

Vertical development: cultivating mindsets, emotions, and habits to lead effectively

*The lesser-known field of adult development psychology, often called vertical development, is at least as important as neuroscience for truly understanding how we and others tick, how to get the best out of people, and how to navigate difficult situations. **Vanessa Dietzel** and **Laura Watkins** suggest some exercises that will help us build “muscles” for vertical development.*

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many leaders were operating in complex environments, facing change, uncertainty and competing interests. The pandemic has pushed all of us – formal leaders or otherwise – into uncharted and often turbulent waters. How can we match our capacity for dealing with complexity to the complexity of today’s challenges?

Modern neuroscience has given us important insights for helping our brains cope with challenge. For example, when our protective, fight-flight-freeze survival response is triggered, activity in many parts of the brain’s executive centre decreases, lowering our quality of thinking, problem solving and emotional regulation— just when we need it the most. Being aware of when our brain is in *protect mode* and knowing how to get it firing on all cylinders again (what we call *explore mode*) is, therefore, essential for making the most of our current knowledge, skills, and experience.

However, we believe that the lesser known field of adult development psychology, often called [vertical development](#), is at least as important as neuroscience for truly understanding how we and others tick, how to get the best out of people, and how to navigate difficult situations. When drawing on both fields, we not only help our brains bring their best in the moment, but also grow our best over time.

What is vertical development and how can we practically work towards it?

When we are learning skills or knowledge, we are developing *horizontally*. By contrast, vertical development is growing what we call our *inner operating system*: the mindsets, emotions and habits that guide how we make sense of situations, prioritise what matters, react emotionally, and act. Over our adult lifetime, we gradually fold our current perspectives into new, expanded ones. From this more elevated viewpoint, we see more of the complexity of the situation: its parts and their connections, and (importantly) more of our own ways of thinking. This greater perspective and self-awareness then bring us more flexibility and choice over how we *manage* the complexity. It’s no surprise, therefore, that there is a positive correlation between the level of [vertical development and leadership effectiveness](#), especially in more complex roles.

Vertical development follows predictable, distinct stages of mental complexity, though there is no rule as to when we transition from one to another, if indeed at all. Several [theorists](#) have described these stages; we summarise Harvard Professor [Robert Kegan’s version](#) below.

Most of us enter adulthood at the stage of the *socialised mind*. Societal norms and our perception of others’ expectations are internalised and, largely unknowingly, shape what we think and do. Examples of such mindsets could be, ‘strong leaders don’t ask for help’, or ‘vulnerability is weakness’. We will likely not seek or even imagine there could be another way of seeing or doing things, with protect mode keeping us in line with the herd. This favouring of collective ways of thinking has been an essential glue in families, organisations, and society for thousands of years. However, the socialised mind may limit our ability to deal with change and conflicting demands, which can trigger us to grow into the next stage.

The *self-authoring mind* sees that we each have choice in how we make sense of situations and draws on our own internal compass for finding direction. We see our own inner operating system more clearly and that we can adapt it to take charge of our lives, for example crafting our own leadership mindsets, e.g., 'knowing when to ask for help or show vulnerability makes me a stronger leader'. That means we can take an independent stance, which is less constrained by our protect mode. Around a third of adults are fully operating out of this stage, a further third of people are on the incline towards this stage, and a handful of people are on the incline beyond it. While the internal compass of the self-authoring mind is useful for cutting through complexity, that is also where its limitations lie.

The next stage, the *self-transforming mind*, recognises that our viewpoints are shaped by our experiences and therefore only a part of the whole picture. A self-transforming mind might reframe or challenge notions about leadership, e.g. 'How can I create conditions for unleashing leadership in others?', 'What does vulnerability bring out in us and others?', or 'How can vulnerability be a source of strength?'. This stage of development is rare, with fewer than 1 per cent thought to have a fully developed self-transforming mind. On our journey towards it, we seek to draw in others' perspectives and are more comfortable embracing opposing viewpoints. We can be empathetic in a qualitatively different way, because we can inhabit others' experiences and navigate rocky emotional terrain. All this further loosens the grip of protect mode and opens possibilities beyond either/or choices.

How can we deliberately develop vertically to help us rise to the complex challenges of our time? There is no single recipe or quick fix, but here are some exercises that help you see more of any situation and give you more flexibility and choice:

- Think through a time in your life when you went through a major developmental growth spurt. What was the trigger for this development? What helped you develop? What changed about how you saw the world, other people, and yourself? How has this impacted how you operate today?
- Put yourself in a new, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable situation. How do you feel? Why is it uncomfortable? How does this shed light on, or change, how you see yourself, others or how the world works?
- Identify people you disagree with on an important issue. Walk towards them: spend time with them and understand things from their angle. Explore whether and how this changes how you see things or create new views that bring your ideas together.

Ask yourself questions that encourage thinking from a particular stage:

- For more self-authored thinking, you could ask, 'What would you do if it didn't matter at all to you what anyone else thought?' or 'What do you personally believe is the right thing to do? How is that different from what others think? Why?'
- For more self-transforming thinking, you could ask 'What are the bigger picture factors at play here?' or 'What are all the different ways to see this? How might we bring all these realities together?'

Each of these activities will help you build muscles for vertical development. Investing in this will not only help you find better solutions to complex problems, but it will also help you maximise your potential and, ultimately, help you navigate life's challenges more effectively, thereby boosting your overall quality of life.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on an excerpt from the authors' book [The Performance Curve: Maximize your potential at work while strengthening your well-being](#), Bloomsbury Business.
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