the leader is not just aware of connections between things but is using that awareness to build new concepts, options and maps of their business context, all of which can be exploited to the organisation's benefit. The Strategist stage leader's ability to filter out noise means they are much more likely to see "weak signals" in the market, the early warning signs of changes to come. What's the thing that is going to kill our business? What minor initiatives should we be pump priming to prepare for the future?

This shift leads to much more systemic thinking – leaders at this stage often seem to have a three-dimensional chess game going on in their heads with an uncanny knack to see three moves ahead. The map is not just a static picture – their conceptual model allows them to predict what will happen if a particular move is made and how a proposed change will work through all the various scenarios (commercial, technological or political) to create the desired outcomes. This ability to make logical predictions feeds back into a greater ability to prioritise: which things to progress, which can be left, often leading to an exquisite sense of timing.

Strategist stage leaders know that their longevity depends on meeting the short-term goals set for them by their shareholders or political masters. But they take a much broader and more long-term view of the meaning and purpose of their organisation than delivering quarterly results and short-term increases in shareholder value.

And because they are playing a longer game, these 8% of leaders have a reputation for staying power. They are happy for things to evolve slowly until the right window opens, and to only fight those battles that are necessary to win the long-term war.

When managing others, leaders at this stage are usually seen as even-handed but tough on the important things – ethics, behaviour, trustworthiness etc. They have a developmental focus and understand the vital role of learning in organisational performance but they can be fairly ruthless in how they prioritise their attention and the development opportunities they offer their staff. They will tend to focus on those who they see as having the greatest potential or the greatest willingness to learn – they make accurate judgments about people and place their bets accordingly, which sometimes gives them a reputation for being inequitable. Leaders at this stage can often have a 'marmite' reputation – respected and admired by some to the point of veneration and seen by others as remote, judgemental and even manipulative as their skill with the political environment is read as self-serving, rather than in serving a wider organisational purpose.

Their people management begins with their own self-management: they have learned to be aware of their emotional state and to govern it in the moment. Strategist stage leaders rarely get in a flap or respond defensively and they often hold their peers and reports to similarly high standards. They collaborate well with people from a wide range of different backgrounds and actively seek out input from people who see the world very differently to them. However, in contrast to the Individualist stage leader, they will move quickly and decisively after taking on board a range of viewpoints, often putting together small, tightly knit teams to make things happen.

As mentioned earlier, people at different stages of development will react differently when faced with the same situation. Their immediate actions are driven by their underlying logic and how they make sense of the situation will vary at the different stages of development. Taking the example of a Sales team with a key product which is experiencing declining sales, we compare below how sales managers operating at different 'action logics' might respond to the challenge:

EXPERT SALES MANAGER	Will look in detail at the data but assume the solution is for his people to work harder and faster towards targets without making any significant changes to either approach or underlying processes.
ACHIEVER SALES MANAGER	Will ask his team for the highlights and then specifically target people in the precise areas which are falling behind. He will consult his team on other ideas they may have to generate further sales or any suggestions they have for improving the overall approach to this product.
INDIVIDUALIST SALES MANAGER	Will call her team together to collectively analyse what is happening. She will ask for their thoughts on what is happening in the market and consider what wider market conditions might be impacting sales. She will work with her team to plan a way forward which might include aspects of process change, skill development, collaborative working etc.
STRATEGIST SALES MANAGER	Will undertake a fast period of research, to include discussion with customers, other sales teams and research into other industry trends, taking a wider perspective on the analysis. He will then collaborate with his team to assess options and act decisively to deal with the short-term as well as creating a plan for longer term changes needed.

References

- 1 Harthill Consulting – international population of middle and senior managers completing the Leadership Development Profile.

Reflective exercise

Do you recognise these “action logics” at play in your organisation?

Given the challenges facing your organisation, which action logics do you need your leaders to operate from in each of their different environments?

Do your leaders possess the types of capabilities which fit best with the demands of their roles? If not, what are you doing to develop them?

What conditions in your organisation might be supporting or preventing that development?

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